HOUSE OF COMMONS

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Government policy on Afghanistan, HC 685

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Watch the meeting

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

Questions 152 - 210

Witnesses

I: General David Petraeus (ret.), Commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan (2010–11).

II: Laurel Miller, Deputy/Acting Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (2013-2017), US State Department; Professor Michael Semple, Deputy to the EU Special Representative for Afghanistan (2004-08).

III: Shaharzad Akbar, Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission; Shukria Barakzai, Former Afghan MP.

Examination of Witness

Witness: General David Petraeus.

Q152 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are very lucky to have with us General Petraeus. General, could you briefly introduce yourself, please?

General Petraeus: Sure. Thanks, Tom, and it is a pleasure to be with you all, having done this on so many occasions in the past about Iraq. I am a retired US Army four-star general. I was privileged to command US Central Command, which is the entire Middle East, including Afghanistan; then to be the commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and also US forces there; then the director of the CIA; and now, for the last eight and a half years, chairman of the KKR Global Institute and a partner in the global investment firm KKR, as well as having had various academic posts during that time.

Q153 **Chair:** Thank you very much, sir. If I may go straight in, when President Biden announced the withdrawal from Afghanistan in April, you warned that the US might come to regret it. Why did you say that?

General Petraeus: Frankly, I feared that what did happen would happen. With respect to this particular decision—and increasingly, as I saw that the 18,000 contractors were withdrawn who were so essential to maintaining the most critical element of the Afghan security forces, their air force—I feared, as I publicly said, that we would at some point see a psychological collapse of the Afghan security forces. Of course, that is what did transpire.

It is very hard to say that this result is anything but heartbreaking, tragic and, in many respects, disastrous. I do not know how else you can see a Government, however imperfect, frustrating, maddening or corrupt, with however much political nepotism, being replaced by an ultra-conservative Islamist Government that seems intent on taking the country back to a 7th century interpretation of Islam, similar to what it imposed on the country when it previously ruled it and when al-Qaeda was allowed to have a sanctuary on Afghan soil.

The human catastrophe that is looming in Afghanistan will require the world to take action. The fact is that the Taliban have no money. The 75% of the budget that the US and other donor nations used to provide is, undoubtedly, not going to be forthcoming, and certainly not to the Taliban. There will be efforts to provide humanitarian assistance, which are already ongoing in substantial amounts, but not directly to the Taliban. Its reserves are frozen around the world, and the IMF and World Bank drawing rights and so forth are also on hold. The prospect for the Afghan people is very bleak indeed.

In fact, the best representation of the Afghan citizen's regard for the new Government is that hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of them have

left and are trying to leave the country. I get multiple emails every day from individuals who served as our battlefield interpreters and qualify for the special immigrant visa, whom we have left behind, along with their family members. There are tens of thousands of them alone, and we have a moral obligation to them.

In addition, there are many tens of thousands of others whose safety has been put in jeopardy and who, presumably, would qualify for different categories of visa but are required to get outside the country to apply for them. Again, the prospects for Afghanistan are very grim. You see already signs of the Islamic State carrying out horrific attacks, principally against Shia; resistance forces gathering a degree of momentum and fighting the Taliban; and very significant internal disputes between the Afghan Taliban, led by Mullah Baradar, who, as you know, has withdrawn from Kabul to Kandahar, and the Haqqani Network part of the Taliban, which is ensconced in Kabul.

I cannot say that I laid all of this out with enormous clarity, but I did, months prior to that collapse, say publicly that I feared a psychological collapse and the kind of outcome that we have seen, the extraordinary logistical accomplishment of the airlift notwithstanding, which did, indeed, pull out 123,000 or so troops, the bulk of those on US airlift, but it was certainly not a process that one would say was characterised by meticulous organisation and co-ordination. Rather, it was quite chaotic and resulted in the tragic loss of 13 of our men and women in uniform and nearly 200 innocent Afghan citizens.

Q154 **Chair:** Sir, given your points there—and I should say, for the record, that I did once serve under your command, so I probably should not be calling you "sir" anymore—

General Petraeus: It was one of the great privileges of my lifetime.

Q155 **Chair:** They speak of little else. You have set out very clearly many of your warnings that you gave before July and, indeed, before August of this year—

General Petraeus: And last year.

Chair: And, indeed, last year.

General Petraeus: Really, for a number of years. If I could, my argument has been that we should have the strategic patience to maintain a sustained, sustainable commitment, and sustainability as measured in the expenditure of blood and treasure. We had not had a single American lost in combat in the year and half prior to the airlift. The cost was quite reduced. We had two or three times the number of coalition troops on the ground than there were US. Largely, what the US was doing was no longer on the front lines but providing advice, "assist and enable"—the enabler is the most critical element of the intelligence surveillance—reconnaissance platforms, drones, and in particular the

Reapers, and US close air support when it was necessary to augment what we provided for the Afghan air force.

Q156 **Chair:** May I ask this? I know you were not alone in doing so, but given all the warnings that you gave, why do you think President Biden and his national security team took the decision that they did? They cannot have been un-warned. Indeed, we saw from cables and diptels that were published only today in the *Times* that the UK Government were getting very much the same warnings from our embassy there. I assume that the US embassy was probably giving roughly the same advice, so why do you think the White House made this decision?

General Petraeus: Again, there have been explanations, which have been reasonably clear, making what would be the best argument for why we undertook what it was we did, and I would just leave it to those explanations provided by the Commander in Chief and by the national security team members.

Of course, I was by no means alone. The Dunford commission was a congressionally chartered bipartisan commission co-chaired by a former Republican senator, as I recall, and a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former commander in Afghanistan, General Joe Dunford. He advised the same that I offered, and there were a number of other studies and analyses from Brookings and so forth that, again, offered similar.

To be sure, none of us ever could say how long it would take. I publicly said that we should acknowledge that we cannot win in Afghanistan, because our Pakistani partners were never willing to eliminate the sanctuaries allowed in Balochistan for the Afghan Taliban headquarters outside Quetta, and then in North Waziristan in particular for the headquarters maintained by the Haqqani Network. The enemy headquarters and some of their infrastructure were outside of Afghanistan, beyond our reach, by and large. We occasionally had some authority to do something, as is publicly known, but by and large did not.

Essentially, it meant that, in this very vast country, with the access from outside, you really could never go to the complete source and you just had to understand that you were not going to be able to win. This was not a situation like Iraq, where you could drive violence down by 85% during the course of the surge, and I told that to Congress over the years when I was in the hearing to be the commander in Afghanistan and, subsequently, as the commander and then as the director of the CIA.

It is sometimes okay to manage a situation. To be fair to this Administration, they are doing the right thing literally all the way around the rest of the world when it comes to Islamist extremists, together with our partners, the UK typically foremost among them. If you look at what we are still doing in Iraq, Syria, the Horn of Africa, north-west Africa, western Africa—you name it, around the world—we have learned that you have to not just keep an eye on Islamist extremists but keep pressure on

them, so that, even if you cannot have the kind of comprehensive civil-military counterinsurgency campaign that you might like to employ to get to the root causes of extremism, at the very least you can periodically disrupt and degrade the capabilities of the Islamic State, so that it cannot carry out the kind of attacks that terrorised countries in western Europe at the height of the Islamist State caliphate, when it owned that ground in north-east Syria and northern Iraq.

Q157 **Chair:** The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Milley, has said that the evacuation of Kabul was "a logistical success but a strategic failure". It does somewhat stretch my understanding of "logistical success" that Bagram air base was closed before the withdrawal. How do you assess the UK and the international community's evacuation operation? Some countries like France evacuated their people very early, others like the UK and the United States rather later. How do you read the situation?

General Petraeus: You have to go to, in a sense, the big ideas and the assessments of what would take place in particular, and ask if there were not some misjudgments in those categories, at least with hindsight, although I should note that there were some of us who did say that we feared this psychological collapse of the Afghan forces, which did transpire. The idea that you would withdraw your soldiers before you withdraw the diplomats, the American citizens, the green card holders, the special immigrant visa holders and their family members, and others whose lives were in jeopardy because of their service with us—I might note, with a slight degree of quiet pride, that the CIA did carry out quite an impressive, quiet evacuation, assembling people at a base that was very near Kabul and then taking them in through a special gate that was opened just for that purpose or flying them in helicopters.

By and large, the description that is merited is that it was a logistical marvel, in some respects. The fact that you could just pull this many people out in such a short period of time is an extraordinary comment on our sheer logistical capacity, and also just to impose order on what was clearly a chaotic situation outside the gates after that early initial incident and that image of individuals hanging on to a C-17. I would also add the image of the C-17, the entire well of which was filled with civilians in the order of so many hundreds, beyond what the capacity was for the seats. They took the seats out and just lined them up, and the pilot said, "Just watch me; we will get this thing off the ground", and he did. He knew the capacity of a C-17, as you do as well, having ridden in them.

As for whether to assess it as a strategic setback or failure—I forget his words—the question is what we were thinking by having all the military out. Clearly, it was based on an assumption that the Afghans were going to continue to prevail, certainly well beyond Kabul, for quite an extended period of time. That was a serious miscalculation. The fact was that the Afghans could not, without the 18,000 contractors, maintain these very sophisticated, US-provided Black Hawk helicopters, Little Bird attack

helicopters, C-130s and close air support aircraft that were crucial to the Afghan security forces.

I might explain, just for your members and perhaps for those who might watch this, that there has been much said about how we should have made the Afghan forces more like the Taliban: lighter and more easy. They are counterinsurgents, not insurgents. The Taliban right now are finding out how much more difficult it is to be a counterinsurgent, because you have to defend stuff and you cannot attack at will, go back to the mountains and hang out with your fellow fighters until your next foray forward. You have to defend population centres, critical infrastructure and the construct of the Afghan security forces. One could question whether we should have insisted on providing US aircraft or continued what was being provided when I was a commander, which was more Soviet/Russian style, which was much more analogue and which the Afghans could maintain.

That is a separate issue and another debate, but the fact is that you had to have a construct of about 100,000 soldiers, keeping in mind the military is only about 150,000. Another 150,000 were police and others, but they are not as useful in this type of fighting, as you well know. You have them defending these population centres and critical infrastructure and, when they are hit by the Taliban in this vast country, with limited road infrastructure and limited road security at times, you have to airlift, with helicopters or C-130s, Special Operations Forces. As you know, there were 30,000 to 40,000 of these and they were really quite capable—the commandos in particular. They would respond, reinforce those on the front lines and fight back.

This did happen early on in fighting, first in the north and then in Kandahar. There was quite a good example of how that should work. The Afghan air force would provide the first line of close air support with its fixed-wing and then its rotary-wing aircraft, with the US then providing especially drones to enable very accurate precision close air support to augment what was provided by the Afghans. There is really no alternative to that, and those who say, "You should have just been like insurgents" overlook a pretty basic fact, which is that we were not insurgents. The Afghans were not insurgents but counterinsurgents, and had to secure key areas against insurgents and extremists. There was really no alternative in that regard.

You can argue about what we did insist in providing over time, which is certainly debatable, but I do not think that the construct of this was debatable; nor is the idea that it all went wrong when we started doing nation building. If you do not do nation building, to whom do you hand off security and institutional tasks that you are performing for the country whose Government you have toppled—noting, of course, that we did not even get the inputs right, as you have heard me describe before, until late 2010? By "inputs", I mean roughly the right level of resources—military, diplomatic, intelligence, rule of law and all the other capabilities

that we need, the right leaders, the right preparation of our forces, the right organisational architecture and, above all, the right strategy.

