

## Defence Committee

### Oral evidence: Withdrawal from Afghanistan, HC 699

Tuesday 16 November 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr Tobias Ellwood (Chair); Stuart Anderson; Sarah Atherton; Richard Drax; Mr Mark Francois; Mr Kevan Jones; Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck; John Spellar; Derek Twigg.

Questions 102 - 190

#### Witnesses

**I:** Dr Jack Watling, Research Fellow for Land Warfare, Royal United Services Institute; Brigadier (ret) Ben Barry, Senior Fellow for Land Warfare, International Institute for Strategic Studies.

**II:** Dr Sara de Jong, Representative, The Sulha Alliance; Peter Gordon-Finlayson, Representative, The Sulha Alliance; Professor Brad Blitz, Representative, Afghan Solidarity Coalition; Dr Neelam Raina, Representative, Afghan Solidarity Coalition.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [AFG0010 Afghan Solidarity Coalition](#)
- [AFG0015 The Sulha Alliance](#)



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Jack Watling and Brigadier Ben Barry.

**Chair:** Welcome to this Defence Select Committee hearing taking place on Tuesday 16 November 2021. We continue our discussion and inquiry into the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Our session today will be divided into two parts. We have two panels. For the first panel, I am delighted to welcome Dr Jack Watling, who is a research fellow for land warfare at RUSI. Joining us virtually is Brigadier Ben Barry, who is a senior fellow for land warfare at IISS. We will be working with those two witnesses for the first hour.

The second panel will involve Dr Sara de Jong, who is a representative from the Sulha Alliance, along with her colleague Peter Gordon-Finlayson. Joining them will be Professor Brad Blitz and Dr Neelam Raina, who are representing the Afghan Solidarity Coalition. Welcome to you all.

We will now turn to the first panel. I should declare the fact that I served under Brigadier Ben Barry when we were in Bosnia. I was seconded to the Light Infantry. It is a pleasure to see you again, Brigadier, and thank you, Dr Jack, as well.

Q102 **Sarah Atherton:** Good afternoon, both. I would like your opinions on the Doha agreement and the withdrawal of coalition troops. In the MoD's response to this inquiry regarding the Doha agreement, they concluded that the UK was left with "limited options in relation to future presence in Afghanistan". Were NATO's hands tied when the US decided to withdraw? Can we start with the Brigadier, please?

**Brigadier Barry:** It is important to go back to 2014, when the UK and US military strategies for Afghanistan diverged. The US chose to leave several thousand troops—US army marine corps and green beret special forces advisers—on the ground. Acting as combat advisers and calling in large amounts of US air power, they helped the Afghan forces to fight off determined Taliban attempts to capture provincial capitals—for example, two battles for Kunduz and a sustained Afghan attempt to capture Lashkar Gah.

Why is this relevant? It is relevant because the UK had opted out of a major part of the US military strategy after 2014. What was left was the armoured Uber capability—the security force in Kabul—and a limited amount of work in Afghan Ministries and with the Afghan officer academy. The UK was not putting troops in harm's way in the way that the US was, and it does not seem to have contributed to the bombing operation as well.

We must be frank and assess that UK military influence over US military decision-making was probably even more limited than the Defence Secretary alluded to in his testimony. When he said in his testimony that the UK seemed to have no influence over the Doha negotiations and over the subsequent US decision-making, he is telling it as he sees it.



**Dr Watling:** I would add to that the Doha agreement was a very effective roadmap to deliver what the United States wanted, which was to get out within a defined period, and to fix them to a timeline in order to make that politically very hard to walk away from domestically. I do not think that we had many options in terms of influencing the US. They were putting in the vast majority of the enablers to sustain our presence in Afghanistan and were clear about what their interests demanded.

Once they had set that direction, the rest of NATO could have sustained a prolonged presence, but it would have done so at the cost of most of those NATO members' commitments in eastern Europe and elsewhere, given the rather small forces that most NATO members deploy, and the disproportionate resource that it would take to sustain an operation at that reach.

We could have done it, but at the expense of what? Given that Afghanistan was mentioned only a couple of times in the Integrated Review and that there are other critical national interests that would have been undermined if we had tried to extend our presence, I would agree with the Ministry of Defence that our options were very limited at that point.

Q103 **Sarah Atherton:** On that point, do you believe the US had authority to agree the terms of the Doha agreement for NATO coalition forces and the Afghan Government?

