



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Defence Committee

Oral evidence: Withdrawal from Afghanistan, HC 699

Tuesday 26 October 2021

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Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Sarah Atherton; Martin Docherty-Hughes; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Gavin Robinson; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; Derek Twigg.

Questions 1 - 101

Witness

I: Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP, Secretary of State for Defence.



Examination of witness

Witnesses: Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this Defence Select Committee hearing on 26 October 2021. I am delighted to welcome the Secretary of State to give evidence to our inquiry on Afghanistan. Sir, thank you for your time this afternoon.

Before we go into that, there is just a little bit of housekeeping, if I may. There are some outstanding notices that we have requested from the MoD, and I just wondered whether you could take away with you that we are still looking forward to a requested approval for our visit to Hereford, a background briefing on nuclear, a response to our report *Women in the Armed Forces*, a letter from the Submarine Delivery Agency and a naval inquiry request. Hopefully your staff are scribbling those away. We will be looking forward to receiving those as early as possible.

Thank you very much for your time today. This is a massive subject. You will be aware that a number of us requested that the Government did their own inquiry into our involvement in Afghanistan over two decades. That was not forthcoming. You then encouraged us to conduct this inquiry ourselves, so here we are. We are grateful for your time as well. We are going to focus mostly on the last six to 12 months or so; towards the end we will widen our scope and look at the whole of the campaign.

There is also a request for another written reply, given that it is topical. There were reports in the *Sunday Times* about an incident that took place at BATUK in Nanyuki in Kenya. We do not want to waste any time today, but we would be very grateful if you could look into this and give us your reflections on what happened and what needs to change in the future. Is that okay with you, sir?

Ben Wallace: Yes. If you would like, I can answer those first two points. I can answer the Kenya one and get it out of the way now, if you want.

Chair: Yes, very quickly, if you can.

Ben Wallace: First of all, on the late reports and stuff, I will chase those up. On your report about women in defence, Sarah Atherton did such a good report that, as I informed you and the author, I wanted to take a little bit longer to reply to the Committee, because I wanted to properly stress-test it and put it in front of the women's network of serving women in defence, to make sure that our response does as much as we can to fulfil it, because it deserves respect. If you will forgive me, as a Committee, for that time, we have done that and it should be ready.

On the Kenya thing, there were two incidents reported in the media. The one reported in the *Sunday Times* is fairly historical; it was a long time ago, in a sense. However, that is a Kenyan police lead and is therefore subject to the normal rigours of the House, sub judice, et cetera. It was an investigation that we supported; we will continue to support it if requested. To date, we have not had a formal MLA—mutual legal



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assistance—request from the Kenyan authorities in that. We did support them at the time and there is no obstruction from the MoD or the Army on this side of the House. If they require any more support, we will be forthcoming.

On the more recent one, which is a very live investigation, I really am limited in what I can say, other than to say that I have made sure we lean into that and co-operated as much as possible. I spoke to my Kenyan counterpart on a number of occasions about what help she would want, if needed. Indeed, I even met the Army chief provost to ask her, “Is there anything standing in your way? If there is, I shall remove it to help”. We are absolutely determined to meet any of those allegations to help support and get to the bottom of them.

Chair: Thank you, Secretary of State. We are now going to go into the Afghanistan inquiry. We are going to begin with the Doha agreement. To take us forward, I will go to Sarah.

Q2 Sarah Atherton: Good afternoon, Secretary of State. As you will be aware, the Committee has just visited the United States and met Embassy officials, military representatives, NATO and the House Armed Services Committee. Afghanistan, or more precisely the withdrawal from Afghanistan, was a topic for constant discussion. What part did the UK play in the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan following the Doha agreement?

Ben Wallace: The Doha agreement was made in February 2020. We had no part in that deal, which was done in Qatar, and the conditions that were set. As you remember, the conditions allowed the Taliban to continue offenses against the Afghan army. It effectively withdrew coalition ISR/air support. It put in place a release of 5,000 prisoners. It committed to, within 135 days, a reduction of force levels to about 8,600; it might be 8,500, but it was around that. It was a pretty quick withdrawal. It removed from the battlefield the one thing that the Taliban feared, predominantly, and it gave them an ability to continue their military offensive, which is where it was.

We were not involved in that. However, the deal was then taken to the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting and subsequently into our meeting at NATO. As I have made clear, the framework nation was the United States, and then effectively we were in a position where we could try to communicate the importance of taking it step by step. I made a public statement to the broadcaster PBS in March 2020 about how this has to be step by step in an interview and it has to be condition-based.

If you will remember, at the time there were conditions attached. There was a secret annex that was announced by the Pentagon—it was announced as secret by the Pentagon in a press conference when I was there back in March 2020—with certain other conditions. At the time, the conditions were quite key for many of us to make sure it was not a fait accompli. Those conditions were subsequently lifted.



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That started the draw-down. The United States then took a decision over the period to draw down. I can give you the exact numbers as they were drawn down over the period, but they started to decrease over time until we eventually got to the full withdrawal. They were to reduce to 8,600 troops in the first 135 days. By 17 November 2020, the US announced a further draw-down of 4,500 to 2,500, leaving the overall troop levels at 5,400. We were not given a veto or a say on the levels that the US announced in their contingency. We had a discussion about the extent to which, in February, we should continue to be vested in Afghanistan. The deal had laid the timetable and certainly had laid the conditions that meant we ended up where we were.

Q3 Sarah Atherton: Are you aware of any communications with the Afghan Government over any of this? If not, why was that?

Ben Wallace: I cannot really answer on behalf of the United States' negotiations that happened in Qatar. What I have said recently is that the terms of the deal could probably not have been more helpful to the Taliban in achieving its victory or its aim. If you remove from the battlefield the one thing that holds them back and at the same time publicly do a deal with them in Qatar but not necessarily with the actual Government in post, you send a message to the world that you do not have any faith in the Government in post. You are effectively doing a deal without them.

However, I have to caveat that. I am not aware of private discussions between the United States and the Afghan Government at the time, so I could be wrong on that bit—that there was a whole thing—but in the public domain that was not what came across.

Q4 Sarah Atherton: Some quarters have blamed the Doha agreement for the fall of Afghanistan's Government. Was this Government correct to follow that agreement?

Ben Wallace: In terms of the scale and presence of the United States in the framework, it was not about following the agreement. We did not really have a choice at that stage. That is really the truth. The conditions were the one area where a number of nations had hope that the conditions would be adhered to. My actual quote was that this has to be step by step. For my part, that is what we were going to do. I said "condition-led". You often heard that in the first half of that.

It was about the conditions within the deal itself. We never objected to a deal being done. We wanted a deal. All of us wanted a deal to benefit Afghanistan. If you take each condition on its own, I am not sure I felt the deal did anything to hold back the Taliban particularly. It certainly removed from the battlefield the very things that had slowed them or held them back in the past.

Q5 Sarah Atherton: Did you raise any of these concerns with the Cabinet or your US counterpart?



Ben Wallace: I raised a number of concerns with a number of our allies. I spoke with my allies almost monthly: with the United States, with NATO and with NATO members. I spoke with Mark Esper from the US Administration. On 5 March I met him in the Pentagon; I met him on 25 June 2020. I spoke to him on 24 July and on 20 October. We met on a number of occasions. I spoke with Lloyd Austin when he came into post, and I spoke with other nations and the NATO Secretary General.

Most of those calls, if you will excuse me, are either private or secret level, but what I would say is that I made my views known on a number of occasions to both Administrations when I had reservations.

Q6 **Sarah Atherton:** What about the Cabinet?

Ben Wallace: We do not talk about what we talk about in Cabinet, nor indeed in NSC, but my views were made known in parts of the Government when we had discussions about Afghanistan.

Q7 **Chair:** Afghanistan was not at the talks. Is that not something that did not make sense? Afghanistan did not participate in Doha. You had the Americans speaking directly with the Taliban. The Americans, led by Pompeo, recognising that there was an election coming up, wanted to have some form of deal that they could announce to their domestic audience. Is this not something that Britain felt obliged to flag up and to say, "We do not even have Ashraf Ghani's representation here"?

Ben Wallace: I am not going to comment on the United States' political process or election programme or anything else. It is genuinely not for me to say, other than to say that there was definitely a feeling that the deal itself needed to be condition-based and we needed to follow those conditions. I made that very clear in private and I made that clear in a public statement to the PBS broadcaster on 5 March.

It is not for me to speak to my American counterparts about their motives or anything else. I would not speculate on that. All I would say is that we can see that the results of the Doha deal ended up in the Taliban taking hold of Afghanistan.

Q8 **Chair:** Yes, absolutely. Forgive me if I am wrong, but you called it a rotten deal. Is that a quote?

Ben Wallace: Yes, I have been on the record. Certainly in August I talked about it being a rotten deal. As I have said, if you look at the conditions of the Doha deal, I could not quite see where the Taliban were being held back. If the conditions attached—if you remember, there were conditions—had been met, you could at least say that there was something for them to commit to. It rapidly became clear that the conditions were not going to be met, and indeed they were removed at one stage in their entirety. When that was done, I remember saying in a meeting with colleagues, "The game is up", in my view.

Q9 **Chair:** I am grateful for your honesty and clarity in saying that this was a



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rotten deal. If you do not have the main beneficiary, which is Ashraf Ghani, the President, Afghanistan, represented, of course it is going to be a rotten deal, because you are missing a stakeholder.

I know you do not want to comment on this, but Zalmay Khalilzad, who was the lead envoy, came from a rival Pashtun tribe to Ashraf Ghani. There are questions about what motivation he had to keep Ashraf Ghani out. This is probably beyond the scope of this Committee, but this is exactly why we need an inquiry to understand what happened in Doha. It is from Doha and that agreement that all the other events leading up to the evacuation, which we are shortly to discuss, flow. 4,000 Taliban fighters were released from prison, for example. Some of them are now in the Taliban Government.

My bigger question is this: is this not normally something that Britain does well? I am talking about understanding when you need to bring the Taliban to the table and leaning on our experience in Northern Ireland, when it was a tough call to speak to the opposition; this is the statecraft that we normally offer, the special relationship. Is this not something where perhaps, in retrospect, Britain could have been more forthright in saying, "There are some simple ingredients here that we should have got better"?

Ben Wallace: I would agree with your observation that you should always have as many of the key stakeholders at any of these discussions. This is a generic point. We saw that in issues around Syria. If you remember the Syrian civil war, key antagonists were not invited to the table for Geneva I. You could not do a deal on Syria at that time if you did not invite those key people. That has always been the challenge.

I remember in the negotiations for the JCPOA with Iran, when I was the chair of the APPG for Iran. In the early days or the middle days of the Bush Administration, no American was allowed to be in a room with an Iranian. How they were ever going to do a deal was an issue.