Even within that, there were mistakes made. Some things were overdone, undoubtedly. We threw money at problems at various times where we might have exercised a bit more restraint. Part of that was because we were always racing against the clock and we knew, from the time that we had the inputs right, which did coincide with my time as the commander, but purely because of timing—it was largely set up by General McChrystal's report and his early work—that within six months we were going to have to start to draw down, regardless of the conditions on the ground.

These were some of the issues. There is no question about us taking our eye off the ball early on and focusing on Iraq. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mullen, used to say, "In Iraq, we do what we must. In Afghanistan, we do what we can". That is what delayed ever getting the inputs right, and we lost the time between 2001 and 2010 because of that, in many respects. We were always shooting behind the target. When we finally got a hit, we then did not, at the end of the day, have the strategic patience for a sustained, sustainable commitment.

Q158 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you, General. It is a privilege to have you today. I just wanted to draw you back briefly to your comments on Quetta. You rightly say that the Taliban had been sat waiting—others might say "harboured"—within Pakistan. It seems to be an inconvenient truth that the international community is ignoring that the Taliban have lived quite happily in Quetta, waiting to be able to get across back into Afghanistan. What do you think our posture should be with Afghanistan going forward and what responsibility do you lay on the Pakistanis in terms of the success of the Taliban and their preparedness to go back into Afghanistan?

General Petraeus: First of all, the privilege is mine, but, with respect, I do not think we ignored the Taliban, by any means. We roughly knew where they were.

Q159 **Alicia Kearns:** Apologies—to clarify, I mean the international community is now ignoring that inconvenient truth, because we have to work with Pakistan as we go forward with Afghanistan, rather than retrospectively during the time.

General Petraeus: Even with respect to that, I do not think we are ignoring that either. We have been quite forthright. I used to go to the head of ISI as the director of the CIA, Chief of Army Staff, head of Central Command or commander of ISAF, and say, "There is a reason why the Taliban headquarters is called the Quetta Shura, and it is because they are located outside Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, a province in which your army does nothing other than maintain the staff college and border crossings, as you have acknowledged to me". We get that.

The best example that we knew where they were is the publicly known and disclosed strike that killed the leader of the Taliban, after Mullah Omar[1], so we had a pretty good sense of what was going on. I do not necessarily agree with the assertions that the ISI was funding, directing or enabling. It was a much more complicated relationship between the Inter-Services Intelligence—if you will, the Pakistani CIA—and the Pakistani army, but there was certainly toleration and a lack of both capability and willingness to eliminate these sanctuaries from their soil. The Haqqani Network was under a bit more attack over the years, as you will recall, in North Waziristan, because of various arrangements that existed. At various times, there were strikes to take out the head of that, but never real pressure.

You will remember that, in 2009, when I was privileged to be the Central Command commander and we were actively supporting the Pakistanis fighting against the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan—the Pakistani Taliban—the Pakistani army carried out a masterful offensive and then counterinsurgency campaign to eliminate the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan from Swat, Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai and South Waziristan, but then lost momentum, will and capability to close North Waziristan, which, in many respects, was always the heart of darkness. It is also where the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is, along with al-Qaeda elements and a number of other extremists.

Again, it is just a reality, and my sense of the situation was that, in general, the Pakistanis questioned their own ability to deal with these forces, which had very considerable capability, without getting seriously bogged down by them. They did not have the air mobility that we have. They would get through the mountain passes. Their lines of communication would be cut off. You have to understand the terrain in these areas. This is a place where the mountain pass is at 12,000 to 14,000 feet, and very forbidding territory. That was the reality with which we had to deal.

We certainly discussed and confronted this, and we did not get anywhere. That is still where we are. To hear some of the rhetoric that comes out of Islamabad, one can certainly raise one's eyebrows, and I do and have done that publicly, and when I met with the now former DG ISI just a couple of months ago, when he was in Washington. It is just a reality. We had Holbrooke dealing with them, the Bulldozer. We had the highest levels dealing with them and you could not make progress, yet we depended on Pakistan for the lines of communication that go through the Khyber Pass and down in the south into Kandahar province, which is a huge Achilles heel. We discovered that when it was shut down for some 40 days a month or two into my time as the director of the CIA.

[1] Note from witness: In referring to "the leader of the Taliban, after Mullah Omar" I misspoke. I meant to say: "the leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar's successor, Akhtar Mansour".

Chair: General, forgive me. We are going to try to get through a few more questions.

Q160 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Thank you, General, for joining us this afternoon. It is a pleasure to have you with us. An article in the *New Yorker* quotes you as saying, "We know the UK wanted to stay. You saw people in the UK Parliament say, 'We can't do anything independently?' The answer unfortunately is probably not". I wondered if you could speak to that a bit more and really get into, in your experience, how much influence the UK has on strategic US policy in the context of withdrawal.

General Petraeus: It is important here to remember a pretty stark reality, which is that the United States does not just spend more than all of its 29 NATO allies put together, noting that one of those is North American, of course. It spends more than twice as much—in fact, it is two point something times as much—as every other NATO member put together. Therefore, even the largest of the NATO countries—the UK, France, Germany and Italy—are still spending just a very modest subset of what the United States is devoting to our national defence.

I have watched the capability gap that has been created over the years, from being a second lieutenant in Cold War Europe, in the British Army of the Rhine and Northern Army Group, and then, over the years, as the executive officer and chairman of the Joint Chiefs during the operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, and then as a commander during the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent three star and four star tour. I always had a British deputy, I might add, which gives you some sense of the influence.

There was one country in which I would stop every single time that I was going back and forth to the US, which, thanks to the US Congress, was fairly frequently, and that was the UK, in London. We would go to No. 10, to Whitehall, and to all the other spots—the MoD and so forth.

At the end of the day, the reality is that, in most of these kinds of endeavours, the US has to lead. In truth, if it does not lead, it probably is not possible for the other coalition partners to stay or to be engaged. That was reflected by the reality in Afghanistan and it is somewhat inescapable. That does not mean that I am not a massive supporter of NATO. There was a reason why I was in Warsaw three weeks ago for the Warsaw Security Forum and in Rome last week, and why I will be in London next week.

I am a huge transatlanticist and an enormous supporter of NATO. I was privileged to serve as a NATO one star, three star and four star, in each case dual-hatted, to be sure. At the end of the day, the reality is what it is. Without the US being the foundation particularly for an expeditionary deployment, because of the sheer capacity—and we talked about the logistical capability demonstrated by the evacuation. There is just no other country in the world that could do what the United States did in that evacuation. They could not even do a fraction of what was done by

the United States, even if they were all pooled together. It is just a fact of today's context.

I strongly support what the Biden Administration is doing, for example, to engage and collaborate with all our allies and partners around the world as they construct, together with those allies and partners, the most important policy in today's world, which is the creation of a coherent, comprehensive whole-of-Governments—with an "s" on the end—approach to the relationship with China. Where does the UK fit in that? Very prominently. The whole idea of Global Britain is based on these unique characteristics, capabilities and attributes that the UK brings to the world. That is why I stop in London to and from Baghdad, Kabul and Qatar.

Q161 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** You have answered the next question that I was going to put to you on the ability of other allies to operate without the US, but can I take you forward slightly to the impact—

General Petraeus: Just very quickly, there are some examples. The French in Mali are an example of that, but that is very modest and, in fact, is quietly supported by about 1,000 US troops and by other partners, including, as I recall, the UK and other European partners. Even there, there is a degree of strategic patience that may not be present going forward, for something that would seem to be sustainable.

The operation in Libya is instructive. Remember, our President said we were leading from behind. We were allowing the UK and France to lead that effort but, at the end of the day, my recollection is that the US flew something in the order of 65% of the sorties, did all the combat, search and rescue, had to loan bombs to both the UK and France when their supplies were getting very short at one point in time, and ultimately ended up being the lynchpin for that whole operation anyway.

Q162 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Can I take you forward to something that General Mark Milley told the Senate Armed Services Committee? He said, "I think that our credibility"—US credibility—"with allies and partners around the world [...] is being intensely reviewed". I believe there is a comment here from you that was reported in the *Wall Street Journal* as saying, "I don't think you can dispute that the outcome here is a blow in some fashion to our reputation and credibility". We are practically at this point. Can you speak to what the withdrawal means and the impact that it will have on not just US and UK relations, but those with other allies in NATO? How will that affect broader US strategic interests?

General Petraeus: That is a wonderful and critically important question. Let me explain why. In the global context, in this most important endeavour that we are carrying out—the US and its allies and partners—for the relationship with China, we want to go to great lengths to ensure that there are no misperceptions, mistakes or stumbles into what could be actual conflict. The way to ensure that is by having robust deterrence. As you know, deterrence is a function of a potential adversary's assessment of your capabilities, on the one hand, and your willingness to

employ them, on the other. That latter quality rests on this somewhat intangible concept of credibility.

I am one who believes that credibility is not just in one situation; it has implications elsewhere: the fact of how we are perceived, whether or not it is even fair to the United States. If you talk to the US national security team members—and I have—they will say, "Look, we consulted the daylights out of our European, NATO and other coalition partners on Afghanistan". As I said, I was just in the Warsaw Security Forum, where we had a lot of leaders from different NATO nations. They did not feel that they were adequately consulted. Perhaps it is just that, after all this consultation, the US still reached a decision on policy that was not supported by or agreed with our allies and partners.

In any event, there is a perception of inadequate consultation and, unfortunately, the situation with AUKUS, which is an important initiative—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: That was my next question.

General Petraeus: To be fair to our national security team, they thought that there had been adequate consultation between our great Australian partners and France, but it turned out, from the perspective of Paris at least, that that was not the perception. You have a situation where the longest-standing alliance in America's history, which ultimately led to the French fleet blockading Cornwallis at Yorktown and enabling us to win the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, which led to the Treaty of Paris—the location of that again significant—has been somewhat bruised.

To be fair, the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and every national security adviser have gone to incredible lengths to try to reassure our French partners and allies. They have sought to do the same with our European partners. They have all travelled out to the region and were all over Europe last week or two weeks ago. The Secretary of Defense is out there now.

We have to accept that, at the very least, there is a perception that our credibility is somewhat called into question or intensely reviewed, so what do we do about that? The Administration get what they need to do about that, and they are intent on doing it. As I mentioned earlier, we are doing what we need to do everywhere else in the world. This was a bit of an outlier.

Q163 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** General, I wonder if I might pick you up on that. You have talked, understandably, about the US Administration post-AUKUS, but our inquiry is about UK Government policy on Afghanistan. Given AUKUS has happened right in the shadow of that, have the UK and Australian Governments—but principally the UK Government—done enough? For example, you just talked about the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State in the US Government doing as much as they can to repair the relationship. Is the UK doing enough to ensure that the alliance is not as bruised as it otherwise might

be?

General Petraeus: I am afraid that I really do not have sufficient visibility of what your Government may or may not be doing. It is hard enough to track my own Government's actions and, to some degree, those of Australia, which I have been focused on a bit as well, since that is really the proximate issue here. The fact that the French did not withdraw their ambassador from London, when they did withdraw them from Canberra and Washington, perhaps is some indication and can help answer that a little bit, but that is one that your own Government probably have to answer better than I might be able to.