**Dr Watling:** The United States, of course, was the one that had called Article 5 in the first place and we were supporting their request in going into Afghanistan. The mission had changed over time, but the US was providing over 50% of the resource to sustain the effort, despite being, at one point, one of over 50 countries that were involved. If the United States decides that it is not in its interest to do that heavy lifting, and others are not prepared to step up to the plate, I would say that that is within the US's right to determine.

We can perhaps have some useful conversations about the lack of forethought that that agreement highlighted in terms of humanitarian transition and the capacity for humanitarian arrangements to be made for what was likely to follow, and that could have been a conversation with NATO partners that could have been constructive, but I would not question the United States' right to determine that it no longer wanted to sustain that level of effort.

Q104 **Sarah Atherton:** Could the United States have managed that better?

**Brigadier Barry:** I am in complete agreement with Jack but we have to remember that the Doha agreement was between the United States Government and the Taliban political office. Although there was an Afghan Government delegation at Doha, it did not agree to the Doha agreement, so the US was very much in the driving seat and it was being driven by its proclaimed national interest.



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It is clear that the Doha agreement was very much a withdrawal agreement, but it encouraged, or tried to encourage, the Afghan Government to reach a deal with the Taliban. I have no doubt that, diplomatically, the British Government did quite a bit of heavy lifting to try to encourage the Afghan Government to meaningfully talk to the Taliban and also to reduce friction between Kabul and Islamabad. In the end, the UK was not in the room when the Doha agreement was signed, and nor was the rest of NATO or the Afghan Government.

Q105 **Sarah Atherton:** Doctor, with hindsight, could anything have been done better? I know that hindsight is a great thing.

**Dr Watling:** As I say, a lot of the provisions that were not met in terms of the conditions articulated in the Doha agreement were, essentially, window-dressing. No one was prepared to put in enough resource to be able to impose those conditions and, therefore, they were simply words in the treaty. They were not intent. So long as that intent was not there, I do not think that we could have produced a particularly different opinion, not at that late stage.

We can get into the effectiveness of partner force capacity-building later, and how that might have played differently, but the one area that we really did miss was acknowledging that there was going to be a likely collapse of the Afghan Government and, therefore, a need to ensure humanitarian access. That is very much on us, because the dependence that had been built upon international aid and humanitarian access over the course of the conflict was something that was suddenly going to fall away and there was not enough capacity to take up the slack. That was predictable and predicted, and not enough was done.

**Brigadier Barry:** It seems to me that, after the Doha agreement was signed, the Afghan Government exhibited some symptoms of wishing it could be unsigned. They may well have thought that they could persuade President Biden to suspend it and to retain a US presence. It also seems highly likely that Washington DC, London and President Ghani's office all thought there would be a Taliban offensive but that it would not start until September, after the US was clear of the country.

It is quite clear that the US and UK attempted to persuade the Ghani Government to adopt what London and Washington considered was a more realistic military strategy, and they thought that there was a reasonable chance that the Afghan forces could fight the Taliban to a stalemate, but they seemed to have underestimated just how hollowed out the Afghan forces are, what a blow to their morale the US decision to withdraw and the cessation of meaningful air support was, and how very strong the Taliban position was in rural Afghanistan.

Q106 **Chair:** Dr Jack, going back to your comment about the absence of Afghanistan signing the Doha agreement, are you suggesting that this agreement was benefiting the United States, and that the United States knew that it was not going to be benefiting Afghanistan?



**Dr Watling:** There was no expectation that it would benefit Afghanistan.

Q107 **Chair:** So the Doha agreement was all about America getting out.

**Dr Watling:** Yes.

Q108 **Chair:** Where was Britain? Why did Britain not say anything about this, given the massive commitment that we had made over two decades? Why did we not stand up and say, "This is not going to work. This is not good for the very people who we have been trying to help for 20 years"?

**Dr Watling:** For the reasons that were addressed in the first question in terms of the extent to which we would have been bent out of shape if we had tried to do any of the heavy lifting ourselves.

Q109 **Chair:** I am not talking about doing heavy lifting, but simply about Britain loudly and clearly saying, "This Doha agreement is not going to work. It will lead to chaos". Why did we not say that, if it was very clear that that is where this was going?