I do not in any sense object to or disagree with your observation that, fundamentally, if you are going to make a peace deal, you need people in the room. I have to caveat that. I do not know what went on in secret between the United States and the Afghan Government. I cannot speak for that. I can only go on what is in the public domain. It may be that I am entirely wrong and they were running a proper relationship with them in private. I would just caveat that caution on that speculation.

Chair: I would just make the wider point that the value we bring to the special relationship is our alternative thought; it is understanding issues on the ground and whispering in the ear of our friend, saying, "You might want to go this way". The Taliban came to the table in 2001 to speak to Donald Rumsfeld and ask, "Can we have a place at the table in Bonn in December 2001?" and Donald Rumsfeld said no. How different the whole of the Afghan campaign might have been had we been recognising the tough decision, absolutely, in allowing them to speak.



Q10 Mr Jones: Can I just pick the Secretary of State up on something he said? On 8 July, the Prime Minister made a statement to the House of Commons on Afghanistan. I was one of those who raised with him, along with others, the issue around the withdrawal of air cover for the Afghan forces. You have just said that was an important factor in terms of the ability of the Afghan forces to push back the Taliban. I asked the Prime Minister, and I got the usual bull that you usually get from the Prime Minister in response to these questions. Then we have the CDS in early August still giving quite a bullish view that the Afghan forces could still remain.

What military assessment was done in terms of the effects of that withdrawal of air cover? I accept the Prime Minister might not read the detail things, but was it discussed at the Cabinet or the NSC in terms of saying the important thing about how withdrawing air cover was going to be quite fundamental in terms of the ability of the Afghan forces to remain in a superior position against the Taliban?

Ben Wallace: What was discussed was how we could continue to give advantage to the Afghan forces from a UK point of view in a declining size of footprint. We did at a certain stage take a decision to put in some extra capability in June or July to give them at the very least some aspects of ISR capability—that is intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance—to help them in that.

Again, that was unilateral. That was something that we took a decision to do. There is no getting away from this issue that the United States, as the major contributor, including to Op Pitting, where they put in 5,000 troops from the 82nd Airborne Division—is the key scale and enabler. If we are to do this differently again, we need to have our forces configured so we can make other bilateral, trilateral or multilateral collaborations to do it.

Kevan, we could go around the thing about whether I could have immediately rustled up an air force if the Americans leave.

Q11 Mr Jones: I am not suggesting that. That is not my question. I will come to that in a minute, because I want to quote something the Prime Minister said. When I asked the Prime Minister on 8 July, I got the usual bull that you get from him. It is very interesting that in August, when he then addressed the House, he said that the US decision to withdraw air cover to the Afghan forces in the country had hastened the collapse. Obviously, something had dropped from his eyes and he had realised this.

I accept that there is a limit to what we could have done, but all I am trying to get an understanding of is what military assessment was made in terms of what the effect of withdrawing air cover would be. Clearly, the CDS in his comments in early August was still very bullish. As soon as I knew we were taking air cover away, I thought, "This is not going to last very long".



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Ben Wallace: There were a number of assessments at a classified level at the beginning of August. One of them did indeed say that the withdrawal of ISR/air cover capability increased the ability of the Taliban to continue or successfully take ground or run an offensive.

Q12 **Mr Jones:** Come on, Secretary of State; it does not take a military genius to work that out, does it?

Ben Wallace: You asked what assessment was done, and there was one done.

Q13 **Mr Jones:** I accept that. What was then done? Clearly, the Prime Minister in July was very bullish or was just not understanding. He was doing his usual flippant reply to questions put to him. I know the CDS is not here today—

Ben Wallace: He is coming on 9 November. I just want to put that on record.

Q14 **Mr Jones:** I am just trying to get an understanding of why that bullish nature was still there in early August, when we knew the game was up, did we not?

Ben Wallace: Everyone accepted that, when the deal was set, there was going to be a change. Whether that was going to be entirely Taliban or whether that was going to be what the deal had hoped for, which was a sort of coalition, the matter was clearly the speed.

After decades of investment, a significant amount of training, support and kit—we saw in the media some of the kit that the Taliban are now tragically walking around with—had been given to the Afghan Government. Remember that we handed over places like Lashkargah many years before. Our major military operations finished in 2014.

Q15 **Mr Jones:** The difference then was you had US air cover, which was very important, was it not?

Ben Wallace: People recognise that it was coming to an end. The debate was around how quickly it was going to come to an end and whether it was going to come to an end in a way that reflected the ambitions of the deal rather than the ambitions of the Taliban. As we saw, the Taliban came through in the end. We saw the Afghan armed forces and the Afghan political establishment collapse very quickly.

We should not forget that on top of the 457 British lives—I do not forget those; nearly every day I remember those people who sacrificed their lives for that—thousands of Afghans died fighting for their country. I mean thousands. If I can get them for you, you should look at the casualty rates since the deal.

If you are asking whether we could have taken the assessment, put some air cover in and changed the outcome—



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Q16 Mr Jones: I am not suggesting that at all. I accept that you are only one piece of this jigsaw. The thing that gets me, which worries me generally about this Government, is the lack of coherent thinking at the centre. In response to my question about withdrawing air cover, the Prime Minister could quite clearly have said, "Yes, we are looking at this and it is very serious", et cetera. He did not. You then have the bullish role of the CDS in early August saying that it is going to continue for another year. That is my problem. It is not necessarily with yourself, because perhaps the military did the assessment. It is about how it fitted in with other processes in Government. You could pick any subject, frankly, with this Government, and the same thing would happen.

Can I just ask you about the options? On 18 August, the Prime Minister said that we "looked at many options, including the potential for staying longer ourselves, finding new partners or even increasing our presence". Could you tell us how extensive those options were, or was it just the usual nonsense from the Prime Minister?

Ben Wallace: I speak to our NATO allies regularly. I spoke to the Secretary General of NATO only last week. I spoke to a number of our allies to explore whether there was an appetite to stay quite early on after the deal. That was not forthcoming. There are certain allies where, once they are not interested, frankly we are in a place where we do not have any options.

The US were making the running. The former Administration was making the running. They were making their announcements on troop reductions. They would communicate it with us, but, as they were sliding down and the deal was done, the release of the prisoners and the effective withholding of those of those capabilities, which was to the advantage of the Taliban, were ongoing. There was no appetite. When there no appetite, we examined what we could do to enable them a bit more. We did put a small increase—

Q17 Mr Jones: I accept all that. I accept that throughout this you have been on a bit of a limb on some of these issues. It comes back to that core thing. The Prime Minister told the House—I quote him again—that "we looked at many options". You quite clearly had discussions with him, but what was the Afghan policy in terms of the Government, not just MoD but FCO and centrally? Were they seriously talking to allies? Was the Foreign Office talking to them as well, saying, "Is there is an opportunity for us to keep a presence there?"

Personally, my own position is that, once the Americans decided to go, that was it, but the Prime Minister said that many options were looked at. I accept that you perhaps spoke to individuals. I want to understand what the whole Government approach to this was.

Ben Wallace: Certainly, as the threat changed, we looked constantly at different troop levels, whether they were to increase significantly—

Q18 Mr Jones: Was that at Cabinet? Was that at NSC?



Ben Wallace: That would be at NSC. Papers were circulated about whether we drew down quicker than everyone else, whether we left before everyone else, whether we increased to help the resilience in Kabul, whether we simply did an increase to protect our Embassy and make sure we could keep that running, whether we had an ability to surge more troops effectively to look at some of the provinces and whether we could have a better understanding.

Those things were constantly looked at in different levels. There were options for less or more military than we put in at certain stages. None of them reached the threshold for a significant return of military deployment.

Q19 **Mr Jones:** Where was NATO in this?

Ben Wallace: NATO was in a very similar position to us. Some forces had long left. The French had left Afghanistan considerably a few years ago. The biggest presence in Afghanistan after the United States was us, because we were providing the Kabul Security Force. There was air support and other supports from individual countries. The Germans were there as well.

The NATO countries have to answer to themselves. I do not know what they were doing internally, but we in the end took the decision that our Embassy was on the outskirts of the green zone so we had to make sure we had the right force protection. We had good links into the Afghan Government. We had some of the better links compared to anyone else. We in fact sent some extra people into the Afghan Government into the final few weeks to try to get a better understanding.

One thing that is missed in the debate about whether the intelligence was wrong and why we were surprised by speed is that the lesson from history is that as regimes, countries or Governments collapse, your intelligence reduces and your certainty slides. Your sources, your networks, your people are leaving the country; your military footprint is shrinking.

Q20 **Mr Jones:** We will come on to that. I have to say that I disagree with that. We have been there 20 years. This must be the most photographed piece of real estate on the globe.

Can I just finally ask one question here? You say you were talking to NATO allies, but I want to know in terms of the Secretary General and others. Basically, what the Prime Minister has said was the usual nonsense that we get from him; it was the first thing that comes into his head. Clearly there were not many options, because there was only one option, and that was to withdraw.

Does it not worry you—it certainly does me—that on a serious issue like this there does not appear to be a cross-Government approach in terms of a joined-up approach? You have clearly tried to do your best, and I take my hat off to you for that. Frankly, you are up against a very



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disjointed organisation in central Government, which then leads on perhaps to some of the other issues we are going to be talking about later on in terms of the chaos around the withdrawal.

Ben Wallace: I would disagree with that. We have small groups; we have NSCs on this. We had NSCs on a number of occasions specifically on Afghanistan. I think we had one in July where we discussed a whole range of options. It is entirely joined up in that space.

Mr Jones: I would hate to think what un-joined-up looks like.

Q21 **Chair:** Part of this inquiry is to understand what happened and the mistakes that were made so that we do not make them in the future. To advance Kevan's point very briefly, the air power that he is talking about, that top cover, also provided ammunition. If you do not deliver ammunition to the Afghan forces and they run out of bullets, that is when they are going to drop their guns, get rid of their uniforms and go home. They will see the winds of change once again sweeping across Afghanistan. It is a critical, schoolboy error that was made.

Likewise, you served in Northern Ireland. You could go back to Bosnia, Germany and Japan. When peace deals are signed, you do not then cut and run. You stay there to make sure peace and stabilisation can continue. With all the military experience we have across NATO, why did we think that it was somehow in order to sign something in Doha and then agree to disappear? It does not make sense. That is partly why we have ended up seeing the Taliban advance. There were supposed to be further meetings in 2021; they never took place. The Taliban had got their deal.

Ben Wallace: With due respect, Mr Chair, you may want to aim your anger at the US. I did not sign the Doha agreement. The Doha agreement was done by the United States.

Q22 **Chair:** I am not having a go at the US. You mentioned the British troops that were involved.

Ben Wallace: I understand. We were dealt the hand we were given.