I would note that it was not even just the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the national security adviser and the President. It really was everybody. This was a full-court press. I have heard from members of this particular group in closed sessions, and there is a recognition of the need to do repair. They have set about doing that. By and large, virtually everywhere else around the world, in a comprehensive way, that effort has been ongoing. Afghanistan is, though, a bit of an outlier in that regard. General Milley was quite forthright in saying that our credibility was being intensely reviewed. That was rather a diplomatic way for an infantryman to put it.

Q164 **Royston Smith:** Thank you, General, for joining us today. It is a great honour to have you with us. You have talked in the media about China and Russia, and their potential involvement in Afghanistan going forward. How do you see the interests of China, Russia and Pakistan as a result of the Taliban takeover?

General Petraeus: I might start with Pakistan, because this is a bit counter to what has happened. Pakistan is going to be the country under the most pressure as a result of this. You will recall that there was a degree of celebration coming out of Islamabad. I do not know if I would even call it a degree of gratification. They certainly were not concerned by the Taliban takeover, to put it mildly.

Now, because of this humanitarian catastrophe that we are going to see in Afghanistan, the logical recipient of the refugee flow is going to be Pakistan. They can try to close the Khyber Pass and the other borders, but there are many ways to get across if you are sufficiently desperate. Tragically, Afghans are already sufficiently desperate and are going to get even more so as foodstuffs and humanitarian assistance come up short. There is just no way. The economy has completely collapsed. There is no money available. Reserves are frozen. The IMF and World Bank are not lenders of resort at this point in time. There is no prospect that China would step in and provide the 75% of the budget that the US, predominantly, and some other major donors—Japan and the UK among them—have provided.

I fear for Pakistan. It is already a somewhat fragile democracy in various respects. It has well over 200 million people. It has nuclear weapons. I

have concerns about the implications of this for Pakistan, noting, of course, that the benefits that it used to receive from all of this transit and other activity that was devoted to supporting efforts in Afghanistan have also gone. It was a big importer of various foodstuffs and other items into Afghanistan.

With respect to China and Russia, it is interesting that I see a lot of converging interest, not just between China and Russia but also with the US, the UK and a number of other countries. None of us wants to see this kind of humanitarian catastrophe. We do not want to see another geopolitical Chernobyl like Syria—the meltdown of a country that spews millions of refugees all the way into Europe, causing the biggest domestic populism challenges that European democracies have faced, at the very least since the end of the Cold War. I am not saying that that is necessarily going to happen. It is much tougher to get to Europe from Afghanistan but it is not impossible, and we are already seeing some indications that there will be efforts to do just that.

China, Russia, the US and the UK do not want to see a flourishing of the illegal narcotics industry—something that the Taliban either used to control or were aligned with and certainly got some revenue from. They say they are going to shut it down. I will believe that when I see it, because there are literally very few other crops producing any kind of items for export. I would note, by the way, that there was a drought this year in Afghanistan, so they begin the winter season already with inadequate foodstuffs produced within Afghanistan, in addition to all the other problems that are coming about as a result of the Taliban takeover and the collapse of the economy. The lights could go out if they cannot continue to pay for electricity from the central Asian states and for refined fuel products from Iran. Are they going to continue to receive those? It is a very good question.

China and Russia, as are all of us, are concerned about this being a hotbed of extremism. Extremists have celebrated the takeover by the Taliban. The Islamic State was augmented very substantially by hundreds of individuals broken out of the prisons that the Taliban liberated on their way to Kabul. You have seen these attacks already, particularly against Shia mosques and Shia populations, the most recent one in Kandahar this past Friday prayers.

You are seeing fighting internally. The resistance forces have by no means given up and are gathering a bit of momentum. As I mentioned earlier, the Taliban are becoming acquainted with how much more challenging it is to be a counterinsurgent or counterterrorist force than it is to be an insurgent, hanging out in the hills, attacking when you want to and then going back to the hills. It is much more difficult. They do not have the intelligence, the surveillance, the reconnaissance or all the other assets that are necessary, as we have learned over the years, to do just that.

China and Russia also want to see the central Asian states—for Russia in particular, the former Soviet republics—continue to flourish and to do well.

Lastly, I just do not see China rushing right in, even given the extraordinary mineral wealth. You will recall, when I was COMISAF, we did an assessment at the time that determined that the wealth in the ground was $2 trillion, so even more than $1 trillion in the ground. The problem is that the human, physical and other infrastructure and capital just is not there; nor is the security situation sufficient at this point in time to see some big initiatives, much less the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline for natural gas that we envisioned when I was the commander in Afghanistan.

In fact, China left the copper mine south of Kabul, in north Logar province, sadly, after being on the receiving end of some rockets and mortars, again during the time that I was the commander. We hoped that they would stay. We wanted to see Afghan mineral resources exploited and produce hard currency for the country.

There will be a cautious approach to this. The belt and road initiative has, first of all, drawn down somewhat in recent years. Beyond that, it is not one that gives money to a country; it loans money to a country to do an infrastructure project that enables China, typically, to extract minerals or other resources or services from a particular country, or enables it to build infrastructure. I do not see the immediate prospect of that, given the unsettled nature of the Government right now and the internal dispute between the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Taliban, with the Afghan Taliban leader in Kandahar and the Haqqani leader in Kabul.

Q165 **Royston Smith:** You talked about celebrations in Pakistan, which will be short-lived when they find the pressures of refugees and the rest. Can I ask you about some of the other neighbours—Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan? I know that Tajikistan is harbouring the Afghan resistance. How is it going to play out for those countries?

General Petraeus: I am not as certain of that as perhaps I might want to be. Turkmenistan will stand on the side-lines, as it traditionally has. It allowed us to refuel there at the most when I was Central Command commander. Uzbekistan partnered with us and, during the time that I was CENTCOM commander, we created a Northern Distribution Network, as it was called, with the approval of then-President Karimov, to restart the line of communication that went through Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia to some terminus in western or eastern Europe. Uzbekistan, by the way, also has a number of refugees and individuals who feared for their safety.

It is not clear, over time, what Tajikistan will ultimately do. Russia still has very considerable influence there. They are sorting out how they want to approach this. Kyrgyzstan is a little more remote. We had a transit centre and a base at Manas for a period of time, as you may

recall, but they will probably not play a huge role. Kazakhstan is not contiguous to Afghanistan.

It is not clear to me whether various countries around the world have yet made decisions about whether they want to support an opposition to the Taliban, as an example, which may have some slight attraction if you are not particularly fond of the Taliban, as is prudent to be, also recognising the hardship that that could create for Afghan citizens at the same time.

These are very tough questions for countries in the region—and much more so for countries around the world—that in the past have resourced the Mujahadeen against the Soviets and this kind of thing. These are very open questions right now and are being reviewed pretty carefully in various capitals that matter around the world.

Chair: We are going to have to let the General go in about three minutes, so this is the very last one.

Q166 **Henry Smith:** General, it is a great privilege to have you with us today at the Foreign Affairs Committee. In discussions and conversations that we have had with the Pakistani Government, they were, as you correctly say, ambivalent or at best pleased at the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. They are encouraging much closer diplomatic relations with western nations like the US, the UK and others with the new reality in Kabul. What is your view on that?

General Petraeus: I have to answer as the professor of economics that I was once or twice during my life: it depends. In this case, it depends on the nature of Taliban governance, it seems to me. There were hopes, which may now be seen as misplaced, that this was going to be a kinder, gentler Taliban. At least their spokesman initially seemed to present that it would be a much happier place for women, girls and minorities than it was during the Taliban regime of the late 1990s, when they harboured al-Qaeda and refused to eliminate them from their soil, when the 9/11 attacks were planned there, and when they ruled as if it was a 7th century, beyond ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam.

So far, what we are seeing is a bit of a mix, because there are local leaders who are interpreting things in local ways, but by and large you cannot look at what has happened and say that it is particularly encouraging about the ability of women to continue to go to college or even to secondary school, or to have a job, other than in a place that is strictly female, like an attendant at a female toilet. It is very restrictive so far.

By the way, I say this, my wife and I having sponsored a scholarship for a woman at the American University of Afghanistan. That woman is now studying in Qatar, because the prospects were so impossible in Afghanistan. As we are seeing what is becoming the reality of Afghan governance under the Taliban, there will not be enthusiasm for endorsing

what they are representing in the form of recognition or even in the form of direct assistance to the Government.

Rather, there will be what is going on already, which is how you bypass this Government and put aid into the hands of international organisations that can be trusted to get the humanitarian supplies, assistance and services directly to the Afghan people, as difficult as that is in a country that is controlled by the Taliban in every respect and has checkpoints everywhere that will probably have a tariff and so forth.

That is the reality on the ground. It is understandable that Pakistan's Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and other leaders would say that they want us all to embrace, or at least to recognise or work with and support, the Taliban, because they are now staring in the face the reality of a humanitarian collapse and of the prospects of millions of Afghan refugees flooding into their country once again—a country that has its own extremism problems and many other problems and challenges, all of which will be exacerbated by this influx of huge numbers of humanity who need basic services and support. It is very understandable if you are sitting where those in Islamabad sit, but not as understandable if you are sitting elsewhere in the world.

Q167 **Chair:** General Petraeus, thank you very much indeed for joining the Committee this afternoon. I am enormously grateful for your patience at the beginning as we were voting, and I am enormously pleased to see you again. I hope very much that we will meet up soon.

General Petraeus: The pleasure was mine, Mr Chairman, noting again how privileged I was to have you in our command.

Chair: Thank you, sir.

General Petraeus: Thanks for what you did then, thanks to you and to all of you for what you are doing now, and thanks for the great partnership that there is between the US and the UK, especially when it comes to those who are men and women in uniform and in the intelligence services.

Chair: Thank you very much, sir. With that, we will break just for a very brief moment as we bring in our next two witnesses.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Laurel Miller and Professor Michael Semple.

Q168 **Chair:** As before, I am just going to ask you very briefly to introduce yourselves. Michael, do you want to go first, because you are in the room?

Professor Semple: I am Michael Semple, professor at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice in

Queen's University Belfast. I am delighted to have that position. I have had many years of experience working on Afghanistan and have seen through more than one big change like we have witnessed over the past two months. I started working there with Oxfam and went on to work with the United Nations. I was a humanitarian co-ordinator during the first Taliban rule and then a political officer who helped to roll out the Bonn settlement and lay the foundations of the Afghan state that has just collapsed. I then worked as the deputy to the EU special representative.

Laurel Miller: I am Laurel Miller, director of the Asia programme at the International Crisis Group, which is a conflict prevention and conflict resolution-focused non-governmental organisation. As for Afghanistan experience, I was the US deputy and then acting special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan from mid-2013 to mid-2017, and have also, before and after that, engaged in my own research and analysis regarding Afghanistan when I was at the RAND Corporation and in other capacities. Thank you for having me.

Q169 **Chair:** Michael, if I can go to you first, please, Mark Sedwill, who, as you know, was the Cabinet Secretary here in the UK, has said that the withdrawal from Afghanistan was "an act of strategic self-harm". Do you agree?

Professor Semple: Yes, absolutely, at least in the way it was conducted. I do not think it was necessary to maintain a military presence there forever. The withdrawal was not a response to military defeat. Insofar as there was a defeat, it was a defeat brought about by the way in which the withdrawal was conducted.

Q170 **Chair:** We are going to come on to a few more areas of this, but do you agree with General Petraeus' argument that maintaining a small, capable force of enablers was achievable in the longer term?