**Dr Watling:** Because we probably did not want a public fight with the United States, over something where we felt they were pretty fixed in their direction of travel.

Q110 **Chair:** Would you like to have seen Britain take a more robust position on this and to show more courage to point out the flaw in terms of where this was inevitably going to take Afghanistan?

**Dr Watling:** We could have had a more honest assessment beforehand about where that was likely to go.

Q111 **Chair:** Is that not what the special relationship should be about?

**Dr Watling:** It should, but the tone of that would have been to start a more mature conversation about what happens next. I do not think that that conversation would have helpfully been about criticising the US for what they were doing in terms of leaving, because, as I say, I do not think we were going to change their position on that.

Q112 **Mr Jones:** We know that, over the years, wild optimism has been an issue in Afghan policy. At the weekend, I was listening to a former Afghan Finance Minister, who was very clear about the ghost soldiers and the fact that the numbers in the Afghan security forces, for example, were not what they were. What do you think our and the US's assessment was, realistically, of what the Afghan forces could have done once we had withdrawn? It was quite clear, listening to that interview, that he knew—surely, we should have known as well—that the numbers were overblown, that there was corruption and that we should have taken a more realistic assessment. On the optimistic idea that they could withhold a Taliban attack, what is the issue around that?

**Dr Watling:** In November of 2020, my colleague Nick Reynolds and I published a report looking at partner force capacity-building, but it included an assessment of the Afghan military and training to them. That



was based on interviews that we had conducted between the autumn of 2019 and spring of 2020. We had not travelled to Afghanistan in that period. Our methodology was to interview large numbers of US, UK and other nationals who had been out in Afghanistan, training on the previous rotation.

The reason I highlight that is that, if you go back and read that paper—and I am happy to summarise the findings—we set out in quite a lot of detail that it was a hollow force that was incapable of sustaining itself and would collapse in fairly short order then. We did not have any information that was available to us that was not available to the Ministry of Defence and others, because the vast majority of our sources were serving officers.

The strange thing that I observed was that, whenever I spoke to anyone who was lieutenant colonel and below over the past year, their assessment on Afghanistan was that the lights were flashing red. The moment I spoke to somebody who was two-star and above, things became quite rose-tinted. There is an interesting question as to why that transition occurred. Was it that accurate assessments were not being pushed upwards? If so, why? Was that because there was a view of what would be accepted and what would be sent back? Was it because senior officers were not willing to admit where thing had got to, were not comfortable or were drawing on their own assessments and ignoring their own intelligence?

Certainly, the conversation within the US and UK intelligence community—not drawing on anything that was classified but just conversations with people back in January and February of this year—the entire discussion, as I remember it, was around whether the Afghan Government would last as long as two months or maybe longer. The longer assessments were those that thought, as has already been mentioned, that the Taliban might start their offensive in September and that it might, therefore, not conclude before the end of the typical fighting season, which would buy some time.

Q113 **Stuart Anderson:** Could I nip in on that point and something you said there? You said that you could see a collapse in fairly short order. Did you define a timeline? Short order on a 20-year campaign can be one year or one month. It is easy to say “short order”. What did your short order mean or define?

**Dr Watling:** We did not define a specific timeline. The reason for that is that our assessment came down, essentially, to where decided to hold out and where the Taliban would have to mass enough capability to overwhelm it. The more places that did, the longer it would take, but the outcome of those battles in succession, in sequence or concurrently, was not particularly in doubt. The reason we did not expect anywhere to particularly hold out was that it was evident that the Afghan military was unable to sustain itself. So long as they are not able to provide food, pay,



ammunition and spare parts for their equipment, they would only ever be able to hold out in limited areas for a short period of time.

Q114 **Mr Jones:** If you knew that—I am not doubting what you say in terms of the response you got from the MoD—it is quite clear that Ministers would have had access to the same findings, even if they had read your paper, for example.

**Brigadier Barry:** I wonder if I could help here. At the same time that Jack and Nick were producing that excellent report, I was publishing a military history of Iraq and Afghanistan. It gave me no pleasure, in late autumn last year, to make an assessment of this. I will just read from what I said, because it is quite illuminating: “From a position of weakness, the US negotiated a ceasefire deal with the Taliban, with no guarantees that the Taliban would stick to their side ... nor that the elected Kabul Government’s interests would be protected”.