Q23 **Chair:** We were involved. The question is why did Britain not do more to advance the conversation, given our understanding and our usual grasp of the situation, which is usually appreciated by the United States, to give an alternative perspective. That I feel is what is missing here.

Ben Wallace: Many people across the international community felt that there was an Afghan army. There was a significantly sized and well-resourced Afghan army with lots of equipment, which people had thought might have stayed longer in role.

Chair: We are going to come on to that specific question in a second.

Ben Wallace: It is a fair point. At the time of the Doha agreement, whatever we think about the internal conditions of the Doha agreement, which I felt was a rotten deal, even with that and the conditions, it was



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not unreasonable for many people to have thought that all those Afghans, the hundreds of thousands, the people under arms, who had been trained and equipped, would have—

Chair: We will come back to the competence of the Afghan army in a second.

Q24 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I just have a quick follow-up and some clarification based on what Kevan was saying. In relation to the Prime Minister saying that we were looking at various options, how long were those options being looked at for? Back in 2020 when the agreement was signed, Sir Stephen Lovegrove said to the Foreign Affairs Committee that at that time the UK expected the Taliban to take over. I am just curious as to how long options were being looked at. Should they not have been being looked at right from the time that agreement was signed? If so, what were those options and what happened to them all?

Ben Wallace: The options were constantly changing depending on the threat picture. The United States had the 135-day agreement to draw down to 8,600 troops. That affected our troop level there and then. Then they reduced that further and that affected our troop level. If you remember, the Taliban slowly started to take provinces, but then bit by bit took all those districts and suddenly you had more. Every time there was a significant situation change on the ground, we reviewed our force numbers. That was the right thing to do. There were lots of occasions.

Q25 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I am sorry, Secretary of State. Were options being looked at right from the time when the agreement was signed?

Ben Wallace: Yes, because the agreement indicated a reduction of forces straightaway. That was part of the Doha deal. The footprint is examined all the time; that is constant.

Q26 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** At that time Sir Stephen Lovegrove said that the UK expected the Taliban to take over. I am just trying to get some kind of understanding of what options the Government were looking at. What happened to all those options?

Ben Wallace: When did Sir Stephen Lovegrove say that was what the Government position was.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: He said this at the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy last week.

Ben Wallace: Did he say when he expected the Taliban to take over?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: He said that from the minute the agreement was signed, they expected the Taliban to take over.

Ben Wallace: Is that what he actually said?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Yes. "Pretty much from the moment at which the Doha agreements were signed, there was an intensive set of activities drawing on many different types of information and intelligence. We



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assessed that the central scenario was always going to be a Taliban-dominated Government”.

Ben Wallace: He said “Taliban-dominated”, not a total takeover. The assessment was that at some stage there would be a Taliban-dominated Government, which would include the Afghan Government.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I am sure we can get on to it later, but I am just not clear about what options the Government were looking at and what happened to those options.

Chair: You are absolutely right. For all those people who served in Afghanistan, this certainly was not the outcome that anybody was expecting. We are going to have to make progress.

Q27 **Derek Twigg:** Secretary of State, in light of the Taliban advances not least being quicker than we expected and the performance of the Afghan armed forces, were any discussions had with the US and allies about delaying the withdrawal?

Ben Wallace: I certainly was questioning the timetable. The timetable kept changing. If you remember, we had a discussion. They were all going to be out by 1 May. That was the original Doha agreement. Then there was a discussion to extend beyond 1 May. The United States announced 11 September, and then that changed rapidly again. Some of it was forced by the situation and some of it was forced by the military running a timetable that was maybe different from the political timetable in the United States. There was definitely a change there.

The timetables, again, were often under review. Originally under the Trump Administration there were conditions. The conditions were supposed to help set the timetable. If the conditions were not met, the timetable would slow up or speed up. The conditions were then removed by the new Administration, and that again changed the timetables.

Q28 **Derek Twigg:** There was no specific discussion that took place when the speed of the advance became apparent in terms of the potential chaos caused by this much speedier advance and the threat to Kabul and so forth it posed.

Ben Wallace: By that stage, if you remember, we had reduced down to 750. We would have taken our lead entirely at that stage from the speed of the United States’ withdrawal, because they were the enablers of the airfield. Even at HKIA, in a sense, without that 5,000 people we would not have got out. We sent 1,000 people, and 16 Air Assault Brigade did an amazing job. Basically, they were leaving.

Q29 **Derek Twigg:** No discussions took place, then.

Ben Wallace: When you say “discussions”—

Derek Twigg: It is a simple question about delaying the—



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Ben Wallace: I would meet the Secretary of Defense in the United States, and he would say, "We are planning to do this by then". A few weeks later, those timetables might change. Then we just had to take the cue.

Q30 **Derek Twigg:** The Government did not ask the US to delay the withdrawal because of the Taliban advance.

Ben Wallace: No. Actually, can I just correct that? If I fast-forward to the Op Pitting era, there were discussions then about eking out more days. The Prime Minister discussed whether he could have more days, because every day meant evacuation. In that final endzone, there were discussions by me and by the Prime Minister. They were not strategic. They were just, "What is the chance of going beyond 31 August? What is the chance of going to 7 September?" or whatever it was.

Q31 **Derek Twigg:** There was no ask for a strategic decision to be made to delay the withdrawal.

Ben Wallace: No.

Q32 **Derek Twigg:** Can you tell us about the NATO lessons learned from the Afghanistan documents that were discussed at the ministerial meeting last week?

Ben Wallace: Yes. I have to caveat that, because the NATO discussions are confidential. Fundamentally, the lessons learned were, first of all, "How do we not get into this situation again? How do we make sure we are resilient to the impact of one ally doing something equipment-wise?" It is a good example of whether NATO is resilient enough and able to be concurrent enough to do things in parallel and whether NATO is helping members states invest in the right places so that we are not overdependent on the United States or not taking the United States for granted. To be fair to Donald Trump, his 2% decision was the most generic strategic starting point—

Q33 **Derek Twigg:** Did you say "not to be so overdependent on the United States"?

Ben Wallace: Yes, not to take for granted the United States or to be overdependent on them. They are funding at 3.9% of GDP. Some of the biggest countries in NATO are still not even at 2%. The lesson learned is that this is why it is important to fund your forces: to give you choices. That is definitely the first thing.

Britain and the United States did an absolutely amazing job in Op Pitting. We flew out lots of other nations, because there were some nations that were absolutely without any options. They did not have enough of a transport fleet to help and to go in. If you were a Defence Minister in some of these countries in NATO, you would feel deeply uncomfortable that, when it all collapsed, they did not have a transport fleet.

Chair: We will come onto Op Pitting in a second.



Ben Wallace: That is what the main lessons were. That is why people have encouraged people to spend more. That is why the DDA, the defence and deterrence plan by SACEUR, the subsequent SSDs and SASPs—they are the peacetime and wartime plans—and force planning are about trying to make sure we are spending money in the right place. If we do that, we should not be as vulnerable to what happened in Afghanistan. If we are better at communications amongst our allies, we will make sure we do not find ourselves out of step or in the position that we found ourselves in Afghanistan.

Q34 **Mr Francois:** Secretary of State, it is good to see you. To follow on from Ms Lewell-Buck's question, can we be absolutely clear about this, because it is quite important? The central planning assumption at NSC level after Doha was that there would be a Taliban-dominated Government in Afghanistan, if not necessarily a unilateral Taliban Government. You are telling us that was the central planning assumption at NSC level from right after Doha. Is that right? I am sure you would accept that is quite an important thing.

Ben Wallace: If Doha was February/March 2020, what I can say is that the central planning assumption at the beginning of 2021—

Q35 **Mr Francois:** Hang on; that is a slightly different thing. That is nine months' difference.

Ben Wallace: I do not think there was a planning assumption done immediately. There was a series of intelligence documents and assessments that showed an assessment that, first of all, it is highly likely or highly probable—I forget the vocabulary; as you know, I do not design that terminology—that it would end in a civil war. That was one of the assessments. Certainly, as we got more clarity on the draw-down—because remember that the numbers did not start to reduce—

Mr Francois: We get that.

Ben Wallace: As the numbers reduced and the Taliban offensive started to pick up, the assessment was that it is likely that there would be a Taliban-dominated Government, which would include the Afghan Government, probably towards the end of 2021, so the next month or whatever, or 2022. One was likely and probable.

Q36 **Mr Francois:** Secretary of State, we are not trying to trip you up. There seems to be some variance here in the timings. We are listening to you very carefully. You are the Defence Secretary. You are saying that became the central assumption from early 2021. Ms Lewell-Buck quoted Stephen Lovegrove, now National Security Adviser, giving evidence to the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy very recently, where he said much the same thing. His timings, if I heard you rightly, were that this was the central assumption from pretty much shortly after Doha. You both agree about what the central assumption was, but you are about six to nine months apart.



Ben Wallace: No, what I can do is clarify for you when that assumption first appeared. I have refreshed myself before coming to the Committee with all the intelligence estimates I have read—and there were many—up until literally in the middle of August. I read all the way back. The significant shift in pattern started to happen towards the beginning of August and the end of June, when the river started running faster.

Certainly way back in April and March the planning assumption was as the National Security Adviser said. What I need to do is get back to you about when that first started.

Mr Francois: We are not trying to trip you up.

Ben Wallace: I can definitely clarify on that one for you.

Q37 **Mr Francois:** The JIC collate all of the intelligence inputs in the usual way and produce a summary of the likely intelligence picture to NSC, and NSC takes that. Is that right? No one is giving any secrets away here.

Ben Wallace: Yes.

Q38 **Mr Francois:** Do you accept now that NATO was defeated in Afghanistan?

Ben Wallace: No, I do not think we were defeated. We could have chosen to stay as the force we were if we wanted to continue. Our resolve was found wanting. That is what I would say, rather than “defeated”.

Q39 **Mr Francois:** With respect, what is the difference?

Ben Wallace: If we had had the resolve, we could have stayed there—

Mr Francois: My point is that we did not have the resolve. We left. We all know you tried to put together a coalition of the willing. We all know that.

Ben Wallace: I do not think we were militarily defeated. We always had a military advantage until we started reducing—

Q40 **Mr Francois:** Hang on. Clausewitz tells us that military force is ultimately to be deployed for a political end. If after 20 years of fighting, we leave for whatever reason and the Taliban overrun the place in a matter of weeks, surely that is a defeat. Anything else is sophistry, is it not?

Ben Wallace: No, because there was the US Doha deal and then NATO chose to draw down, to leave. They could have said, “We are not doing a deal. We are staying there”. Yes, we would have continued to lose men and women of our armed forces. Militarily, the forces available to NATO were overwhelming. We took a decision, or the Doha deal caused us to do it.