Professor Semple: It is absolutely clear and a lot of people will be struggling as to why that option was not exercised. I suspect that there were also options that enablers would have, over time, been rendered redundant, so you would still have had a full military withdrawal, but not in May or September of 2021.

The key issue as to why this did not happen all revolves around what was happening politically in terms of the relations with the Afghan Government and the broader Afghan state, and in the attempt at a peace process with the Taliban. I have no doubt that it would have been possible to maintain enablers there. I suspect that it would have been possible to stabilise the security situation as long as they were there, but the question is what would have been achieved during that period. Significant course correction would have been required for it to be worthwhile staying there.

I was asked to give some response to President Biden's last big speech on Afghanistan when he explained his decision-making, and he explained

that he was faced with a binary choice between two bad options: getting out and accepting that you no longer have control over what happens, or extending the military presence, provoking an escalation from the Taliban and being left with no viable endpoint.

There were alternatives that would have led to a reduction in the conflict, primarily through political action, but I suspect that, if the President felt that he was choosing between those two bad options, it is because he was not convinced by or not offered, in a sufficiently persuasive way, the third option, which is to continue to do something with the military but for a finite time, with a good prospect of success.

Q171 **Chair:** Ms Miller, what influence did the UK or other allies have on this decision?

Laurel Miller: Minimal influence. This was clearly a decision made in Washington. That does not mean that there was not discussion and consultation with Britain and other allies, but I do not see any evidence that the views of other allies were factored into the decision to withdraw or the timing for withdrawal.

That said, I also have not seen clarity of objections. I have not seen allies and partners clamouring for staying in Afghanistan. Some individual voices have but, as a matter of Government policy, it is not at all evident to me that allies and partners were not ultimately satisfied to see the US take the decision that it did, even if there was handwringing about the manner of the withdrawal.

Q172 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you, both, for coming before us. Michael, what is your assessment in terms of the speed of takeover by the Taliban of Afghanistan? How do you feel the international community should be engaging with or responding to the anti-Taliban opposition that exists?

Professor Semple: When you ask me how I assess the speed of the Taliban takeover—

Q173 **Alicia Kearns:** I am sorry—in terms of the public assertions that the international community could not have expected it to be so quick, and nor did the intelligence community.

Professor Semple: We have to look back through at least the past three years. There are different ways in which there were either failures of intelligence or failures to use the available intelligence during that period. From September or October 2018, up until February 2020, there was the first set of negotiations between the US team and the Taliban, trying to get the US-Taliban deal. Everybody struggled to make sense of what the Taliban's strategic intentions were. There was a chance to look at that again after the deal was done at the end of February 2020.

Thereafter, it became absolutely critical from March 2020 up until May of this year, and the question that you should be asking of me or of people who were there making decisions is this: how did you understand the

Taliban's strategic intent? How did you respond to any such assessment? The US, as far as I can understand—and Laurel Miller knows a huge amount about this—was trying to create conditions in which it could pull its troops out and leave some kind of viable political setup, because it had brought the Taliban on board.

There is a key logic to it. It was saying to the Taliban, "Rather than trying to grab everything for yourselves, far better for you to cut a deal with the other political forces in Afghanistan. You will then win the blessing of the countries of the region and the world. Even with US troops out, or if you asked for some kind of residual assistance, which would also be possible and might be on the table, there will be a continuation of economic assistance, which is better than military victory". The attempt was to get them to buy into this logic.

If I am talking about issues around intelligence and the Taliban takeover, it is about what we understood of their intent there and whether they were taking the bait. My assessment during that period was that I liked the logic, but my findings from researching the Taliban suggested that their leadership had not bought into that logic and had prioritised taking power by force, and that their main backers in Pakistan were not putting enough pressure on them to make them take the bait, although there was a huge amount of co-operation between the US and Pakistan in rolling out that negotiating process.

That was the key issue as you get around to May of this year. There was an ongoing military campaign by the Taliban. I had multiple interactions with senior US officers in the field and US officials during that period, who were hoping that they could somehow persuade the Taliban to reduce their violence. We said, "Look, it is not happening". When you get to the final stage from May of this year, the Taliban launched their final offensive. That is an outcome of the strategic intent that they anyway had.

By that stage, you have to be assessing the strategic decision-making by the Afghan Government and their response to attempts from their partners, particularly the US, to say, "Switch course". I am sure that people like General Miller had been trying to tell them, "You have to redeploy. You are not going to have our resources. We are getting out. You cannot hold on to the country, but you can hold on to the key strategic areas".

The intelligence questions there are not so much about what the Taliban are doing but what the Afghan Government are doing and how they are redeploying their forces. In a sense, the speed of collapse has as much to do with the failures of the Afghan Government and their security forces to respond to that final offensive, and the inability or reluctance of the US to do what was necessary to get its partner to change course, and hence we get the collapse.

I tried to make sense of this intelligence failure and linked policy failure. It was that, when the Taliban did not do what all of us involved, in one way or another, wanted them to do, we failed to invest in an adequate parallel, alternative strategy or plan B. When it became pretty much clear that we really were in this final offensive and that there were critical errors being made in Kabul, nobody was sufficiently focused on that to be able to change them.

Q174 **Alicia Kearns:** Laurel, I do not know if you want to add anything to that. I would be particularly interested to know whether you are seeing the anti-Taliban opposition pop up or whether they are trying to talk to organisations like the International Crisis Group. What is your assessment of their current situation?

Laurel Miller: I would like to comment on the question of intelligence failure, but first, on the specific question of anti-Taliban opposition and remnants of the former regime, we are not seeing that as a significant factor at the moment. This is not the Northern Alliance of the 1990s with the kind of external support within the region that it enjoyed at that time. In the region and more broadly, we are seeing much more of an inclination to find ways to work with rather than against the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan, at least for the time being, and that is different than what we saw in the past.

Even though there have not been countries rushing to recognise the Taliban formally, because no one wants to jump first—they want to jump as part of a group—we see an inclination in that direction and, as soon as there is an opportune moment, we will see a number of formal recognitions of the Taliban regime, and a lot of de facto recognition and working with them until that time.

It has to be said that we have not seen the end of history in Afghanistan, and so I am certainly reluctant to predict the indefinite durability of a Taliban Government that face a lot of internal and external challenges of different kinds than they have faced before, and so past performance is not entirely a guarantee of future performance by this Government. They are going to experience new challenges, some of which General Petraeus alluded to, of being now a counterinsurgent and Government group rather than insurgent group. They also have their own flanks to worry about in terms of other militant groups.

On the question of intelligence failure, my view is that there was not an intelligence failure, because what happened was not a surprise. As any policymakers know and as I am sure the Committee members are well aware, intelligence assessments are probabilistic assessments. They are not predictions of the future. Even if intelligence agencies and analysts got it somewhat wrong on what the specific timing was for how quickly the Afghan Government would collapse, the trajectory of collapse was predicted. No one was saying, and none of the public reports of what the intelligence had said have indicated, that intelligence analysts said, "This Government is sure to hang on. Just provide it some money and it will".

It was a question of when, not if. There have been those assessments but I cannot imagine that they were not caveated in some way to indicate the probabilities.

My own view—and I said this many times before it all happened—was that there was a genuine probability of rapid downward spiral and collapse of the Afghan Government, which has as much to do with the Afghan Government and a lot of individual decisions within the Afghan security forces that could not be assessed and calculated as it did with anything that the Taliban were doing. It was two sides of a coin.

I thought, as many did, that it was somewhat more likely that the Afghan Government would be engaged in a pitched battle for urban areas with the Taliban over an extended period of time and would not collapse so rapidly. I also thought—and I was not alone in this—that that may have been the dominant scenario, but you could not really assign numbers to the percentage chance that that is what materialised, as opposed to a rapid collapse, with any high degree of confidence.

Moreover, it is not a straight line decision from "intelligence community tells us X and, therefore, we do Y". There are lots of inputs, including what diplomats say in their reporting, what external analysts say and what policymakers observe. Intelligence assessments are only one input to decision-making. My personal view is that overemphasising what was or was not said in some particular assessments of how rapid the collapse could be is incorrect.

When I was in Government, even as early as the 14-2015 timeframe, when the US was anticipating that it would be withdrawing from Afghanistan by 2016 and we were doing contingency planning for possible evacuations, we anticipated a rapid downward spiral and the need for rapid evacuation of large numbers of people as a possible scenario. It was our view at that time that a decision to begin to withdraw forces would provoke a crisis of confidence within the Afghan security forces and Government, and among the Afghan population. That was at a time when the Afghan Government were stronger and the Taliban were weaker than what the situation was in 2021. We could not predict it with precision but, at the same time, it was not surprising.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you, both, and I apologise that I have to leave in a moment.

Q175 **Chris Bryant:** Just briefly, the bit that confuses me about what you have just said is that I have heard of intelligence that said very clearly, around about the beginning of the year, that, although the Afghan Government maintained that it had 50,000 special forces based in Kabul, only 500 would ever be prepared to fight. I do not understand why, on the back of that, everybody was not able to predict fairly clearly—and some people clearly did predict fairly clearly—that Kabul was not going to last for very long.

Laurel Miller: That is a question directed to me, I guess.

Chris Bryant: Sorry, yes.

Laurel Miller: First, I want to be clear that you can raise and examine questions of will to fight without it being about blaming individuals within the Afghan security forces. This is not about their patriotism or their bravery, at least not in any systematic way. The unpredictably of will to fight is part of what I would point to when I say that there was a huge amount of uncertainty as to how long the Afghan Government would hold on and whether you would see a rapid collapse.

I never believed, in the years that I have been involved in this, even when there were many more US and NATO forces in Afghanistan and in contact with Afghan forces, that it was possible for foreign forces to have their finger on the pulse of the will to fight among the Afghan security forces' rank and file, and what kind of factors would lead to decisions to melt away, as has happened in other Afghan conflicts at other points in time and as happened in 2001 with the Taliban.

Q176 **Chris Bryant:** If you do not mind me saying, that is a bit of a flaw when it comes to an exit strategy, is it not?

Laurel Miller: Or it is just a reality of the limitations of your ability to know what is really happening inside the Afghan systems and institutions that you, as a foreigner, are just going to have limited visibility into. It has to be a question mark on your ability to be confident in your assessments of what was going to happen.

I recall sitting in meetings in the US Government when the question would be posed to US military officers: "How cohesive are the Afghan security forces?" This is some years ago. They would so very quickly say, "No problem there", and I would think to myself, "How do you know? How can you know?" That is not to criticise these people but, to me, that was an unknowable. You had to consider that as a variable with a high degree of uncertainty and a lot of individual calculations.

The final point I would make on this is that it would not be correct to say that members of the Afghan security forces failed the system or the country. It was the system that failed those individuals. The system was not there, so that, once you pulled out the American and NATO factor, which had both a psychological impact and glue, and a practical, material support for the security forces, they lost confidence in the ability of their leaders and system to support and lead their mission. That is why I say it was the system that failed the forces rather than forces that failed the system.

Q177 **Chris Bryant:** Michael, could I ask you a slightly different question? As I understand it, the Afghan economy is somewhere between 72% and 82% constituted of aid. There is a real danger that aid is not going to get through, and we might want to use aid as leverage for all sorts of different reasons, because we want to ensure freedom of movement and

that women and girls are treated properly, or because of human rights issues and so on. It feels as if the prospect for Afghanistan is really very bleak and that civil war is a not inconceivable possibility in the next six months.