I went on to say, “As a result, the 2001 defeat of the Taliban has been almost completely reversed by the insurgents. At this moment no one has ‘won’ the war in Afghanistan but an emboldened Taliban could well overwhelm the current Afghan Government and its forces, imposing a victor’s peace that would give it the ability to reverse much of the last two decades of socio-political development”.

What was this based on? I did not talk to any intelligence officials but I drew extensively on two open sources. One is the excellent Afghanistan Analysts Network, a network of Afghan experts and a mixture of Afghans and Europeans who produce extremely useful commentary.

The second one was the report of the US Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction—SIGAR—John Sopko. The real indicator on SIGAR was that, over the previous few years, many of his indicators were pointing in the wrong direction and were increasingly flashing red, as Jack says. Secondly, an increasing proportion of the data that he would draw on from the Pentagon was classified and he was not able to draw on it. If that is not an indicator of things going downhill, I do not know what is.

What is not clear from what General Carter and Mr Wallace said about intelligence is the extent to which they were using open sources in the way that my work and Jack’s work was able to do.

Q115 **Mr Jones:** What is evident is that what you were both saying must have had access to—I have to be careful what I say because I have seen the intelligence on Afghanistan as a member of the ISC. I am not going to comment on that at all.

Can I turn to the subject of air cover? On 8 July, the Prime Minister gave a statement to the House. I raised the issue around the withdrawal of air cover. It was self-evident to me that, if you withdrew your air cover, the vulnerability of the Afghan forces was going to be very much increased. We got the usual nonsense and generalisations that you get from this Prime Minister, but what assessment have you seen, Dr Watling, not just in terms of the issue that you have raised around the hollowing out of the



forces, but on the effects that withdrawing air cover would have, not just in terms of logistics but, more importantly, in terms of strike, for Afghanistan to survive?

**Dr Watling:** We have to contextualise what happened, not in terms of a short, decisive campaign season by the Taliban but, instead, three years of grinding attrition against the Afghan security forces, for much of which they had air cover and were still taking up to 40 casualties a day on average. They were increasingly having elements of their own forces defect and often take equipment with them. Because they lost the ability to manoeuvre in the countryside, what we were observing was that they were being isolated in particular forward bases and outposts, which the Taliban could then get close to and start sniping people, sometimes overwhelming and clearing out bases but, in those instances, essentially, concentrating because they had freedom of movement.

Because the Afghan army had only about 10,000 personnel that it could pick up and move anywhere—the rest were pretty much fixed in isolated areas—it was unable to respond to this. The Taliban increasingly took over the countryside and then infiltrated the towns and started threatening families and assassinating a lot of key individuals like pilots or signallers—people who were able to set up radios and so forth—who enabled air support to continue.

The eventual withdrawal of maintenance for aircraft was potentially the straw that broke the camel's back, as it were, but it was not, in and of itself, a turning point. It was simply the conclusion of a long, drawn-out process of attrition that meant that they were not effective.

Just on a basic point, if you have a very limited number of your personnel who are literate, it is very difficult to maintain radios and to set up radio networks. If you cannot set up radio networks dynamically, you are not going to be able to maintain links to said aircraft and to co-ordinate airstrikes. At the point where the advisers, green berets and other special forces that Brigadier Ben has already mentioned withdrew, most of the signals capability collapsed. At that point, if you were refuelling the planes, it would not have made a huge amount of difference, because they could not have been talked on to target. There are wider structural reasons than just that.

Q116 **Chair:** I want to move on to the coalition troops and the evacuation. Before I do that, I would just like a very short answer on the division between the lieutenant colonels and below and the brigadiers and above, who, I can concur, were giving me, and, I am sure, others, the message that perhaps we wanted to hear rather than the reality check that things were not going the right way. Is this on a par with the Pentagon papers in 1971, where we were being misled as to the glidepath on how badly things were going in the country?

**Brigadier Barry:** I do not think it is on a par with that, but it is on a par with a persistent problem, in the Pentagon, the MoD and Whitehall, in the



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Iraq war of optimism bias—thinking that things were better than they were. There is a very good section in the Iraq inquiry about that. It is overoptimism and being conditioned to be overoptimistic about this.

It may also be that the extensive personal contacts between many senior officers and many senior Afghan officers may have reinforced that optimism bias. I also wonder about the extent to which the Ghani Government in Kabul and such military advisers as President Ghani had were in touch with the ground truth.