Q41 **Mr Francois:** In other words, your point is that we were not defeated in the field. We, NATO, were not overrun. At the end of what had been a



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20-year NATO operation, we left and then the Afghans were overrun. You could say, if you were a bloke who spent years fighting in Sangin, "What is the difference?"

Ben Wallace: The difference is that NATO were there to enable a political resolution and a political campaign. That is what failed. We were the enabler. The military were there to put in place the security environment in order to try to deliver that. When that was withdrawn, that is when you find out whether your political campaign has worked. What we discovered is it did not work. The western resolve, the western political narrative and the western foundations that we laid failed.

There are lots of searching questions there for all of us. Did we overlook corruption? Did we have optimism bias in the capacity of the Afghan forces to want to stand against the Taliban, bearing in mind their significant casualty rates? That is often forgotten.

Mr Francois: No, we do not—

Ben Wallace: You do not forget that, but people—

Mr Francois: When people say that the Afghan army ran away, that is a bit unfair, because they certainly had not run away for quite a long time.

Q42 **Derek Twigg:** You are basically saying that we were politically defeated but not militarily defeated.

Ben Wallace: NATO is an enabler. We were there to enable a political solution.

Derek Twigg: We politically were defeated, then.

Ben Wallace: It did not work.

Q43 **Mr Francois:** Ultimately NATO is political alliance. If we suffered a political defeat, that is still quite a bad thing, bearing in mind that NATO, up to that point, had never been defeated and was arguably the most successful defensive alliance in history. Churchill said, "Wars are not won by evacuations". We just have to be brutally honest about how bad this was.

Ben Wallace: Just on one thing, if you reflect on Article 5 and why we went there in 2001, there were a number of reasons we went. One was counterterrorism and the expulsion, defeat or dismantling of al-Qaeda. That was a military success and a political success up until we have left. We bought 20 years. You can put it this way: we bought counterterrorism success for 20 years. Al-Qaeda did not mount and successfully carry out a terrorist attack on the United Kingdom or her allies from Afghanistan. For many soldiers, that is very important. To me, it is very important.

Counterterrorism, whether it is Irish republican terrorism or loyalist terrorism, which is still there in small amounts, is often not something that you just fix. My point is that has been a success until now. Will al-Qaeda return? It is highly likely that we will see a return to al-Qaeda and



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an increase in threat coming from Afghanistan. For 20 years, we were safer. We can bank that. It does not mean to say we will be in the future.

Q44 **Mr Francois:** We will meet you halfway. For the avoidance of doubt, Ben—you know why I say this—none of us is suggesting for one nanosecond that the brave fight our troops put up there was for nothing. That is not the argument I am making at all. What I am saying, though, is that in the end it ended very badly. In August, the CDS described the Taliban as “country boys”. The Taliban then defeated, at least politically, the most successful defensive alliance in history. Do you agree with his description of “country boys”?

Ben Wallace: I have never served in Afghanistan.

Mr Francois: Neither have I.

Ben Wallace: I would not be able to speak to the texture. You have to put it in context. His comments were slightly about reminding people that the Taliban are not alien to Afghanistan. It was a domestic insurgency. They were not like some of the others, like al-Qaeda, who are often foreign fighters or indeed large parts of the Haqqani network that come from elsewhere in the region. They were indigenous and locals in many areas. In some areas, they were literally at school with the two parts of the Afghan army. Some of them were fighting for their cause but were going to go back to the countryside and to their regions. We have already seen some of this in elements of the new Taliban Government. The Taliban is not a single homogenous—

Mr Francois: Secretary of State, we would have put this—

Ben Wallace: You can ask him on 9 November.

Q45 **Mr Francois:** We would have asked him today. For the record, this is not the first time the CDS has pulled out of coming to see this Committee at short notice. At the risk of taking ourselves a bit seriously, we are the Defence Committee of the House of Commons. We are not Nick Carter’s personal echo chamber. It has not gone down at all well that he has pulled out yet again. We hope to pursue this matter with him in November.

Ben Wallace: He is coming in November. I think 9 November is his date. He is coming to give evidence to you.

Q46 **Mr Francois:** It is very good of him to find the time, Secretary of State. Just returning to what happened in Kabul, at what point did these intelligence assessments that were coming to NSC really say, in effect, “The game is up”?

Ben Wallace: The beginning of August is when the assessment started to show clearly the Taliban advancement into provinces and positioning to take large cities.

Chair: We are bleeding into Richard’s—



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Mr Jones: You are eating Richard's sandwiches.

Q47 **Mr Francois:** I am sorry. In that case, I will stop there. Just quickly, it is early August when you guys go, "Oh right, this is going to collapse".

Ben Wallace: I expressed views in July that the game was up.

Q48 **Mr Francois:** You were slightly before the rest of the pack.

Ben Wallace: If I may just say one thing about intelligence, I have spent years and years looking at it now. Intelligence is there to inform us as Ministers. It is to inform us and to help us understand, and it is to help us make our own assessments and judgments. You have to make your own judgment. Having engaged with a number of nations on this issue, married to what I read in the intelligence and my experience of how things fall apart at the end, I took a view—it was easier for me to be dispassionate, having never served there—that the game was up and that we should start the process of significantly drawing down so we were not found to be caught out.

Q49 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I just have a quick question, Secretary of State. Did you see the Foreign Office risk assessment in July that said Afghanistan was on the brink of collapse?

Ben Wallace: I do not think I did see that.

Q50 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** It was not shared with you as Secretary of State for Defence.

Ben Wallace: I would need to check. I take most of my reading from the intelligence assessments in the JIC. I do not know. I certainly know that—I go back to the point about intelligence—we put in place in the Afghan Government in July some people to get to the very truth of what was going on and to understand what was going on in those Ministries so that we could really get a sense of the Afghan intent.

There were a number of warnings and indicators that had been set out months before about what we should look for to see whether the Afghan Government was going to collapse. Some of those indicators were Afghan Government personnel leaving; some of it was provincial capitals being taken or falling; some of it was desertions in the Afghan army, et cetera. Some of those warning indicators did not actually happen until the very last minute. Some of the provincial capitals did not fall. Some fell very quickly without a fight. Some of the ones that we thought would hold out just did a deal. I was constantly watching the warnings and indicators. You could see the march towards some of those being fulfilled.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I was just curious about who has seen that report.

Chair: We may come back to that on the work between the MoD and the FCDO.

Q51 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** The comments made by Nick Carter and the Prime Minister are not indicative of that report being—



Ben Wallace: What I would say is that in July the ambassador was clear in his report that at the time—we were talking about whether we had to relocate the Embassy—he felt that the Embassy was secure where it was. That might have been his written report, but at the time of the discussions about how we secure the green zone or whatever it was called, where the Embassy was, he was quite forward-leaning that it was okay where it was.

Q52 **Chair:** I said earlier that my personal view is that a schoolboy error was made by not bringing the Taliban to the table in 2001. I would argue that a second schoolboy error was made in not training the Afghan forces seriously until 2009. Would you agree with that? It was not until then that 4,000 US troops were deployed to Afghanistan specifically under Barack Obama to train an Afghan army and police force.

Ben Wallace: Tobias, genuinely the best people to answer that is the military personnel in terms of how good or bad they were trained.

Q53 **Chair:** It is the date that I am interested in. We went to Afghanistan in December 2001. Would you agree that leaving the training of an indigenous capability, because you want to get home, for another eight years probably was not wise? We should have started sooner.

Ben Wallace: I understand your point about, first of all, engaging the Taliban in December 2001. We have to be politically realistic about engaging the Taliban earlier. By all means, your point about engaging with belligerents in conflicts is well made.

Chair: I have moved on to the point about Afghan forces now.

Ben Wallace: I want to make two points on this. We should not forget that the initial deployment to Afghanistan was to remove al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, and it was a fighting war at first. It was an Article 5 deployment. The Taliban had just hosted a terrorist organisation that had inflicted the single-worst terrorist—

Chair: We get all that.

Ben Wallace: It would not have been politically realistic to say in December, “Let us sit down with the Taliban”, after 9/11 had happened in September.

Q54 **Chair:** It is the toughest of all decisions to make to speak to your adversary. The point is that it was not al-Qaeda that we would have been sitting down with; it was the Taliban, which was hosting them. It has happened. My question is when you train Afghan forces—

Ben Wallace: I know what your question is, Tobias. Let me just get to the next bit. What I do not know—I would have to clarify this to the Committee—is when exactly the counterterrorism military operation ceased, which then allowed the space for the training and the nation-building.



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I would therefore respectfully request that you put that question to the Chief of Defence Staff when he comes, about the transition from a counterterrorism operation to a nation-building operation.

Q55 Chair: That is a big juncture, where you go from, “Yes, we have defeated al-Qaeda in the mountains and Tora Bora”, to, “We are now going to stay on and try to rebuild this country”, but that decision was made. That is why I am saying that leaving it until 2009 to start building an indigenous force was indeed too late.

I want to make one final point, before we move to the evacuation itself, on the fact that NATO is an enabler. They create an umbrella of security under which governance and other things can then happen. Every time that any of us visited Afghanistan, the people who were in charge of everything were the military. It was mostly the US military. People have come to our Committee to say they did not know the difference between Sunni and Shia; they did not know the difference between Durrani and Ghilzai.

Look at Afghan governance. Go back to Durrani himself; go back to Dost Mohammad or Zahir Shah. Afghanistan has never been run from Kabul, but we came in and imposed a governance model, for which the military, NATO, were then responsible. This was your gig, so to speak. It was the responsibility of NATO to make that happen.

Ben Wallace: NATO is a military defensive alliance with a political governance system. NATO is not a post-conflict reconstruction body. In Afghanistan, it was an offensive body under Article 5. Panther’s Claw was one of the offensives. Remember that our main CT efforts stopped in 2006. It went from doing that to being effectively a security enabler for DFID. If you remember, the provisional reconstruction teams were predominantly international aid-led and DFID-led structures, and we were there to provide security for them.

NATO’s job was not, first and foremost, to nation-build. NATO’s job was to enable that to happen. If other nation-building structures in the world such as the UN would not operate without security or were not there in scale enough, that is a question for the Committee to examine. It is a concern that I have in places like Mali. That is not a NATO deployment, but a UN military deployment. We are there with MINUSMA; there are 300-plus British troops there. The Algeria agreement that was supposed to be about nation-building in Mali, education, radicalisation and anti-poverty is not happening in parallel. What happens? A military coup, with the Wagner Group—it is not looking too good.

Q56 Chair: You are making my point for me. There is a disjoint that needs to be reconciled between what NATO does in war-fighting and what it does in stabilisation and peacekeeping. It is about the people responsible for everything in there, including the reconstruction. It was 16 Air Assault Brigade that delivered a turbine from Lashkargah to Kajaki. 10 years later, I flew over Kajaki Dam, sadly to see it still lying there in its bubble



wrap. There was an absolute disjoint about what should happen next. It is a question for NATO. If we go into Yemen—

Ben Wallace: With all due respect, it is not a question for NATO. It is a question for the collective foreign policy leaders of the members of NATO and other nations. It was not just NATO in Afghanistan. It is a question about whether the international community's foreign policy delivered an Afghan state and nation-building.