Professor Semple: This relates also to the bit of Alicia's previous question that I did not get to answer on the resistance and what happens next. Putting these together, yes, Afghanistan faces an unprecedented economic crisis. You are talking about something like a halving of GDP over a period of one or two quarters—way beyond anything that any country has had to cope with in modern times. It is not just a question of aid that was provided Government to Government or through agencies. We have lost most of the infrastructure of the modern economy that had been put in place.

Chris Bryant: And the middle class to deliver it.

Professor Semple: Absolutely, a million people are thrown out of work because Government stops. In my UN role back in the first period of Taliban rule, I was tasked to assess the humanitarian impact of sanctions then in place, one version of which now continues. In that period, before sanctions were imposed, the banking system was already non-functional, so the Afghan economy, insofar as it functioned, was already operating unbanked. Over the past 20 years, we have helped Afghans develop a banking system, and so all those who are involved in international trade in Afghanistan—and, of course, it is a trading country—are now banked in a way that they were not 20 years ago, but suddenly all the banks have closed. One bank is just managing to move a wee bit of money, but in effect all the others have stopped trading.

It is not just that Governments are not providing assistance. If you go to the main trading cities up in Mazar-i-Sharif or other port cities like Aqina and Kandahar, most of the business has simply stopped. The way that that impacts the Taliban and their attempts to run the Government is that they have come to power and the people who have now moved into the Ministries are saying, "We have fought this 20-year jihad. We have defeated a great superpower. I am now in the Minister's seat and I have no money. I have no food to give to my followers and I have no money".

Literally, people go and visit Taliban Ministers and they say, "Can you lend me a fiver while you are here?" It is that kind of level. "I have just captured 100 pickup trucks but I do not have fuel to put in them". Talk to Taliban officials who are struggling with responsibility for whole regions of the country, and they feel under siege by widows or women who tend to do the submission of applications for assistance, saying, "What can we do with them?"

There are two versions of the model that the Taliban are pushing. When my researchers have listened to Taliban officials, they have said to the population, "You have to feed our troops now, even if you have almost nothing yourselves. Do not worry. It will not last for long. We will get

international recognition and then the world will fund us. We will be able to feed our troops off the back of that and we will leave you alone thereafter". For the Taliban, recognition is the route for them to be able to hold their military together, consolidate in power and build their Islamic emirate on international dollars.

The alternative version is that, at least if they can get the humanitarian-aid funding, the limited customs revenue that Afghanistan can generate even under the Taliban was sufficient to run the Taliban military that you need to keep the population down, leaving next to nothing over for civilian administration, and the internationals will provide the humanitarian assistance for at least some feeding of the population. This is the kind of struggle that they are facing.

However, I would absolutely agree with what Laurel said earlier on: that we really do not know the outcome of this process. Although the Taliban clearly fully intend to consolidate their Islamic emirate's grip over the country, we do not know whether they can pull it off. You mentioned civil war, and my reading of it is that there is already a civil war underway, and the question is what the route to ending that civil war is.

On the issue of resistance, there is already resistance to Taliban rule. One should remember that this is not just a replacement of one group by another. This is a violent takeover by a group that has an extremely limited ethnic base of support, which has never demonstrated any significant support among the population. It is their military effectiveness that has allowed them to get into power. Already in the first two months, they have governed in such a way that they are succeeding in alienating not just much of the population but even many of their own people, who are questioning what it was all about. There is deep concern inside the Taliban movement since the power grabs by the Haqqani group and people who are closer to the ISI than the core Taliban from Kandahar. They are deeply worried by that.

The latest version of the Northern Alliance could be labelled "national democratic forces"—people who have a power base particularly in the non-Pashtun ethnic groups, and then some of the Pashtuns who are strongly opposed to the Taliban. They are reorganising. They are prioritising political action before they scale up military action. They say they want to try to get back to a broad-based Government. They do not think it is likely that the Taliban are going to buy that, but they feel obliged to prioritise political action before they go back to the battlefield.

People look around and say, "There is no resistance to the Taliban". If there is military action, it comes further down the road. They are rebuilding and rearming. Unfortunately, that is the reality; it is not a decision that is made in this room or any western capital. It is something that, in a sense, the Taliban have triggered, because the logic that they were told was, "Do not do this. Do not do the power grab. Resistance will be inevitable".

One of the differences, perhaps, with the prospects this time is that the

Taliban may not have changed over the past 20 years but the Afghan population has. There is a significant prospect for civic resistance against the Taliban. What are the Taliban going to do when hundreds of thousands of people say, "You people precipitated this economic crisis by defying the will of your population and the advice of all your own international partners, let alone rivals—stand aside"? What are they going to do?

They cannot shoot everybody. Nobody knows what is going to happen to the resistance. We know that there is resistance happening. It has implications on this issue about how you engage. The Taliban are not the only actor in Afghanistan. We do not know what it is going to look like in six months' time. Anybody trying to engage with the Taliban should also be engaging with the other forces in Afghan society. You need to spread your bets.

Chair: Can I go straight on from that to Royston? I know you wanted to ask about British engagement with the Taliban.

Q178 **Royston Smith:** Yes, I did. I was going to ask about how we should consider the Taliban as a unified group, but you have answered that they are not. In that context, how should we deal with them? What leverage does the international community have?

Professor Semple: I have a few thoughts on this. First of all, the Taliban are in power. Afghanistan still counts. It is important to deal with Afghanistan. One part of that has to be dealing with the Taliban, so, yes, you have to engage with the Taliban.

If you accept my assessment that this is not an equilibrium state, the Taliban hanging on to Afghanistan, having defied all calls for some kind of inclusive administration, is just not going to work. There is a real risk that international engagement with the Taliban prolongs the agony by helping them to hang on for longer.

A recommitment to a peace process in Afghanistan, which reaches that stated objective of a broad-based Afghan Government, with an inclusive political system and the Taliban on the inside rather than outside, broadly acceptable to the population and able to conduct its dealings with the international community, is the sustainable end state in Afghanistan.

A political recommitment to that should go alongside the acceptance that you have to engage with the Taliban now. That leaves you space to engage with other political actors and goes some way to mitigating the risk that, by sitting with the Taliban, it looks like the world has decided that the Taliban are here to stay. Afghanistan is a country that has now had centuries of global engagement, whereby decisions by political actors inside Afghanistan are influenced by what they see international and regional actors doing, so you have to be very careful not to be giving the wrong message. Frankly, it is not in the interests of the West to see a consolidation of the Taliban if there is an alternative of a more broad-based system.

The key thing in UK engagement should be doing it in such a way that increases the prospect of a viable peace in Afghanistan, rather than just prolonging the agony and the civil war by propping up the Taliban somewhat.

Q179 **Royston Smith:** Ms Miller, do you have anything to add to that, please?

Laurel Miller: As a representative of a conflict prevention organisation, I am sorry to say this, but I see, essentially, no real means for external actors such as the UK, the US and other allies to try to promote broad-based, inclusive governance in Afghanistan right now, or any kind of broad-based peace process. The Taliban simply are not interested in that. Everything that they have done so far demonstrates that they are not, at this time, interested in that.

The countries that have somewhat more leverage over them, such as Pakistan, Qatar and China, would like to see a more broad-based, inclusive Government because they know, as Michael indicated, that the current, more monopolistic form of rule is not stable in Afghanistan. They are not prepared to use any kind of really forceful leverage over the Taliban in order to achieve that. They are not prepared to withhold from the Taliban this kind of de facto recognition that they are enjoying now.

The aid that Europe, the US and other traditional donors could provide is marginal leverage over the Taliban at best. They are not showing that they are susceptible to that form of leverage. Humanitarian assistance is not being and should not be used as leverage. It should be provided on a completely non-political basis.

At the end of the day, the Taliban, because what they are prioritising is holding on to power and satisfying constituency number one, which is the fighters who brought them to power and on whom they depend for continuing in power, are prepared to tough it out and to facilitate the acceptance of humanitarian assistance, and then to be prepared to rule a steadily more impoverished Afghanistan and to adapt to that impoverishment. Although Afghanistan has changed in the last 20 years, it would be a mistake to see those changes as permanent and somehow a buffer against regression.

Q180 **Royston Smith:** How do we get humanitarian aid to where it needs to go without the Taliban preventing it, taking it or siphoning it off somehow?

Laurel Miller: There is always some siphoning that happens in some fashion, at least in the sense of taking credit for the delivery of aid that is provided by foreign donors and international organisations. There are international organisations, UN agencies and international NGOs that are still on the ground in Afghanistan and have worked there for many years, including during the former Taliban rule in the 1990s. They have the systems in place to be able to deliver humanitarian assistance. I do not see any great obstacles for what is purely humanitarian assistance to be delivered.

I find it surprising that, as of last Friday, when I checked, the UN's appeal for humanitarian aid for just the remainder of this year was still less than 50% filled by donors, even though that is the one area where donors can, without too much concern about facilitating Taliban rule, provide support to the Afghan people. There is more that donors can do on that front, even while other forms of aid are problematic.

Humanitarian assistance is only a mitigating measure. It is a bandage kind of measure. It is not going to reverse the trend of greater impoverishment of Afghanistan and the economic problems that Afghanistan is facing, which have both political and practical dimensions. You do not need me to tell you that, for western donors, the political obstacles to providing the kinds of assistance that were provided to the last Government—which, it has to be said, did not prevent the kind of fragility that we are now seeing materialise—are extremely significant, in addition to the practical ones of trying to work with a not fully formed, not fully competent Taliban regime.

Q181 **Bob Seely:** Can I ask a question of Laura and then a couple of Michael? I have come in late, so apologies if you already answered this. Laura, you were talking about the various reasons for the collapse of the Afghan forces. To what extent was the withdrawal of western technical ability part of that? I ask that specifically because of the nature of the way the US used overseas contractors.

If you had a helicopter or helicopter capability, the Afghans were not necessarily part of that, because the helicopter came with a contractor. As soon as the money dried up for that, whether or not the helicopter stayed, the contractor would not service it and, therefore, you could not use that kit. To what extent did our lack of trust in our Afghan partners mean that, when we pulled out, the expertise needed, especially with drones and air power, went with it?

Laurel Miller: That was certainly a factor in real, practical ways but also in affecting the confidence of the Afghan forces that they would be able to hold on. Of course, it was a very long-term problem, which was well recognised by the US and by NATO, that there was a dependency for the higher-end capabilities, like the Afghan air force, on foreign contractors. It was not that people in the US Department of Defense and elsewhere did not recognise it and were not working to try to address it. The undesirability and unsustainability of this arrangement was known. The problem was just that it takes a long time to build up the indigenous capabilities to provide that kind of maintenance support, and there was a lot of frustration with this.

There was also a lot of frustration with the fact that these high-end forces, particularly the air force, were, over a long period of time, being used in ways that really just ground them down and redoubled the maintenance challenges that there were. I do not put this on the Biden Administration per se, because it would have taken much longer than the

period of time they were in office to deal with this, but you have to say that there was not really a plan for withdrawal.