**Q117 Mr Francois:** Doctor, you talked about optimism bias, as did the Brigadier. We often see that in many facets of what the MoD does. Would it be fair to say that the optimism bias got more biased the further up the chain of command you went?

**Dr Watling:** I do not know. I did not do a substantive survey of all general officers, but I would highlight a particular incident. I was having a conversation with a senior officer in the army, who initially started to tell me why things were not looking good, and then paused and, essentially, choked up. They then spent about 15 minutes trying to explain why it was probably going to be okay.

There is another aspect to this, which is that, when you hit a certain rank and were probably in a position of responsibility in the years that really set the trajectory of events, there are a lot of people in those positions who are coming to terms with the consequences of their own decisions and past and background, and struggling with it. They were really worried about what was going to happen to friends and whether they could maintain the morale of Afghan allies that they were actively talking to at the time.

It is not necessarily just optimism bias. There is also an element of processing and not necessarily looking at those questions in the most rational way.

**Q118 Mr Francois:** You said that, at two-star and above, if I heard you right, you tended to get a rosier picture than the ground truth, which is a phrase that the military have. The ground truth, presumably, was often grimmer and, once you got above two-star, it was a slightly more rose-tinted picture. Is that a fair characterisation?

**Dr Watling:** That is a fair characterisation.

**Chair:** There is a PhD thesis to be written on the linear proportionality between the increase in rank and optimism bias. We will leave that for somebody to do. Let us turn now to the more recent events and the withdrawal.

**Q119 Richard Drax:** Brigadier and Doctor, good afternoon to you. We have heard already why things went wrong: ghost soldiers, one exit point, corruption, the lack of air cover mentioned by my colleague, the lack of equipment and the unilateral pull-out. We know all this. Brigadier, if I



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could ask you first, being a former military man, what could have been done better by the coalition troops to get everybody out between 2020 and, eventually, 2021?

**Brigadier Barry:** It is hard to see specifics. A decision is made to concentrate on Hamid Karzai airport and not to use Bagram, and also to co-operate effectively on the local security at the airport with the Taliban forces that had taken over Kabul. If I had been in the position of the British brigadier or the US commanding general, I would have been drawn towards very similar decisions.

It was a very difficult operational scenario, where you had a lot of British and US troops and airmen, and some NATO presence, doing the very best that they could. Quite clearly, there were problems in identifying all the people who were eligible to be evacuated, not only by Britain but also by the US, and a less-than-perfect outcome was achieved. When it came to the tactical execution on the ground, given the time and the resources, the US, British and NATO contingents that took part did pretty well.

Q120 **Richard Drax:** Everyone knew that we were going to leave sometime before the last-minute rush. It did seem to everyone watching that the military were doing a fantastic job, but it all seemed to have been rushed at the end. As a former military man, I am asking you whether, with hindsight—and hindsight is a wonderful thing to have—that could have been better organised, rather than the last-minute panic that was caused?

**Brigadier Barry:** To be fair to the US and UK authorities that were doing this, including people in the embassy and their foreign offices, they had been planning on the assumption that they had a whole year in front of them where things were not going to collapse. In the case of the UK, whether the Foreign Office mobilised itself quickly enough is a question to put to them. From my point of view, having studied evacuations and been on evacuation exercises, they are very difficult tasks, military aspects of which were executed pretty well.

**Dr Watling:** I would agree that the military operation—Operation Pitting—was conducted quite effectively. There are questions around whether we could have been quietly withdrawing some of the key individuals who we wanted to get out earlier than that, just on the basis that we had access to them and could find them.

There is another element that struck me. You had the military doing its own planning and preparing, and the Foreign Office having its own conversation, but they had not really linked up their processes. For example, the Foreign Office, as I understand it, had not delegated authorities to their personnel on the ground to make judgments as to whether or not people were entitled persons, the result being that everything had to be passed back to the Foreign Office. That is where you got about a four-hour delay on people being reached at the Baron Hotel or at one of the gates, and then letting them through.



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That communications architecture was something that could have been worked out with the military and the Foreign Office more effectively, if they trained for this sort of thing together. The mood music in Whitehall is integration. There are some interesting examples of where integration was not all that it might have been in Operation Pitting. I am not saying that to criticise the Foreign Office. It is more a case of making sure that the Departments plan in a joined-up way, so that, when you do get on the ground, there is less friction.