Q57 **Richard Drax:** First, I need to declare an interest: this is one guardsman talking to another, and it is a pleasure to see you, Secretary of State, this afternoon. Thank you for coming. Secondly, can I also thank you and those who served in dealing with the very difficult pack of cards that you were given? Under the circumstances, you did a remarkable job, and so did our armed forces. Thank you for all the work you put in.

I do not want to dwell too much on this, but just quickly I would like to ask you a question about intelligence failure, which you have touched on several times in this debate already. Can I remind you that the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Nick Carter, in the *Times* on 7 August said it was "too soon" to write off the Afghan Government? He said there were "increasing signs that the population is rallying in defiance".

Then Dominic Raab, with whom I think you had one or two little fights, said that the UK had been "caught out and surprised by the scale and speed of the fall of Kabul". That was echoing comments made on 31 August. Then the Prime Minister, in a statement to the House on 3 September, seemed to contradict the then Foreign Secretary's claims, saying that it was unlikely that Kabul would fall in 2021, by suggesting that it had been clear for months that Afghanistan "would collapse quickly to the Taliban".

Then you said to *The Spectator*, "It was a bit of a shock when Herat fell. Some of these big places had historically been resistant to the Taliban. When they fell, literally without a fight, I think the game was up. I remember back in July arguing that, whatever we think, the game is up and we have to do what we can to accelerate whatever we are doing". Finally, the MoD's written evidence concludes that the rate at which Afghan national security forces collapsed over the summer of 2021 was "unexpected".

It just seems a very unclear passage of events here with different Departments thinking different things. We have touched on the lack of air cover. As a former military man, particularly dealing with the Afghan army, which was not the most sophisticated, without air cover and with all of the threats they faced if the Taliban took over, it was probably likely that they would say, "Enough is enough", considering the corruption, the lack of food, the lack of ammunition and all of the other factors that played into this.

Can you just confirm to us whether it was an intelligence failure? Was it a military failure? Was it a combination of the lot that meant that this sudden collapse, and the retreat to Kabul airport, was not identified



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sooner and action taken to counter it?

Ben Wallace: Did the intelligence correctly predict the speed and the collapse of the Afghan Government? No, it did not. As I have said earlier, it predicted things with varying levels of certainty. They use words like “probable” or “likely”. One was that it was an outside chance or less likely but possible that it would collapse by the end of this year and there would be effectively a Taliban takeover, but likely the Afghan Government would hold on until the following year. That was the assessment right up until pretty much the warnings and indicators started to be ticked off. Yes, the speed was not anticipated.

The question about intelligence is whether it is reasonable for them to have been able to predict the exact timing of the collapse. That goes to my point earlier. History shows us—for example, think about the collapse of the Soviet Union or Saddam Hussein’s regime—that towards the end of these regime they rapidly collapse and the indicators are not forthcoming, because your own coverage falls apart.

If your sources are forward troops and they are no longer there or if your sources are human beings who inform you about the political situation and they have jumped on a plane and gone to Dubai, suddenly you do not have any real knowledge outside an ever-decreasing circle. Your certainty declines as your information continues to be delivered. That is why I took the view that the game was up, because to me the lessons of history show that we have much less certainty when there is chaos, rather than more certainty. We put people into some of those departments, and we were getting information back. It suggested to me that I had to use my judgment.

There is a Chilcot point in this. After the Iraq war and the intelligence in that space, Chilcot did his amazing review and made some very good recommendations. Fundamentally, we have to take judgment as well. We have to use our judgment. I have spent nearly five years reading far too much intelligence every day. Sometimes our intelligence is so washed straight that your ability to use your judgment is discouraged because of the Chilcot fears.

It is unreasonable to expect intelligence to predict the exact day or week. If you look at the warnings and indicators that were put in place, they were correct. The assessments made of them were not correct. If I was sitting here and this had happened last week, I would have been able to say, “The assessment said in June or July, or whatever the exact date was, that this was possible”.

Richard Drax: I am going to hand over now to another colleague, because this question of how you withdrew is coming up next. The point I will make is that, from a military perspective, you do something on the information that you receive. You ended up at one civilian airport, vulnerable, getting everybody out. We are going to come onto that, so I will say no more. It is interesting. Why did you do what you did next?



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Why did you leave yourself vulnerable at one very hard-to-guard civilian airport rather than staying at other airports or the main one there, which you could have defended far better? That is coming up next.

Q58 Mr Francois: Very quickly, Ben, what you seem to be saying—I do not want to be accused of putting words in your mouth; I am showing that we are listening to you—is that the intelligence assessments got the sequence of the collapse broadly right, but they got the pace wrong.

Ben Wallace: Yes.

Q59 Martin Docherty-Hughes: Briefly, following on from that, I read it perhaps slightly differently when the Secretary of State said about washing out assessments. It sounded like they were being sugar-coated. It just sounded very odd.

Ben Wallace: No. What I mean is that often intelligence is, with total honour, desperate to try to be neutral and not to be leading. One of the Iraq things was whether the intelligence was leading, like leading a witness; was it leading you into making wrong assumptions? They try to do assessments that are very clear and stark and caveated to the point that there is no inaccuracy and no room for making a mistake.

That is important. That is why they are there: to inform us. It does not mean someone like me is let off from judgment. My job is to take those things, read them, in my view have enough knowledge about what created that intelligence report and indeed enough history or knowledge of the political environment to add to that my judgment and say whatever. If you follow an intelligence assessment like it is an option paper, you will find yourself in the wrong place sometimes. Ultimately, just like a police officer on the ground or a soldier, in the end you have to make the decision about where you are going to cross the river.

Chair: Colleagues, we are going to have to make progress. Can we have quick questions and quick answers, please?

Q60 Mr Jones: I do not disagree with your assessment of JIC assessments, having read them. The ISC, which I sit on, has asked to see these assessments. It will be interesting to see whether the Government are forthcoming with those.

Can I just go through the thing that is really getting to me? You quite clearly came to the conclusion that the game was up in July. The Foreign Secretary basically retreated, saying that the assessment was clearly wrong. He basically said that this is certainly not the Foreign Office's lead responsibility, i.e. he basically blamed your Department and the Home Office, rather than the Foreign Office, which is not good. As you well know, those JIC assessments are created from a variety of different sources, including Foreign Office sources plus defence intelligence and other sources.

I just want to get some understanding—again, it comes to the point I



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made earlier on—about what the decision-making process was within Government. Clearly, you thought the game was up. Who did you raise that with? Who was actually co-ordinating or making these decisions? It seems to me that you were at odds with the Foreign Office; the Prime Minister was floating off somewhere above all this and making various assessments. Clearly, he changed his tune—that is not unusual for him—from one day to the other. It does worry me genuinely, not just in terms of the intelligence but also in terms of the co-ordinated response to this. It just seems a mess.

Ben Wallace: No, because we all agreed as Government that we would be withdrawing from Afghanistan and we all started that process.

Q61 **Mr Jones:** No, let us just knock it down very clearly. Yes, I agree with that. You did that. Therefore, the next thing would be to put a plan together. You had serious concerns, having seen the intelligence. You thought that in July the game was up. What was then the process of putting the steps in place or asking for more intelligence after that? It seems chaotic. You were clearly at odds with the Foreign Secretary. You have said things publicly that quite clearly—

Ben Wallace: We were both in total agreement that we were drawing down, ready to leave Afghanistan. We agreed to increase a smaller number of force personnel—that is me, the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister—to make sure we had the right force protection and indeed that we had the right people in place should we need to evacuate sooner than we had planned. Joint Headquarters sent out in December 2020 a permanent contingency team to be established in January 2021. All of Op Pitting and all of that planning we had actually started—

Mr Jones: As a former Minister in the MoD, I am in awe of the military in terms of their ability to plan. I have no problems with that and no criticism of what they did. My criticism is actually a political one. It is in terms of, on the intelligence assessment, who was taking the decisions. It is quite clear that you have come to a conclusion, having read the intelligence, that the game was up, to use your own words, in July. How did you feed that in? Who was in charge of this process? Clearly the Prime Minister was not or, if he was, he was not reading the stuff, because he has made at least three or four contradictory statements on the intelligence.

Q62 **Chair:** Can I ask whether you took this to National Security Council?

Ben Wallace: I cannot disclose where we had discussions and the discussions on the NSC itself, obviously.

Mr Jones: I am sorry. You can. With the greatest respect, you can. I am not asking about what went on. I just want to understand what the process was.

Chair: You can say that it was raised.



Ben Wallace: The NSC came to an agreement that we would prepare for a withdrawal and increase force capability to make sure we were in the right place to do that. The NSC is collective. We all agreed to carry on to the next stage; we all agreed that we were leaving Afghanistan. It did not matter whether, as I said, my view was that the game was up a few weeks before everybody else. The fundamentals—

Q63 **Mr Jones:** I am sorry. I disagree with you. It did. Clearly, you had looked at that assessment and come to a very different conclusion than the Foreign Secretary had. When it all went wrong, he clearly blamed somebody else, which is a bit pathetic, frankly, from a Foreign Secretary. What are your thoughts on him blaming, which he did publicly, your own Department and the Home Office for this?

Ben Wallace: I am not going to get into an argument about different views within Government, if there were any.

Mr Jones: He said it publicly to the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Ben Wallace: What I would say—let us not forget this—the overall owners of the timetable were the United States. They were the key enablers.

Mr Jones: No, I am sorry. I disagree.

Ben Wallace: They were. We could have lots of discussions in luxury about what we could and could not do, but fundamentally the Americans decided that they were leaving Afghanistan by 31 August, and they were out of there.

Mr Jones: It is quite clear from what you have told us today that it was a complete mess, and the complete mess is not yours. It is actually a lack of co-ordination both in terms of intelligence centrally and what the plan was. In spite of that, you and the MoD do what you always do, which is to put a plan in place. Frankly, this does not speak very highly of the Prime Minister and the rest of the shower.

Chair: Before you answer Kevan, is it okay if we hand this to Sarah? This is now her area.

Q64 **Sarah Atherton:** In terms of Op Pitting, without exception the British military did an amazing job and they were admirably led. The evacuation was a multilateral collaboration. What did the MoD lead?

Ben Wallace: Basically, they put in a contingency plan and, from the ground, they worked side by side with the Americans in what they were going to plan for. We needed an airport, and the Americans took the decision that HKIA was their preferred base. I cannot answer for why—maybe Nick Carter can—they chose that over Bagram. There may be tactical or strategic reasons.