There was a political imperative for withdrawal that we had seen building up for years in Washington. It was not new with the Biden Administration. There was resistance to the idea of complete withdrawal from within the Department of Defense. There was a plan for pulling out the people but there was not really a plan—and there would not have been a perfect one in any event—for the aftermath of withdrawal, including on this issue of contractors, for a variety of reasons. One was a concern that, if you plan too conservatively for it, you make it happen and you precipitate some of the dynamics that you are trying to avoid by trying to avoid the withdrawal. The short answer is that this was, in the context of withdrawal, one of the precipitating factors for collapse, but it was not the uniquely responsible factor.

Q182 **Bob Seely:** Michael, do you have anything to add to that? If you do not particularly, I will come to another couple of questions. You talk about the cleft stick that we have: that, if we recognise the Taliban, we could potentially get more aid into the country, so you could argue that there is a significant moral imperative when it comes to helping. At the same time, you say, "All we are going to do is prolong the agony and, therefore, we should not necessarily be recognising the Taliban".

With both ethical concerns at the fore but also looking at national self-interest, what is the best approach? Is it not to recognise the Taliban and to force them down a more moderate route, if such a word is applicable to them? What would you do in these circumstances? What would you be advising Government to do?

Professor Semple: We know that there are issues around what is recognition anyway, but we are talking about the extent to which there is diplomatic engagement and the extent to which there might be a move towards the withdrawal of sanctions and the restoration of economic assistance.

I do not see how it could be in the UK's national interests to be involved in consolidating a regime that grabbed power directly against the advice and strong warnings of regional powers and US allies, and has adopted a deliberately provocative approach in its formation of the Administration. This is not just about a question of, "Did they agree to the broad-based formula and to some kind of power sharing?" They chose to insert some of the most controversial figures available to them at the top of the Administration.

Q183 **Bob Seely:** Are you talking specifically about the Haqqani now?

Professor Semple: Specifically, Siraj Haqqani was brought in as Interior Minister—somebody who is directly responsible for the operation of suicide bomb networks and for attacks on UK, US and Afghan civilians in large scale, and personally ordering and celebrating them. I wrote a little piece a while back. He addressed their military commission with

something like "dream of the Prophet" and the Angel Gabriel predicting that he would be the instrument through which God destroyed America. They did not need to appoint him Interior Minister. In Afghanistan, there is always a good way of retaining your influence by putting a proxy forward, but they deliberately chose the most provocative appointments.

Go to people like Taj Mir, who was, until 14 August, directly a suicide bomber trainer. These are people who have refined the use of suicide bombing and exported the technology around the world. He is now inserted at deputy level at the national intelligence service. The messaging that that would give—that they are suddenly made respectable and normalised without any evidence that they have also since given up on their ambitions to use these tactics—is inconceivable.

Q184 **Bob Seely:** Are we talking about complex operations for the far enemy in terms of suicide bombing or strapping lots of dynamite to vulnerable people and shoving them into a marketplace to create fear? What sort of levels of sophistication are we talking about with that?

Professor Semple: World leading. These are the people who invented world-leading, complex attacks. We can look at it at two levels. One is the practical and direct: do you have valid concerns about the imminent prospect of them now using their new control over the intelligence apparatus to launch these attacks outside of Afghanistan? That is one issue and a very specialist area.

Even before you conclude that, say, Taj Mir is about to open up a new camp somewhere outside Kabul and start developing complex attacks in the region, it is the messaging. The political cost even at home would have to be so high to be seen to be consolidating and financing such people and rewarding them for refusing all options to compromise. You are rewarding terrorism.

Q185 **Bob Seely:** That brings me on to my second question. You are talking about a very narrow base. The Taliban has always been half religious extremists but half Pashtun movement of various types, and maybe you would argue with that. To what extent is it still entirely reliant on its Pashtun base? You said it was alienating other groups. To what extent does it have any support among Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras and others?

Professor Semple: It is a very important question. Power inside the Taliban movement—both the stuff that is quite visible because it is now announced in senior appointments, and what we understand when we try to determine what is happening inside the Taliban military—is exclusively Pashtun. There are some non-Pashtun appointments in their overall lists, but they are all deliberately non-power positions.

We should be careful about how we see that the Taliban movement is not a credible representative of the whole Pashtun ethnicity, but they are from the Pashtuns and make use of some of their tribal connectivity. They have systematically excluded the Uzbeks and Tajiks from power.

When you get into power, you have to find some way of dealing with the local populations, and they can try to pursue some kind of co-option, but for now the story is that this Administration are exclusive Pashtun and the non-Pashtun minorities are excluded.

Q186 **Bob Seely:** I do not understand why they were able to defeat the Uzbeks and the Tajiks, because these people have a warrior culture themselves and were well represented, and perhaps over-represented, in the Afghan armed forces.

Professor Semple: We spent 20 years trying to build up, fund and empower a centralised system. The sole strategic partner that the west recognised in Afghanistan always resided in the presidential palace, initially for perhaps some good reasons, but we understood the story that this is the disarming of the warlords. In a sense, the strategy that the US and the UK ended up supporting was one that spiked the guns of the most obvious resistance to the Taliban.

Q187 **Bob Seely:** Why was that?

Professor Semple: Part of the selling point of the Islamic republic was that it practised a form of pluralism, and all ethnicities in Afghanistan had a place and a stake inside the republic. When it came to the management of the security forces that were centralised in the presidential palace, the West bought into the strategy that that should be Pashtun-led. The price of building up the centralised security forces was weakening the traditional faction leaders who had an ethnic base. Over the last two years, if you look at some of the decisions that were taken in the security sector, they were more about weakening non-Pashtuns inside the Afghan security forces than about defeating the Taliban.

The verdict as to how important and real this was will probably come later, because it has to be unpicked more, but this is certainly something that they fed back to us. There was a basis for resistance and certainly no acceptance. In fact, up until 14 or 15 August, there was a broad national consensus in Afghanistan that they did not want the Taliban back in power, but there was a complete failure to translate that real political consensus into effective resistance.

Q188 **Chair:** Forgive me, but we are going to have to move on, because we have two further witnesses, and I just want to ask some very brief questions. First, is this a direct threat to the UK and to the West, Michael?

Professor Semple: Yes, absolutely. Afghanistan is and will continue to be. If I run through a detailed list, there are some direct and tangible effects for the UK, and some indirect and intangible effects. It is something that people will be commenting on over the years. I would start off with the largest proliferation event on small arms since the end of the Cold War. There is the potential refugee crisis. We know that the international militants are ensconced in Afghanistan and were waiting for this day, so what will they do?

The reputational effect that General Petraeus referred to is very important and will be long-lasting. I know many hundreds of Afghans who are asking, "Why did I co-operate with these people in all the things that we are doing, whereas now, ultimately, I am left to try to survive under the very people we were operating against?"

Q189 **Chair:** Ms Miller, on the relationship with countries like China, Russia and Pakistan, will we be able to work with them to secure some form of influence over Afghanistan or is our role now entirely nugatory?

Laurel Miller: It is worth trying to work with or at least communicate with them and be on the same page diplomatically in terms of what kinds of messages are delivered to the Taliban. The more there is unity within the international community, particularly including those countries you have mentioned, and western Governments as to the messages that are delivered to the Taliban, the more prospect there is of, at least at the margins, shaping their behaviour.

China, Russia and Pakistan are the countries that are going to have the most direct influence over shaping the Taliban in the future, even though their leverage is somewhat limited as well, and self-limited by the fact that they want to see this Taliban Government succeed. I would advocate trying to engage with them to the extent possible, even recognising how difficult it is to be on the same page with that set of countries.

Q190 **Chair:** For a very final question, if I may, I am going to try to keep you brief, Michael. Forgive me for doing so. I have met in recent weeks with members and directors of UN agencies who have been asking about giving money through the Afghan governmental system. My own view has been to say no. There is no point in seeking to sustain or enable a terrorist network that now holds a Government. Would you work through the Afghan political system insomuch as it still exists or would you be looking simply to fund emergency aid directly through UN agencies and similar?

Professor Semple: You should be working through UN agencies and NGOs, and liaising with the Taliban authorities. For anything more profound than that, you have to wait until there is a viable alternative. If, in a year's time, say, the Taliban are still in power and have consolidated, maybe you can work with them, but things are going to change. Do not bank on what you see today in Afghanistan being there. You should not get on the wrong side of history in helping it to stagger on. For the moment, working with UN agencies and NGOs, in liaison with the Taliban authorities, is a viable option.

Laurel Miller: Could I offer one exception to that? I largely agree with that recommendation but I would say it is essential that the healthcare system does not collapse in Afghanistan, and ensuring that may require more engagement with the Taliban Ministry of Public Health than would be required in other areas.

Professor Semple: I wholly agree.

Q191 **Chair:** Would it be true to say that the countries that supported the Taliban were surprised by their catastrophic success?

Professor Semple: Given that they did not seem to have a plan in place, I would think that that is the answer. The Taliban are surprised by it, and you just cannot overestimate the extent to which the Taliban now in power are saying, "What on earth were we doing?"

Chair: I am going to thank you both enormously. I know we could speak for much longer. Michael, you and I normally do. I will thank you at that point and invite our two next witnesses up.

Laurel Miller: Thanks for having me.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Shaharzad Akbar and Shukria Barakzai.

Q192 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed for joining us. I am going to ask you very briefly to introduce yourselves. Simply because you are in the room, Shukria, would you mind going first?

Shukria Barakzai: Thank you so much, Mr Chair and honourable members of the Committee for the opportunity you provide. My name is Shukria Barakzai. In the last 19 years, I have been in this House several times, holding meetings, exhibitions and speeches. This time, I am not representing any country or any group of people. I was a member of the constitution drafting committee in Afghanistan, a journalist, women's rights activist and Member of Parliament. My most recent job was ambassador of Afghanistan to the Kingdom of Norway.

Shaharzad Akbar: I am very honoured to be here. Thank you for having me. My name is Shaharzad Akbar and I am chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, currently speaking to you from Turkey.

Q193 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed for coming to see us and for your courage over many years in standing up for rights in Afghanistan. Shukria, when did you first realise you had to leave Afghanistan?

Shukria Barakzai: Death threats from the Taliban. I was not planning to leave my country. I was waiting for the peace deal to happen between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban. In the last four years, the people of Afghanistan were aiming to be a witness of peace after a long war. Unfortunately, it did not happen. When I felt a direct threat from the Taliban at the airport and after that, it made me decide to leave my country.

Q194 **Chair:** Could you just tell us how that process of departure worked? Where did you get help? What happened?

Shukria Barakzai: I was scheduling a trip to India in the beginning. Unfortunately, due to a long queue and busy traffic on 15 August in Kabul, I missed the flight and rearranged at the airport to get to Turkey. Unfortunately, that plane could not take off, since the runway was packed and certain people had got into the plane. After that, we realised that the Government of Afghanistan had collapsed. It was very strange.

I got into the airport where all the border police were, standing and checking, looking at passports, but later on, at a finger snap, things changed. All night, I was on the plane, because I realised that there was no hope of me getting out. I noticed, from inside the plane, at midnight, the Taliban came and began searching for people and, later on, the chaos and the mass of people on the ground.

After that, when I realised that they were after me, I tried to get to the terminal, just to go somewhere, but it did not happen. I joined the crowd on the ground, but again they were after me. They beat us in front of US soldiers. They were ready to shoot. There was an exchange of bullets between US troops and the Taliban, but just into the air. That was the time I decided that they were after me.

Before all these things happened, which is why I could not make it out, when they first entered the city, they looted my house. One of my colleagues sent me a photo of the Taliban entering the street where I lived. The famous TOLO TV had been there, so I realised they were after me.