**Q121 Richard Drax:** I do not want to dwell on this for too much longer, because there are other questions to come, but that is the point I am trying to make and you are hinting at. There was a lack of planning. If we knew that we were going to go, you would have thought that senior officers in the Foreign Office and the MoD would have sat down and had a desktop plan: "This is how we are going to get out over these next few weeks". We knew that the Foreign Office and the MoD clashed out there, and the whole thing was a shambles until it was resolved. It just seems to me that, with hindsight, a good plan was lacking.

**Dr Watling:** The challenge with that is that we did not determine the place or the timing, and we could not have, because we could not have done an evacuation without the Americans. Where the Americans decided to do it determined where we had to do it. Therefore, you could generate the plans—I went to 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team when they were doing some of the planning; it was fairly advanced—but you hit that point where you ran into a lot of unknowns, which the UK could not control. At that point, your planning had to stop. There was also that limitation.

**Q122 Stuart Anderson:** I want to take NATO as an organisation. How big a blow was the collapse of the Afghan Government? Will it have a lasting impact on NATO? Brigadier, could you answer this question for me, please.

**Brigadier Barry:** We should be quite clear that the Taliban won and that the US, UK and NATO were defeated. There seems to be a certain amount of denial of this, and this is not good for NATO. It is not entirely the Afghan Government's or the Afghan armed forces' fault. Yes, they did collapse, but there are enduring reasons why NATO was not as effective in building them up as it could have been over the previous two decades. It was slightly unfair for the NATO secretary general to apportion so much blame to the Afghan Government and Afghan forces.

It shows how militarily dependent NATO is on US capabilities, and also a lack of political will amongst NATO nations. A very similar theme was picked up by Dr von der Leyen, who gave her state-of-the-nation address to the EU in the summer, where she said that Europe has a lot of military capability but often lacks the political will to use it. Internally within NATO, there must be questions about the US national interest overriding its interests in supporting NATO, and NATO's own political will to use force, as well as its lack of key enabling capabilities like counter-rocket



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capabilities and some of the ISR and combat search and rescue capabilities that the US deploy and that were so important for the operation.

There are a lot of uncomfortable issues for NATO and, if it is to earn its pay, it should be doing a frank and searching lessons-learned exercise on its role in Afghanistan from start to finish.

Q123 **Stuart Anderson:** Before I go to Dr Jack, I want to come in on a point you made there. You said that the Taliban won—we did not win; the Taliban won. That is in direct conflict with the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Defence Secretary, who both said that we did not lose on the battlefield, although that insinuates that we lost politically. Can you separate the two and do you stand by what you said when you said that we did not win? How do you break that down? You will have heard what CDS said and I would love to get your view on that.

**Brigadier Barry:** I have read their testimony and I respect both men greatly, but it was a Taliban military victory and there is a functioning Taliban Government in Afghanistan. If our allies on the ground—both the military and the Government—were defeated, most military historians would agree that that meets the criteria for a military victory. A military victory for one side is a defeat for the other.

It is not just a military defeat; it is also a political defeat, and we should not sugar-coat this. It is also a wider defeat for the values of the West, because, for 20 years, we tried to persuade a lot of influential Afghans to adopt our values: democracy, emancipation and education for women, and the rule of law. There were many Afghans who benefited from it, but that benefit has been stamped in to the dust. If this is not a defeat for our values, I do not know what is.

Q124 **Stuart Anderson:** Thank you, Brigadier; you have expanded very clearly. The Brigadier has explained, as you just heard, in direct conflict to what we heard in our evidence session last week with CDS. Dr Jack, can you tell us what your view is on that question?

**Dr Watling:** Warfare is the use of force to try to impose one's will on an opponent. If we defined what our objectives were throughout the conflict—and we did at various stages—none of those objectives were achieved. If the Taliban stated what their objective was, which was to regain power and outlast us, they did achieve what they set out to achieve. There is no amount of casuistry that can get you out of concluding that, by definition, that is a defeat. If you are not able to acknowledge defeat, it will be very difficult for you to acknowledge that there is a problem and that you might need to learn from it. I strongly disagree with CDS's assessment.