If you remember, at the beginning of this HKIA was operating civilian flights. A large part of the evacuation was on charter flights. The big



change happened when charter flights would not fly anymore, and suddenly we were left with a challenge. The best plan was to carry on the charter flights until 31 August. They had a bigger capacity and they could go in and out. That might have been a factor as to why they chose HKIA rather than Bagram. We effectively led on processing a lot of the non-US. At Baron Hotel, we did not just effectively host our own personnel. There were lots of international people coming through that hotel. We had made this plan of how we were going to use that entrance. The Americans had used a different entrance. We did that.

If you want to know what we specifically led on, it was truly collaborative. We seemed to take the lead in the non-US liaison with the other militaries and the other ARAP Afghans in the Op Pitting process.

Q65 Sarah Atherton: We spoke about the need to maintain a presence to uphold peace and, failing that, lines of communication to monitor the situation. How engaged is the MoD at the moment now with representatives like the High Representative for Afghan Transition, Sir Simon Gass, or Martin Langdon?

Ben Wallace: We have quite a lot of engagement. We engage with him not only to get his reports from his meetings to understand what next; we are also directly engaged through our defence sections in a number of countries in the region to work not only to keep borders open but to message third parties trying to hold the Taliban to account and message the Taliban quite clearly about what is required if they want to be recognised, et cetera. That is one of the benefits of having defence attachés in that part of the world. We are regularly using that through the defence engagement, and they have helped us get people out.

Q66 Sarah Atherton: You are happy with the lines of communication with the FCDO.

Ben Wallace: Yes, Liz Truss and I work incredibly closely. I speak to her every day.

Mr Jones: Like her predecessor.

Ben Wallace: You are full of mischief, Kevan, honestly. My Minister for the Armed Forces, James Heapey, went around some of those countries specifically quite quickly after the event. It is incredibly difficult. We should not pretend. Now that we have left, we are in a state at the moment where it is not easy to get people out.

Chair: Let us move on to that exactly.

Q67 Martin Docherty-Hughes: First of all, Chair, let me seek a reassurance from the Secretary of State about the answer given to you in relation to your question on *Women in the Armed Forces*, which is the report published under the leadership of my honourable friend, the Member for Wrexham.



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Given the reported 10-fold increase in accusations of rape and assault last week of women aged between 16 and 18 and some of the profoundly disturbing evidence in that report, Secretary of State, can you assure the Committee that, in the stress-testing of your Department's response, the defence women's network is representative of the women who gave evidence, including women aged 16 to 18, and not just officers in the chain of command?

Ben Wallace: Absolutely, yes. The women that I spoke to from the defence network were not all officers. I will have another session with them on a regular basis. That is my understanding. I will check in case they were not. They were from different services. They were from different ranks and levels.

I am absolutely determined, and it is a very good report. I would not normally beg the Committee's patience to get it right. I have already pushed for some things that are not even in the report to go further, which I would like to see. We are currently trying to deal with the actual issue of how a military organisation deals with the issue on the chain of command. That is really important. It is something that the Americans seem to have done better. It is a very significant change to do it, but it is not something that I will shy away from in finding a way through.

Let me tell you that there are some really good examples and there are some horrendous examples. I cannot tell you how important it is to me for Sarah's report to be empowered and to help deliver this. The hardest bit is not the report; it is going to be changing people's minds and changing people's culture.

Q68 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** First of all, I would like to thank the Secretary of State for the work he has done in relation to Afghanistan. We do not always agree on everything, but I know he has been working behind the scenes for a lot of Members of this House in some of these very difficult instances of people fleeing Afghanistan. In terms of refugees relocated to the UK through the ex gratia scheme and the Afghan relocations and assistance policy, I wonder whether the Secretary of State can tell us what support will be provided to them upon arrival in the UK and how this will continue in the future.

Ben Wallace: As you know, on arrival we have appointed Victoria Atkins as the lead Minister for what we call Operation Warm Welcome. She can answer for a lot of the Home Office part of that obligation.

If they are ARAP personnel, as opposed to the Afghan relocation scheme, we have now not only surveyed them to get more detail about who, why, what their military unit links were, et cetera, to build a proper data picture, but we are engaging with the British Legion and veterans' associations to offer them a link. Not everyone wants to continue affiliation.



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We are pushing to support them through houses. We have a number already in military housing, and we encourage as many local authorities as possible to take up those leases for the houses that we have offered. We have currently offered over 100, and we have accepted 92. Some of them are under negotiation. For example, Edinburgh has nine at the moment, and those negotiations are underway. Thank you to them. Fife has 10; my father is a Fifer.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: It is a different country, Secretary of State. I am a Dunbartonshire man.

Ben Wallace: From our point of view, it is pastoral care. The Minister for Defence People and Veterans, Leo Docherty, is my direct link to that working group. Our offer is that we will fund those local authority houses for a year rather than the initial three months that you usually get for refugees and others. What we have found is that some of them have already gone off and literally gone into work. I am desperate to clear the people in hotels. We are all trying to get through that and encourage MHCLG there.

Q69 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Can I also say briefly that my own local authority, West Dunbartonshire, has already taken three families and is looking to take more? I may come back to you privately on some of the issues that they face. The Secretary of State mentioned those who have been either working or served in Afghanistan who are now refugees. Maybe the Secretary of State could just say something about additional support for their family members in terms of access to services and the support they might be able to get.

Ben Wallace: Can I write to the Committee on that? It will be bringing in Home Office and other support.

Q70 **Chair:** Just on the point of work, I understand the Government are looking for lorry drivers. I just make the point—I do not mean to be flippant here—that many of the support in Afghanistan, as the Secretary of State will be aware, were those lorry drivers who provided logistical support, driving what were called the jinglies, the big trucks. Many of them are now here.

Ben Wallace: I have learned something I did not know. I did not know the big trucks were called jinglies. What I would say is that I want them to feel as welcome as possible and we want to do as much pastoral care, whether that is by volunteers, charities or whatever, to help them get into work and to never let go of them, as people who we have an obligation to.

Q71 **Chair:** How many of those in the Afghan armed forces are perhaps being offered an opportunity to operate in our armed forces?

Ben Wallace: We are examining some of the legalities around that, but there are certainly numbers of them who have skills that would add to our armed forces. We will have to work through how we do that.



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Q72 **Richard Drax:** Secretary of State, how many UK nationals and eligible Afghan nationals remain in Afghanistan or in other third countries? What are you doing to ensure that these groups are successfully relocated to the United Kingdom?

Ben Wallace: If I could split this into two groups, we have what we call phase ones, which are ARAPs right up until we left, and then the ones who have applied subsequently to that. Of the ones who were processed and called forward but did not make it out, there were 311 principals, as we call them, and 1,559 dependants, which adds up to a total of 1,870. We know there are 1,395 still in Afghanistan or 208 principals, who were the actual people who worked for us. Thirty-three principals or 107 dependents, so 140, are in third countries. There are about 200 people, 37 principals, who we have not had comms with since the day we left. There are about 37 who we have never heard from again. We have one who has chosen not to relocate to the UK but to stay in Afghanistan.

I can give you a slight breakdown of some of the countries where we find them. We do not find them all in neighbouring countries. We have had some in Australia; we have had some in America. Some clearly just got on the first plane out and ended up in other parts. We have already brought some of those back. The number that we have brought back in the last seven days is 23. Nearly 100 have come back.

Q73 **Richard Drax:** In terms of going on to relocate back to the United Kingdom—that is the point—this is a continuing exercise.

Ben Wallace: Yes. ARAP is going to remain open. We have to be careful in the public messaging, because some of the neighbouring countries are worried about destabilising the movement of huge numbers of people and do not want to advertise or be seen to be an open border. It is hard for us to publicly celebrate the success when we do get people out, because that would not help anyone. The methods we use to get people out are also, I am afraid, highly sensitive, if we do.

The plus side is that the likes of Qatar and Pakistan have already started a number of charter flights out of HKIA. We have found on those flights a number of British passport-holders have flown out. Afghanis with passports have been allowed out through the airport. We have to balance the risk of encouraging people to move around or fly if we think they are particularly vulnerable.

Q74 **Chair:** Just on Qatar, I was there a couple of weeks ago. The Foreign Minister is doing an incredible job there. I asked them whether they would be willing to allow our local employees in Qatar to be based in Afghanistan, in Kabul, to represent our consular interest. I wonder whether that is something you might be able to take away with you and explore.

Ben Wallace: The Qatari Government have been incredibly supportive to us and our requests throughout the whole process in Afghanistan. Quite early on, I sought reassurance from the Taliban leadership via the Qataris



when we were starting the evacuation, and they came back within minutes to me.

Chair: I will just make clear that I mean us having representation in Kabul at the Qatari Embassy. That is all I am suggesting.

Q75 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Secretary of State, in September this year, you will recall—I am sure you are well aware of it—that your Department was subject to another serious data breach when the details of more than 260 interpreters were shared in a mass email. I was just wondering whether you could advise us of a breakdown of their current status, how many you have been unable to contact, how many of the interpreters have lost their lives since this breach and what the outcome of the investigation you launched into it is.

Ben Wallace: As is the way of the system, I was handed the results of the investigation literally as I was sitting out in the corridor preparing for this meeting. I will be able to get the results of the investigation to the Committee—I have not read it in full—in a couple of days. I can get it to you as soon as possible.

We have been through all of the individuals. The fundamental error was that instead of putting the distribution on the "BCC" they put it on the "CC". We have gone back through all the records and found that there was another media report. That was one that happened previously. It was clearly a mistake and a breakdown. We have scrubbed through them. We have no evidence of any of the people suffering as a result of it. We immediately gave them alternative methods to communicate with and advice. I can update you on your specific questions at the same time I give you the report.

Chair: We will add it to that list of things that we will be chasing you for, which I mentioned at the beginning of the meeting. Thank you very much indeed.

Ben Wallace: I will get those quicker than some of the other ones.

Chair: I am very grateful. It is much appreciated.

Q76 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon, Secretary of State. You have fairly reflected today the momentous task that Operation Pitting was and the feat undertaken by so many brave service personnel. You are aware of the campaign or the quest to have decoration for those who were deployed. You have considered the 30 days' duration ordinarily required for a tour. You indicated that you were going to consider this personally. The 30 days is not written down in stone anywhere. Are you in a position to update us on that?

Ben Wallace: As a number of the members of this Committee will verify, medallic recognition is incredibly important to our personnel, but it is not a unilateral decision. There are committees on committees, and it is of



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course, quite rightly, the privilege of Her Majesty the Queen to make the final decision.

Medallic recognition is predominantly based on risk, rigour and time. The Afghan medal as such has a five-day period. In one part of its history, people got it after five or six days. There is clearly flexibility in that. I will look at it, as I have said, sympathetically. The request by many people will go through a committee.