After that, when I left the airport in a bad condition, I was struggling. I was calling officially and asking the British Government to help me. That was early morning, 16 August 2021. Finally, with direct help and communication with you, Mr Chair, and the Honourable Debbie Abrahams, and with the co-operation of Lord Tariq Ahmad, after seven days and six hours, I got a letter that said I am eligible and I was evacuated thanks to co-operation between US forces and the Royal Air Force of the United Kingdom.

Chair: Thank you very much. It is a pleasure to have helped.

Shaharzad Akbar: I left Kabul on the morning of 15 August, on a commercial flight to Dubai with my husband and son. We booked the flight on Thursday, 12 August. At that time, I booked my ticket to return on 22 August, because it still had not sunk in that things would fall apart so quickly. By the time I got to Dubai and on to my next flight, we had learned that the president had left the country and the Taliban had fully taken over. I knew that, at least in the short term, I would not be able to go back.

Q195 **Chris Bryant:** Thanks for your witness. It is very moving. I know that quite a lot of people are still stuck in Afghanistan and would like to be

able to get out. The Taliban are now issuing passports, as I understand, but you have to get a visa in a passport and you have to go and get a passport from the Taliban. Is there a way round this circle? Do you see any prospect for other people coming out?

Shukria Barakzai: I do believe that it is very dangerous especially for women or people looking after them who are well known to the Taliban to get a passport. The Taliban know that people are leaving the country. From my understanding, always in emergency situations, there are some exceptions. I do believe, in the case of Afghans, especially those in immediate need whose lives are in danger, that if we ignore the old bureaucracy, which can suddenly create more obstacles—it gives more time and more people into the hands of the Taliban—we can save the lives of people. There is the chance to give them priority, first, and, secondly, safe passage without lots of bureaucracy and confusion in between.

Afghanistan is not in a normal situation. When I say that I am not representing a country, that means a lot to me. I am someone from a country where the state has not been recognised. The people are living in different parts of the world, even including the country. Nobody is taking responsibility. This is an emergency situation. I hope this should be understood widely.

Q196 **Chris Bryant:** I am presuming—maybe I am wrong—that you came through Doha.

Shukria Barakzai: I came from Kabul to Dubai and then from Dubai to Oxford.

Shaharzad Akbar: That is a very important question. Many people who are at high risk are still in Afghanistan. We have verified reports of former members of security forces being targeted and killed as well as defenders and media being harassed and targeted. It is a very severe situation for large groups of people.

In terms of what can be done, it really depends on the political will of the countries. I can give examples of my own colleagues. Three of my colleagues and their families were accepted by New Zealand. In one family, all members had passports. In other families, some members had passports and some did not. New Zealand managed to negotiate with Pakistan and got our colleagues to Pakistan, and from there they were processed and we are hoping that they will soon arrive in New Zealand.

There are ways that negotiations can be done. I know of at least one case where an agreement was reached with the Pakistanis, and the family showed up at the border with Pakistan and showed the letter that they had received and some more documents. Not all of them had passports, but they were admitted to Pakistan and then processed from there.

I know there has not been a question asked on this, but I want to raise it. From our experience at the commission, we had 392 staff, and we

consider that a majority of them, if not all of them, are high risk, because of their human rights work. The UK initially gave permission for six of our female staff who are high risk and had very public profiles, but by the time we got the response from the UK we had already evacuated four of those women to other countries. The UK took in two of our colleagues, and then we sent them an updated list of six colleagues. We have not heard back, despite repeated follow-up. At least in my field with my colleagues there are smaller countries in Europe that have done better.

Q197 **Chris Bryant:** Yes, I have heard that as well, and I have heard that we are being a bit slow even once people have got out of Afghanistan. Sometimes the next bit of processing is very slow, as I understand it. The Home Office has still said that it has not added a single member of staff in Pakistan or in any of the neighbouring countries to be able to process people more quickly.

I have a question, though. I understand that the amount of leverage that the US, the UK and other countries have with the Taliban might be very low, but might other countries credibly argue to the Taliban that, if they want to stop the brain drain, which is undoubtedly a problem for the future economy of Afghanistan, the best way to do that is to allow freedom of movement? If you know you will to get back out once you have gone in, you might go back in. Is that fair, Shukria?

Shukria Barakzai: Of course it is fair, but is there any guarantee that the terrorist group of the Taliban will hold themselves accountable and fulfil the promise they have made? In my experience, given that they were not loyal to the United States of America's Doha agreement, how can there be? That is an important point to consider.

Shaharzad Akbar: I do not know to what extent other countries in the region are talking about the free movement issues with the Taliban or about other human rights issues. Of course, it is definitely something that is worth pursuing. We have a relationship, for instance, with the Qatar National Human Rights Committee, which is our sister organisation. It is a national human rights institution. We have been talking to them for a long time about our own colleagues, and then talking to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to talk to the Taliban about our colleagues and other people like our colleagues being able to get out safely, continuously reminding them that all Afghans would like to go to their own country eventually.

This is not helping with the Taliban's national image; it is not creating trust in the population. I am not aware of the extent to which other countries are raising these issues with them or this is part of the conversation with them. In fact, I do not event know to what extent these issues are part of the conversation that, for instance, the UN has with the Taliban.

Q198 **Neil Coyle:** Shukria, you just mentioned that the Taliban had been trying to find you, trying to locate you. It is understandable that you do not

trust the Taliban. What is your take on their actions so far in charge? What does it tell us about how they are likely to rule Afghanistan? Do you believe they are different? It was the former Foreign Secretary here who described them as "Taliban 2.0", which is pretty crass. Have they changed at all in the 20 years that they have not been in Government?

Shukria Barakzai: I was running a new girls' school during the Taliban, 23 years back from now. Their mindset, their behaviour and their beliefs are exactly the same. In fact, this time I believe the Taliban are changed by only one thing. Before, the Taliban were a kind of unified group. Right now, they have been dividing themselves into two different groups. One of those is close to Qatar, with largely more Kandaharis. They are delivering political messages. The other is closer to Pakistan, especially to the ISI of Pakistan. They largely belong to the Haqqani network. Unfortunately, they have the military control. That is why you can see the different messages and different actions. That difference also comes from the division among the Taliban.

Unfortunately, the Taliban are playing certain roles politically. On one side, they are controlling the country; on the other side, they are not taking responsibility for targeted killings, for security and for the genocide, or for the rights in the constitution that they have already adopted.

Q199 **Neil Coyle:** Is it fair to suggest that it would be naïve to take the Taliban at their word that they have changed?

Shukria Barakzai: From my understanding—wearing the hat of a journalist, I just want to be frank and honest with you—the Taliban have never changed. Their message is exactly the same. A different picture of the Taliban have been purposefully shown just for the Doha agreement, and that is it. It was shown just for the withdrawal, just for the peace deal between the United States and the Taliban, just to bring the Chinese into the region. We see the consequences of that.

Q200 **Neil Coyle:** Feel free to come in, Shaharzad. It is harder to engage through Zoom, but do speak if you wish to. Will the Taliban be able to contain all the other fractious elements and other terrorist organisations like ISIS-K, Daesh or whatever you want to call it? Is it possible to keep a lid on those tensions or will some of that unravel as we go forward?

Shukria Barakzai: Some of those have been great allies of the Taliban while they have been jointly fighting against the Government of Afghanistan and foreign troops. Right now it seems like IS-K will be a headache for the Taliban, for Afghanistan and for the region. They will be more important in the way they are operationally against Shias and the way they are irritating other countries in the region. They may be more important than the Taliban very soon. Why the Taliban are not taking some form of action is because they do not want to lose their foot soldiers to IS-K, because IS-K is wealthier than the Taliban at the moment.

Shaharzad Akbar: I will just quickly come in on the earlier question in terms of whether the Taliban has changed. I absolutely agree with Ms Barakzai. We do not see a change in terms of their actions. I do feel like they have a more sophisticated communication strategy, but, beyond that, if people listened to Afghans, especially Afghan women, from the beginning of the peace process, there was a consistent call that the Taliban should be held to their actions, not to their words.

We in the commission had reports of women being stoned in Taliban-controlled areas, a lack of access for women to education in Taliban-controlled areas, and a lack of civil society and independent media in Taliban-controlled areas. We did not need new evidence. We knew how they were ruling. They were ruling parts of Afghanistan at that time. However, diplomats preferred to listen to what was being said in Doha and not give equal value to the evidence that was coming from the ground. Now we see that in fact they are unwilling to change on something as universally accepted in Afghanistan and all Muslim countries as women's access to education, and are depriving girls of this.

Q201 **Neil Coyle:** I have one final question. You mentioned Doha, Shukria. Who should the UK be engaging with in order to exert influence over the Taliban and try to extract those thousands who are left behind, for example? I should probably say that I have just come back from Qatar.

Chris Bryant: I was there and all.

Neil Coyle: I should get that on the record.

Chris Bryant: Which was paid for by the Qatari Government.

Neil Coyle: Is it the Qataris? Is it Pakistan? Who should we be engaging with to try to exert influence and to try to help, in my case, constituents' families who are still in Afghanistan?

Shukria Barakzai: I do believe it is the Qataris. I believe the Qataris feel themselves to be more accountable, and they have good leverage on the Taliban. We can use Qatar. Right now, among one group of the Taliban in Pakistan there are some verbal issues that may increase.

I believe in using Qatar not only for the evacuation. I would put a humble request to the Committee for the possibility of a conference being held to engage the women of Afghanistan and for them to talk directly to the Taliban. It is impossible to bring women inside Afghanistan and ask them to talk and speak freely with the Taliban. Outside of Afghanistan, it would be possible. I believe the Taliban is, right now, the elephant in the room. We cannot deny it. Of course I am not supporting the recognition of the Taliban, but some sort of engagement is necessary just to make the Taliban accountable and to hold them accountable for their actions.

Shaharzad Akbar: In terms of leverage on the Taliban, yes, it is definitely Qatar and Pakistan. What we hear, which may or may not be entirely accurate, is that the Qatar group is very much marginalised even

with the appointments that happened. I do agree with Ms Barakzai that Qatar remains an important player regardless. Qatar also does not seem extremely happy with all the decisions taken by the Taliban right now. It is important to engage Qataris, Pakistanis and China as the key actors. This conference is going to happen in Moscow. I am trying to figure out more about it. What role will Russia have? To what extent could Russia be brought on to have some unity of messaging to the Taliban, as former witnesses also emphasised?

Q202 **Bob Seely:** To what extent does one see women's issues and women's relationship with the Taliban as a specific issue? To what extent do we see it as being bound up in more general questions about human rights?

Shukria Barakzai: Human rights and women's rights are very vital and very important issues. For the time being, half the population of Afghanistan are being denied very fundamental rights and duties. The large unemployment numbers increased when the Taliban took power, which means that poverty among women has also increased. It has doubled and tripled compared to before. When we are about talking about human rights, freedom of expression, education, access to healthcare, these are the fundamental rights that today's Taliban are not delivering. Besides that, they are banning girls from going to school.

It is very crucial. If we let the Taliban do whatever they want to do, like we did in the 1990s, there will chaos again. I would also kindly ask everyone, humbly, not to ignore the civilian resistance in Afghanistan. People are standing for values, such as women. Every single day there are demonstrations; women are going on to the streets. They are asking about their rights. If there is no international support, locally it will be impossible for the Taliban to listen to their messages.