One thing I would add on your earlier question is that I am not sure that this is necessarily a huge credibility issue for NATO. The way it has been perceived, certainly in Russia, is that, publicly, they have made lots of



jibes about it. Privately, first, it causes some headaches for them, and, secondly, the recognition that we are prepared to accept a certain amount of pain in order to go after things that we think are more important, especially given that, from the US's point of view, they and China are more important, is something that, in some ways, bolsters NATO's credibility against its core task. I do not necessarily think that it is a strategic setback in terms of the credibility of the organisation in the way that some people have argued.

**Chair:** There is a problem in acknowledging that there is a problem, because that is why it is this Committee that is doing an inquiry and not the Government.

Q125 **Mr Francois:** Brigadier, I admire Ben Wallace as the Defence Secretary, but there was a certain element of sophistry in his testimony and that of CDS on the question of defeat. We have just been talking about optimism bias. Would you agree that trying to pretend that we were not defeated in Afghanistan by the Taliban is optimism bias on speed?

**Brigadier Barry:** I could not put it better. This has practical implications for current defence policy. In the Integrated Review and the Defence Command Paper, there is, rightly, great emphasis on partnering with our allies and partners, advising and assisting, and doing so on operations. There was an awful lot of that done by the US and UK in Afghanistan, and it has failed. That, in itself, ought to trigger, in my view, an exercise, perhaps rather like the new chapter to the strategic defence review. Strategic circumstances having greatly changed, what does this mean for UK defence policy and capability?

Q126 **Mr Francois:** Brigadier, there is no paragraph in the Integrated Review entitled "What to do when your allies let you down", is there?

**Brigadier Barry:** No, and that is one of the uncomfortable conversations that one would hope is happening within the Ministry of Defence and within NATO. If we turn the clock back 20 years, 9/11 was a strategic defeat. Al-Qaeda defeated the ability of the FBI and CIA to pre-empt the attack. Secretary of State Geoff Hoon then commissioned a new chapter of the 1998 defence review, because of changed circumstances. At the very least, such an exercise is warranted not just for the Ministry of Defence but the security ministries and the National Security Council, to look at the impact of the changed strategic circumstances, including a military and political defeat in Afghanistan.

**Chair:** It falls on this Committee more than anybody else to try to help defeat optimism bias, and that is exactly what we are trying to do here. Let us move on to the Afghan defence forces and the indigenous capabilities.

Q127 **Derek Twigg:** Following on from some of the points Kevan Jones made, you have made clear that it was no surprise that the Afghan defence and security forces collapsed and performed so badly. I should put on record that many thousands of the defence and security forces have fought



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bravely and died over the years. We hear a lot of criticism but a lot of them were very brave people. If you were not surprised, the question is whether it could have been avoided.

**Brigadier Barry:** It could have been avoided by continuing the US strategy between 2014 and 2018, which was limited boots on the ground, in terms of advisers and air controllers, and support of airpower. There would have been a trickle of US casualties, but it could have held the Taliban at bay for much longer. Of course, what the political effect, both in Afghanistan and the US, would have been, it is difficult to speculate, but I have to go back to my earlier point. This was the UK strategy after 2014, and the UK chose not to participate in it but to make very limited contributions in Kabul.

Q128 **Derek Twigg:** I just want to be a bit clearer on the question. Basically, you are saying that, without the mentoring, the airpower and the support of US or UK boots on the ground, the Afghan defence and security forces were never able to stand on their own two feet.

**Brigadier Barry:** I have studied the war between 2014 and 2018 in quite some detail. The Taliban made major efforts to capture and hold provincial capitals, particularly Kunduz and Lashkar Gah. They were seen off by the Afghan security forces, particularly the Afghan commandos and, to a certain extent, the Afghan air force, but absolutely essential were the US special forces, army and marine corps advisers on the ground, calling in US airpower, and particularly surveillance aircraft and strikes.

Q129 **Derek Twigg:** The answer is that, no, they could not have stood on their own two feet.

**Brigadier Barry:** The evidence is that, on their own, they were going to struggle. If the Taliban had posed less of a threat in the spring and summer, there is a chance that the Afghan security forces would have overcome it. The Taliban had a good plan. They had a campaign plan and knew what they were doing. They were integrating ground attacks with negotiation with the enemy and with pretty expert, modern propaganda. They also had good leadership and command and control. In many of those respects, the leadership and command and control coming from Kabul were inferior.