Chair: You get the support of this Committee for that.

Ben Wallace: They get my support. They get my support, but it has to meet the risk and rigour requirements and be done independent of me.

Q77 **Gavin Robinson:** How long does the process take, Secretary of State?

Ben Wallace: We will see what we can do.

Q78 **Mr Francois:** Secretary of State, we all know what you are talking about. I have a related point on recognition, but not medallic. If you will forgive me, you will see why I am doing this. There were media reports this afternoon that the family of Dennis Hutchings have requested that serving lifeguards should be pallbearers at his funeral, and the MoD have refused that. I do not expect you to comment immediately because you are probably not aware of that.

Ben Wallace: It is his regiment's choice, if he wants pallbearers at his funeral and the commanding officer is willing to release them. He served his country. He was not convicted of anything. I did direct the Department to help bring his body back from Northern Ireland or to facilitate it. I think it went on a civilian flight. If that is the case, I would like to find out who stopped it.

Mr Francois: Secretary of State, if you could look into this, the family would be very grateful, as would the Committee. Bless you.

Q79 **Derek Twigg:** Secretary of State, what estimates have been made of the number and type of weapons that have fallen into Taliban hands as a result of the withdrawal? Maybe you could tell us also what efforts have been made, if any, to try to deny them the range of weapons that were possibly available.

Ben Wallace: Anything that was sensitive was either brought out or destroyed. We left very little. I can give the shopping list to the Committee very quickly of what we left. There was the minibus that we used to take people from the Baron Hotel through the crowds to the airside. Things like that were left behind. They were operated by 3 YORKS or the unit that was there. They called it "White Rose Taxis" at the time. That was obviously their idea.

Q80 **Derek Twigg:** What about actual weapons?

Ben Wallace: We did not leave any weapons to the Taliban. I can leave you a list of what we did. I cannot speak for the American equipment.



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That is nothing to do with me. Anything that we had under our remit was either destroyed or brought out. I can give you the details of what was left behind.

Q81 **Derek Twigg:** What about any of the equipment that we supplied the Afghan army with?

Ben Wallace: I do not know. I will have to get back to you about that.

Q82 **Chair:** We have left a vacuum in Afghanistan from an oversight perspective. Can you give us your assessment as to what the terrorist threat from Afghanistan now is?

Ben Wallace: At the moment, the terrorist threat is low or minimal from Afghanistan to us in the West, and certainly to the United Kingdom, but it is assessed that, unless the Taliban stop, it is of course probable or likely—I forget the exact words—that the threat from the likes of al-Qaeda will increase. As we know, terrorists enjoy states in civil war, failed states or places where they are hard to reach. The track record in Afghanistan is not good.

That is why we are making it clear to the Taliban that it is not acceptable. Of course, as we have seen, the Haqqani are part of the Afghan Government. The Haqqani network is proscribed in the United Kingdom and the United States. Let us see where they go. In the short term there is no increase, but there is a prediction that it is likely that the threat will increase.

Q83 **Chair:** I am pleased to say that you are cautiously optimistic. I have to say that is not the impression I got in—

Ben Wallace: I did not say I was cautiously optimistic.

Q84 **Chair:** You said there is a low threat.

Ben Wallace: For now. It is likely that it will increase.

Q85 **Chair:** My point, though, is that the Taliban came into power with the benefit and the support of the Haqqani network and included al-Qaeda. The attack on the airport was from ISIS-K. The economy is going downhill; there is no money in the country. The Taliban is not a monolithic organisation able to control all its elements, and it is not in a position to govern. Therefore, what we are seeing is that some of those people who are not paid, who wanted to martyr themselves in this advance to take Kabul, are sliding across to ISIS-K.

While you may be saying that this is the situation now, would you not agree that we have left a very dangerous situation whereby terrorism is able to incubate? Indeed, it is the case that the conditions there mean that there is very much an increased threat of terrorism.

Ben Wallace: I do not disagree with most of your observation. I would put it another way. Unless the Taliban starts delivering for the people of Afghanistan, the likes of ISIS-K will strengthen. ISIS-K is currently not in



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a position to able to mount attacks outwith Afghanistan. That may well change, a bit like the threat with al-Qaeda.

The Taliban has to govern. It is one thing to be a military force, but in the end people are people and they want sanitation, education of one form or the other and an economy. If they fail to meet that, we know what happens as well. I would put it that way. Parts of the Taliban definitely know that. That is why they want to try to access funds. That is why we want to be in a position so that aid agencies can be more proactive and deliver aid to people. The responsibility is on the shoulders of the Taliban now to make sure it lives up to the United Nations' obligations that the former Afghan Government signed up to and indeed recognises that al-Qaeda is not good for its health.

Q86 Chair: The reports that I am reading are suggesting that ISIS-K has moved back into the Tora Bora mountains, the very place where al-Qaeda was when we went to Afghanistan in the first place. Are you not concerned that we do not have an understanding of the threat picture when it comes to terrorism in Afghanistan? Are you satisfied that there is enough information and intelligence there for us to appreciate what is going on?

Ben Wallace: We are in a different world. We are not on the ground. We do not have a partner force like the Afghan army. We know that, wherever we do counterterrorism in the world, without those two things we are in a severely suboptimal environment. That is why we are developing and have developed some capabilities to make up for a bit of it, but it is never as good as a partner force and a supportive nation on the ground.

Q87 Mr Jones: You just mentioned the al-Qaeda network, some individuals from which are now in Government. Are you aware, as I am, that the ISI in Pakistan are not exactly sleeping partners, are they, in terms of their relationship with the Haqqani network? You talked earlier on about co-operation on getting people out of Pakistan. Are we also putting pressure on the Pakistani Government to intercede here? They have enormous amounts of influence not just over the Taliban but also certainly the Haqqani network, which they have bankrolled for years.

Ben Wallace: We engage with all countries that have an influence on the Taliban.

Q88 Mr Jones: No, I particularly asked you about Pakistan.

Ben Wallace: Pakistan is one of the countries that has influence on the Taliban, and we engage strongly with Pakistan.

Q89 Mr Jones: More importantly, on terrorism they have a direct influence—the ISI certainly does—in terms of the Haqqani network.

Ben Wallace: When we engage with countries, whether it is Pakistan or anywhere else, we engage across the whole landscape with them.



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Q90 **Chair:** On Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban may be looking at what happened in Afghanistan and saying, "We want to pursue greater power-sharing ourselves". Is that a concern?

Ben Wallace: It is a concern for the Pakistani Government.

Q91 **Chair:** Is it not a concern for us?

Ben Wallace: Obviously, an unstable Pakistan is a concern for us. There is actually a wider piece here about the consequences of what we have seen in Afghanistan. Those ripples will probably inspire people as far away as al-Shabaab, neighbouring Taliban forces and Islamist extremists around the world.

Q92 **Mr Jones:** The difference is that the Pakistan Taliban are not being bankrolled by the ISI, are they?

Ben Wallace: Of course Pakistan has huge influence in Afghanistan, on all its partners in Afghanistan and on all the people delivering Government in Afghanistan. Of course, we would expect and urge Pakistan to use that for good.

Q93 **Chair:** It is a concern for the future, but we now need to start looking at the fact that you have a Taliban in Pakistan that will probably want to advance its own cause and pursue its agenda in a country that has nuclear weapons.

Ben Wallace: Look, any contagion from Afghanistan is going to be a concern to the United Kingdom.

Q94 **Chair:** My final point on terrorism is that very sadly we lost a colleague. It is allegedly assumed that this person could have been self-indoctrinated by what he read on the internet. We do not know; we can speculate. Nevertheless, it underlines the fact that 20 years after 9/11, when this form of asymmetric terrorism burst into our world, we are not much in a better place to prevent people from taking lives and taking their own lives at the same time, believing that they are doing it for a higher cause. Do you agree?

Ben Wallace: I have said many times, going back to when I was the Security Minister, that the scariness of the internet's ability to radicalise, groom, bully, sexually exploit and financially rob people is phenomenal. We are all grappling, in parliaments around the world, with how to regulate and deal with online hate and how to deal with this. It is not easy, but I have always pushed for more regulation on that, because it is frightening how it gets into young people, or actually any people.

As Security Minister, I remember that there was an individual in Wales. He had nothing to do with Islamism. The parents were not Muslim or whatever. He had self-radicalised himself, and he was on his way to a football match with knives in his backpack or something when he was stopped, and he decided he belonged to ISIS. It is powerful and, in the wrong hands, dangerous.



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I know there was a witness from Facebook recently. I have always talked about the business models of these internet models. I have said on the record that I want to talk about the YouTube internet model. The longer you are on it, the more you are hooked and the more they sell advertising. If we want to tackle it, we have to go right to the heart of their business model and make it less attractive.

The worry is that it is without trace, in a sense. You sit in your bedroom and you radicalise yourself. You are not travelling to Afghanistan to be given orders; you are not buying weapons on the internet, because you are taking a kitchen knife or whatever. People have often heard me saying about what keeps you awake at night. I have stopped saying anything, because there are too many things now. The proliferation of precision and knowledge transfer, including radicalisation, has changed the world we live in.

Chair: The trouble is that where we send troops around the world or have to stabilise is often caused by instability that is fuelled by extremism. I am pleased to hear you say that. I am sure there will be a wider debate about what is on the internet, but part of the message is working with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Emirates and other countries as well to understand how the interpretation of Islam is done in the 21st century, given that it is a seventh-century religion. That is for another debate.

One aspect of the concern over what happened in Afghanistan is the fact that many armed forces are scratching their heads and wondering, "What was it all for?"

Q95 **Mr Francois:** Secretary of State, by now the whole House knows that Sir David Amess was a very close friend of mine. We cannot discuss the investigation for legal reasons, as you know. Having heard what you have just said, which was powerful, sir, when we get to the Online Safety Bill, can we ask that you make those views extremely clearly known within Government? We have not had a first reading; we only have a Bill in draft. I agree with every single word you just said. Could you just give us a commitment that you will make sure that within Government those views are taken fully into account, please?

Ben Wallace: Yes. I once got in trouble as Security Minister for saying, if we are having to spend hundreds of millions of pounds going after county lines because they use encryption or we are having to spend lots and lots of money and grow our intelligence services to go after these people because of what they hide behind, the people who should pay for it are the people who make it harder to do that job.

Mr Francois: This Committee knows you. If you give us your word, we will take it.

Ben Wallace: When it comes to the write-round, as we say, I will definitely make sure of that. To be fair, the biggest challenge is that the



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internet is global and some of these companies are not here. I do not mean the well-known ones. If people use some of the encrypted messaging services, their servers are not here and they are not here. You cannot find the chief executive of one encrypted messaging company; he sleeps in a different hotel room every night. Those are the challenges that the internet delivers.