Q203 **Bob Seely:** If I am a man in Kabul, in what way could the Taliban be oppressing my rights? Clearly, if I were to take up arms against the Taliban, I would be an enemy. In what way are they oppressing me as a male Afghan as opposed to a woman?

Shaharzad Akbar: I will answer, if I may; of course Ms Barakzai can also step in. In terms of the overall human rights and women's rights situation, Afghanistan has made some progress on human rights. We have never been a signatory to so many conventions as we have been in the past 20 years, including, for instance, the Convention against Torture, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CEDAW—a whole bunch of international commitments.

The human rights community in Afghanistan then worked very hard to align our own legal framework with these conventions. For instance, our penal code is much more humane than what we had before. We have an anti-torture law. We had one or we have one; I do not know what the status of our legal framework is right now. We have an anti-torture law and an anti-torture commission. We have a child rights commission. We have a child Act that is in line with international standards.

What we see in the behaviour of the Taliban is inhuman punishment, the way they punish "thieves", the lack of due process and the suppression of freedom of expression. In these areas we see that it impacts everyone, men and women. If you are an Afghan man who is allegedly a thief, they will hang you, cut your hand off or do something extremely cruel or inhumane to you. Men and women, everyone is impacted.

Of course, women are particularly impacted by the harsh rules of the Taliban. The difference is that there were many men in the Afghan Government. I worked with the Afghan Government both as an activist and as an insider. There were many men in senior positions who did not believe in gender equality. This is not a secret. But I, and women like me, had the legal framework to protect us.

If a man, even if he was a senior official, tried to silence me because he did not believe that a woman is equal to a man, I could use this legal framework to protect myself. If a woman was being abused in her home, there was a legal framework and there were institutions that she could go to. There was the Attorney-General's office; there was a deputy focused on elimination of violence against women. There were units at the provincial level for victims of domestic abuse; there were shelters and safe houses. None of that exists right now. That legal framework does not exist.

As a group, the Taliban—it is part of their identity—believe that women are not as human as men. They genuinely believe this. They genuinely believe that women are not equal to men, that women are less human and that they should have fewer rights. Now they are in power, so the implications for women are of course far greater.

Q204 **Bob Seely:** Are there any elements of the Taliban that are less bad for you than others? Do you see them as a homogenous group?

Shaharzad Akbar: No group is really homogenous, but the way the whole peace process worked side-lined those voices who could be somewhat reasonable in their own self-interest. I am sure there are people among the Taliban who recognise that it is in their own self-interest to bring their people and their fighters along to the idea of a more moderate version of governance in order to continue receiving international aid and recognition. There are people within the Taliban who are pragmatic enough to recognise that they should not be doing something like they did today in Kabul, when the Minister of the Interior had a meeting with families of suicide bombers and rewarded them with plots of land. There are people among them who know this is not okay and this does not help with the international position.

However, those people have very little voice right now, because they are being told, "We defeated the US. We defeated the Government. We defeated the international community. Why do we have to compromise? Why do we have to bring our fighters, the most extreme among us, along? We do not have to do that. We will just starve our population, and

then people will recognise us and we will take it from there". I genuinely believe that people like that among the Taliban are very lonely and marginalised because of the way things unfolded.

Q205 **Bob Seely:** Shukria, to what extent did the Taliban in the last couple of years use the more liberal framework in Afghanistan in order to say, "Look at all of these dreadful, politically correct people with women's rights"? Did they use it as a recruiting tool to drive the more misogynistic or more conservative men into an armed camp that overthrew the Afghan state? To what extent did they use women's rights as a motivating factor in war?

Shukria Barakzai: If I am allowed, I will say how the Taliban gained the trust of people in rural areas. It started with the civilian casualties in early 2002 until 2021. They have been targeting people who lost members of their family by war, by airstrikes or by other means, which are probably more than 1,000 families. Sometimes even their villages were targeted. Those kinds of misunderstandings and mis-actions have given the Taliban extremely golden opportunities to go and target people.

To be honest, from my understanding, the ideology of the Taliban is very interesting for the people in the villages. They have not seen the Government deliver any service to them in the last 20 years. They have never witnessed having schools, clinics, roads, electricity or media. In the last 20 years, they have just had this preaching from the Taliban. It is understandable that they will have more sympathy with the Taliban than anyone else.

Besides that, the Taliban have an ideology. They are a militant group. They are working systematically. They are not just a mushroom that comes after the rain. Their ideology, their policies and their framework is working among the people who are uneducated, among the people who do not trust Government and among those people who do not have knowledge of what Islam is exactly about. I am very surprised at how the OIC has kept silent about the Taliban's actions while it is saying that women being educated is un-Islamic or it is referring to the culture of Afghans. I am surprised at how Islamic countries are not contributing to this in the way they should or taking staged actions at least to bring the Taliban to an open Islamic debate. From my understanding, in any country, if anything happens, there is a chance for the enemy to use people against a Government for their own interest.

Besides that, when the Taliban were celebrating their victory, they had a military parade, in which they proudly put 5,000 of their suicide bombers, including the big yellow boxes in which they were carrying all their suicide equipment. That group still exists. That is a big threat, not for Afghanistan but for the region and for the world.

Q206 **Neil Coyle:** Linked very much to that, are you surprised at the Taliban's apparent willingness to work with China given its policies towards Muslims in Xinjiang?

Shukria Barakzai: No, not really. For Chinese women's rights, human rights and terrorism, nothing is working. I will not be surprised to see a Chinese invasion in a different way, in an economic way, in Afghanistan. The Chinese may not send their soldiers, although a small number of Chinese soldiers were in Afghanistan before. The Chinese invasion is not far away from Afghanistan. I can see it right now.

Q207 **Neil Coyle:** I had a wider question, if I may. Do you have any sense of the number of people still in Afghanistan, including those abandoned by the UK, who will be seeking to leave the country? On the UK's Afghan citizens' resettlement scheme, is 20,000 a sufficient figure for the UK to be taking over 20 years of involvement in Afghanistan?

Shukria Barakzai: I do believe that is not a sufficient number, first. Secondly, those close partners to the UK, those who worked with the US and UK militaries, are in Afghanistan. Allow me to seek help for those vulnerable groups such as female judges, journalists, women's rights activists, Members of Parliament, members of civil society organisations and people who are working with the Afghan security forces. They are at high risk, and the Taliban are after them.

I would like the number to be doubled by this year. That would be a great opportunity. Saving the lives of your allies may work in the longer term, in future.

Q208 **Neil Coyle:** Shaharzad, do you have a view?

Shaharzad Akbar: ACRS numbers need to increase. We need to be more realistic concerning the number of people who are being left behind in terms of human rights defenders, media, activists and their families. You cannot just take someone out and leave their family behind in harm's way. We still have large numbers of people who have been left behind.

The scheme should also kick in soon. I understand that it has not officially begun. Targeted killings are happening. We have reports of this in the commission. Most of my colleagues are in hiding, but, to the extent that they could document it, over 100 people were killed in targeted killings in 40 days of Taliban rule. The number of cases is probably much more than that. They were detained illegally and then killed by people affiliated with the Taliban. I am saying that this is not a full number.

People are at risk right now. In some places, the Taliban have been able to control their fighters or, given the local dynamics, in some places it might be less intense. In some places there might be more intense targeted killings especially of former ANSF members but also judges and prosecutors. I absolutely agree with Ms Barakzai: judges, prosecutors and defence lawyers are vulnerable groups, particularly women. They just might be waiting for the right opportunity. They might just be hoping that, as the attention shifts away from Afghanistan, they will go after these people.

Even getting to Pakistan is complicated for people right now. I have colleagues who have got into Pakistan. Some of them do not have legal paperwork to be there, so they live in fear and anxiety about the Pakistani police and the situation there. Some who have got there and have legal paperwork have no means of supporting themselves and no certainty about what the next few months might look like.

Yes, the short answer is that the numbers need to be increased; the scheme needs to begin. People who have already arrived in the UK need to have clarity. I spoke to people who are in bridging houses, and it is not being managed well. It is very inconsistent. The level of support and access to healthcare services is very inconsistent. There is not a lot of clarity and information about what is next. I understand that the UK Government are overwhelmed, and someone earlier was saying that extra staff need to be hired, but these things need to happen fast.

Q209 **Neil Coyle:** In order to try to extract some of those people you have mentioned who are still at risk because they have worked with the UK and other countries, should the UK be sending any aid through Taliban-controlled organisations even as an interim measure? Should it all be channelled through international and non-governmental organisations, for example?

Shukria Barakzai: I would like the UK engagement to feed through to the international organisations, from the international organisations through to the local channels, and through the local channels with the Taliban. That will make the Taliban work more closely with non-governmental organisations. That would be an opportunity on one side. On the other side, it may give a little bit of freedom for the people who, for instance, worked with the UK. They cannot say that direct to the Taliban, but it is easy for them to communicate with the non-governmental organisations and through to the international organisations. I definitely like the idea of any kind of engagement through the international organisations to the local organisations with the co-operation of the Taliban.

Shaharzad Akbar: The work should be done through international organisations and Afghan civil society organisations that are still on the ground. We even have Afghan women's organisations that are still on the ground. There are a few things. Humanitarian assistance should be unconditional, absolutely, and not political, but women should be front and centre, as the UN keeps promising us. We keep seeing the UK sending male-only delegations to meet with the Taliban, which does not really send the right message. Women should be front and centre in the sense that women should be consulted and we should make sure that assistance arrives to women.

The assistance should not go through Taliban-controlled organisations or through the Taliban unless there are some really concrete steps being taken by the Taliban. Of course, there are things around sanctions and people being on sanctions lists. For me one of the key issues would be to

say, "We cannot recognise and support you, your Government or organisations affiliated with you unless you recognise half of your population, the women".

Q210 **Chris Bryant:** I have a very quick point. I do not quite understand why the Taliban have such a problem with women. It does not seem to me that it stems from Islam at all. It is a kind of cultural conservatism from a particular part of Afghanistan. Is that fair? There is nothing in the Quran that says, "You cannot educate girls beyond a certain age". I do not understand how they think they are going to be able to run most of the Departments of Government without women. Am I talking nonsense?

Shukria Barakzai: You are absolutely right. In the Quran, there is an order for men and women to read and to be educated. That is the order of the Holy Quran. Allow me to say that women are not the only physical group that the Taliban have a problem with. They have problem with the subject of history in the Afghan curriculum. They have a problem with music. They have a problem with sports. It is not only one area. They have a problem with being accountable. They have a problem with elections. They have a problem with the source of legitimacy.

It is not only one type of problem. They are just a militant group. The expectation for a militant group should be limited by what the nature of military groups is, especially when it is a terrorist group. It is hard for them to digest women. It is hard for them to see a prosperous and developed country. It is extremely unbelievable for them, how dreadful music and sports are for everyone.

Chris Bryant: I went to Erasure on Sunday night. I am sure they would love Erasure.

Chair: On that note, we will draw the session to a close. There is no way we can top Erasure, is there? Shaharzad, thank you very much indeed for joining us from Turkey. I am extremely grateful for you being here. Shukria, may I say that it is a huge privilege to have you here? I am very grateful that I was able to play a small part in ensuring that you are here. Congratulations.

Shukria Barakzai: Thank you, Chair. You saved my life; you saved a mother for her kids and a daughter for her mother. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you.

Shaharzad Akbar: Thank you.