Q96 Mr Francois: By definition, it is difficult to regulate the dark web, but you know what we are asking you to do. Thank you for that.

On veterans more broadly, Secretary of State, as you have heard, the Committee has nothing but admiration for our brave servicemen and women who fought in the Afghan campaign. Clearly, given what has happened, many of them are now struggling with the outcome and its implications. Can you quickly advise the Committee what additional mental health support the Department is providing to assist those people?

Just quickly, we often find that, although services are available, there is usually, unfortunately, a delay. People get diagnosed as needing help, but it takes too long, sometimes, to get them into a treatment programme. Is there any comfort you can offer on that?

Ben Wallace: Yes, we put an extra £2.7 million available for what they call Op Courage to expand the existing mental health services. There is now a plethora of a more streamlined group of mental health services, both regionally in the NHS and in the GP network. That £2.7 million builds on £17.8 million to veteran-specific mental health services. We have done another £5 million for the armed forces charity sector to enable projects to support veterans specifically of Afghanistan.

One of the motivations for why it was so important to finish this and do the best we could for Op Pitting is because, for many veterans, this is part of closure. This is part of the sense that we cannot do anything about the political situation that unfolded; we cannot save Afghanistan. What we can do is we can stand by those people who stood by us. That will not satisfy all veterans, but those are the sorts of things that help veterans through mental health issues and help them come to terms with the other sacrifices that they have had to make.

It is a really important part of helping them, and that is why I am determined that in Op Warm Welcome there is a docking place for veterans and Afghans. I do not know about you, but I have had emails from people saying, "I served for five years in Helmand. I would have an Afghan family any time you want, if I can come and help. I will help them in their education". Many of these veterans want to support, and it is really important.

Q97 Mr Francois: Others may want to row in behind me, Chair, but, just quickly, Ben, I would like to press you on one particular point. We have looked at these issues before, and we have also had a hell of a lot of anecdotal evidence about this. When people leave the armed forces, they



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come under the aegis of the National Health Service and they can often access further support from the charitable sector.

What we often find is that the NHS does have its own pathways for veterans and it is good at diagnosing them as needing help: "You have PTSD, son. We need to help you". There are often then bureaucratic delays to people getting in to a programme. Unfortunately, sometimes veterans take their own lives in that intervening period. ITV had a statistic—admittedly this is two years old—that a couple of years ago 71 had unfortunately taken their own lives. That is 71 too many.

Can you talk to your colleagues in Government not about putting a process in place, because there is one, but about speeding up the gap between diagnosis and treatment? That seems to be where it is breaking down.

Ben Wallace: A few weeks ago, Sajid Javid, the Health Secretary, and I had a meeting with charities on healthcare and on that mental health issue in terms of what more we could do, capacity-building and speeding up. We had a joint meeting about that when we were talking about the £2.7 million and what more we could do.

Suicide is horrendous. I went to the tragic funeral of General Matt Holmes. There are two things that we should not forget. Currently—I do not take it for granted—the incidence of suicide amongst veterans compared to their own age group in the civilian world is either just below or at the same level, depending on the year. We should not take that for granted. That is really important.

There is also the wider issue that young men take their lives. We have to ask ourselves, in our society, why that is happening across the board. I am very conscious of it. I keep in touch with it. Leo Docherty, the Minister for Defence People and Veterans, is doing a good job at it. The Office for Veterans' Affairs is on that right track.

Mr Francois: You are on it.

Ben Wallace: Yes.

Q98 **Martin Docherty-Hughes:** Let me just take this a little bit further but away from the charities to the defence centre for mental health. Let me give you a case of someone who was in what was the Territorial Army and is now the Army Reserve since 1985. They served in Iraq on Operation Telic, did two tours of Afghanistan—Herrick 4 and 10—and also mobilised for Operation Olympics in 2012.

Whilst a veteran of those campaigns, this person is also still a reservist and now works in the Reserves under what is commonly known as an RSD contract, an additional duties commitment. A week tomorrow, they are going in for a kidney transplant to save their life. This is the exact same disease that killed their mother at the age of 41. They have been told that they are getting no sick leave and no sick pay to undergo and recuperate from a life-saving operation because of the additional duties



commitment.

If you work for Uber Eats you are seen to have employee rights, but this veteran, who is still serving technically, has none. What is my answer to them, given that the Government are assisting veterans through charities but cannot give those who are still in service the exact same rights as someone who is delivering a pizza?

Ben Wallace: On that particular case, if you give me the details I would be happy, genuinely, to look at it. We have a duty of care to all our people, whether they are reservists or regulars. I would like to get to the bottom of why that is the case and what it is about our terms and conditions, if that is the case, that makes that generically an issue for all. We can find out. I do not have a straightforward answer for you. Please give me the details of that serviceperson and I can find out. It may be a good test case for me to ask those questions about improving the service for our people. We have a long way to go, but what I am keen to work towards once and for all—I am trying to reform defence across many areas, but I am determined—is for the reserve/regular space to become more as one.

The Army especially has put in place unnecessary barriers internally that put people off using reserves, when they should not, and also in terms of employing them. I would be very happy to look at that, because I see the Reserves in future not as one or the other. I also see the Reserves in the future as something where people have the ability to step up and step down in life, in the same way as civil servants can go on maternity leave or have children and step down, and they still remain civil servants; they might do less time or flexi-time and then come back.

It is not always easy in a combat mission, but fundamentally society has changed and our armed forces need to change with it. If we do not, we will not have people joining, we will not have enough women joining and we will end up in a bad place. If you send me the details, I will look at it.

Q99 **Sarah Atherton:** As a Welsh MP, I am getting increasingly concerned about the inaccessibility of services for veterans in Wales. While we see the UK Government giving money to veterans' services, which is absolutely great, I do not see any improvement on the ground in Wales, particularly when services then interface with the Welsh NHS. How are we progressing with a veterans' commissioner for Wales, which is the only devolved nation that does not have one?

Ben Wallace: Is the veterans' commissioner for Wales not appointed by the Welsh Assembly?

Sarah Atherton: There is an issue around funding going on between the Welsh Senedd and this Government.

Ben Wallace: I can take a look at it, but it is not a particularly expensive post compared to all their big budgets for everything else. We are currently providing them with ambulance drivers to run their ambulances



in Wales. They are represented in the veterans' discussions and the Minister for Veterans talks about it. We are going to have the joint veterans board with myself and the CDL, which is long overdue, and we will talk about it then. The DAs are invited to that, so I shall certainly raise it with them.

I am not going to venture particularly into too much devolved politics—I do not want to—but I would simply say that they are all our veterans and we all have the same obligation to each other.

Sarah Atherton: There is a stalemate, and veterans are suffering.

Q100 **Chair:** In the last minute, I just want to step back and look at the whole thing and the big questions. After 20 years, what next for NATO? What is its purpose? We visited Norfolk, Virginia. It is still focused on a high-octane, high-risk and low-probability event and not doing stability. Is that a question that NATO needs to look at?

There is the question of American international resolve on the international stage and the question of dealing with extremism, which we touched on. What next for Afghanistan? How can we help the 40 million people who are not able to get out, who are staying there? There are also questions about the US-UK special relationship, given that we were not included in those key decisions. Is this something that the MoD will be starting to look at internally, to digest what happened in Afghanistan?

Ben Wallace: On the relationship with the United States, we have just had AUKUS and that announcement about building, with the Australians and the United States, a nuclear submarine—a nuclear-propelled submarine, not a nuclear-armed submarine—capability in the Pacific. We are a very trusted part of the relationship, and only the US and the UK can deliver that to Australia. At a professional level, it is incredibly tight and close. Only last week, I was with the US Defense Secretary on the counter-Daesh strategies that we should all work together on.

NATO is getting itself in the right place. The DDA is a recognition of the changing threat and how we should meet it. There are two plans that split out of the DDA. One is called the SASP; I am not even going to go there. NATO is criminally charged with having too many acronyms that no one actually understands. There are thousands of them. They make them up every day. If we do not know what is going on, the Russians will have no idea what these acronyms mean. I will give you the different acronyms.

They are very key. There is the SASP and the SSD. One is, effectively, the peacetime plans. If you look at those and examine them as a Committee, you will see that this is going in the right direction. The plans recognise that a lot of these things are about stability sub-threshold and not major war, because our adversary has worked out that it will probably lose major war, so it tries to destabilise—

Q101 **Chair:** The point I was trying to make was that what happened in



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Afghanistan was a low-level insurgency armed with AK-47s, landmines and RPGs. The might of a huge military coalition was not able to win. There are questions to be asked, because we may need to do it again, if we are asked, in the next 10 years. I simply ask, because I hope this is something the MoD and the Government will look at.

The second point is a reflection on America. This is a country that we came back to as a Defence Committee that is deeply looking at itself at the moment. It is paralysed politically and focusing on domestic matters. There is a place for greater UK statecraft and thought leadership to be able to provide some of the solutions and answers to some of the challenges that this last 20 years could have perhaps done better at. That is another push that—

Ben Wallace: The Americans are still our closest friends and allies, and they are my personal friends in the political space. Indeed, I am close to my counterpart.

The lesson of Afghanistan—you will see it in my Defence Command Paper—even before we got there, is that you do not fix threats; you campaign against them in a political timeframe, not a quick-fix timeframe. You avoid a future Afghanistan by being engaged in conflict prevention. You help states that are falling into conflict by investing in post-conflict reconstruction and joining up your foreign policy, your aid, your science and your education to deliver an enduring campaign.

If we want to take on the threats in this world, whatever I think of Islamist terrorism, it is not going to disappear, tragically, probably in my lifetime. You have to campaign every day, day in and day out, and not just through the traditional guise of the military and the intelligence services. Wider society has to constantly challenge hate, division and intolerance and do nation-building and address poverty. What is dawning on many people is that this means you have to work together more, not less, and you have to be in it for the long game.

Chair: I hope that we have illustrated in the questions—we are very grateful for your sincerity in replying to them—why there was a lot of call for an Afghan inquiry. We are very grateful for your time today. Can I echo the comments that were made throughout this two-hour period and say thank you for the work you have done over this very difficult period and in Op Pitting and also to our armed forces, which did an incredible job?

When I get asked, “What is your justification?” or, “How can you handle what happened in Afghanistan?” my personal observation is that, from what I pick up, what is going on there now is too big for the Taliban to change. The societal effect of 20 years of our involvement in the country is too big for the Taliban to undo. That is something that we can take away. The music has not stopped yet. It is still in transition. Who knows where it will go? It is not going to go back to 1996. In thanking you for your time today, we now need to reflect on those 40 million people. I



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hope you will be focusing on the difficult winter that lies ahead. Otherwise, there will be a humanitarian crisis.

For today, on behalf of the Committee, thank you very much indeed for your time.