Q130 **Derek Twigg:** A report done by this Committee in 2014 found something like a 34.4% attrition rate among the armed forces. Dr Jack, you were trying to come in there.

**Dr Watling:** One of the things that I would highlight is that I do not think that the Afghan security forces could have prevailed, because they were structured to fail in terms of how we had established them. I would say that they were too large and, being too large, they depended upon command-and-control systems that the Afghans could not sustain or maintain. They were completely dependent upon, essentially, special



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forces officers and trainers in their headquarters, providing the networks and infrastructure for them to be able to communicate and keep records.

That does not mean that you could not have established a partner force that was effective. In Iraq, I have seen forces established at fairly short notice that have proved fairly robust and effective. What they tend to have is the ability to maintain their own equipment and to move.

What we saw was a force that was expanded very rapidly and, therefore, necessitated a huge amount of bureaucracy to understand where its own people were, what training they had received and what they had been given as equipment.

Just to come back to the point about literacy, if you have very few of those personnel who are literate, you do not necessarily know what is in your warehouse or who you need to call in order to get those spare parts that are not in your warehouse to maintain your equipment.

Putting aside people selling equipment and corruption, there were massive incentives for anyone, at any level of the Afghan military, to stockpile and hoard equipment that they were given, rather than to pass it on to their subordinate units.

There were two corps-level operations that were supposed to happen a couple of years ago, in which the planning was done at corps level, and there were going to be orders distributed to divisions and brigades. When they sent out the orders, none of the divisions and brigades had any equipment to be able to do anything that they had been tasked to do—none of it was working—and so the plan was never implemented.

That is why, other than the Afghan commandos—around 10,000 troops—Kabul did not have people who it could pick up, move around and do things with. It had forces that were stationed in bases and patrolling to a limited extent, many of whom had been taken from elsewhere in the country and put there, and so they did not have very good situational awareness or local connections.

We tried to set up a blueprint of a NATO military, thinking a NATO military is the best way to do things, rather than the way to do things that we have come up with to solve the problems that NATO addresses, i.e. conventional warfighting in Europe.

Q131 **Derek Twigg:** So there was a complete lack of understanding of local conditions.

**Dr Watling:** Right. If you look at successful partner force capacity-building—and there are examples of it—you go in and look at the social structure of the force that you are working with and what the internal capacity of the command and control is, and you build from that. You do not come in and say, “We are now going to have corps, divisions and brigades because that is what we do”.



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Q132 **Derek Twigg:** As we and our allies were responsible for training, we got it—

**Dr Watling:** We got it very badly wrong, but that goes back to decisions that were made in 2008. Could it have been reversed after that point? Maybe in 2014, but, after that, you were on a pretty fixed trajectory of built-in dependence.

Q133 **Chair:** They did not start building an indigenous force until 2008-09, which is way too late as well, even though the design itself was wrong. Surely, an organisation as mature as NATO should have the ability to recognise what sort of indigenous armed force is required.

**Dr Watling:** No, not really. NATO has standardisation agreements, which it determines as the blueprint. It then tries to suggest that other people follow that blueprint. It did the same thing to Ukraine, and then Ukraine ended up in a proper shooting war and realised that that blueprint really did not work for them, and deviated from it rather substantially.

Q134 **Chair:** Are you saying that NATO should not develop the expertise to understand what is going on on the ground, if you are in the business of designing an indigenous security capability?

**Dr Watling:** No. NATO should have that capability but that is not how NATO approaches capacity-building. NATO tries to export its own structure.

Q135 **Chair:** Is that a lesson to be learned for NATO? It could very well be that we may have to do this somewhere else in another part of the world.

**Dr Watling:** Yes, absolutely.

**Brigadier Barry:** There is a difference between capacity-building in peacetime, which NATO had been doing a quite a bit of—for example, through the Partnership for Peace programme, and building capacity under fire. We should be quite clear about Afghanistan. It was only when the US really stepped forward and took a lead on training of the Afghan army and air force that the resources and energy were really applied. There was a limit to what nations could do in their national sectors. This is another area where the UK, the US and NATO need to take a hard look at the lessons.

There was also an over-sophistication, in many cases, of the approach. A good example is the Afghan air force, which seemed to work perfectly well with Mi-17 Hip helicopters, but, at US insistence, those were replaced by much more expensive and complicated Black Hawk helicopters, which required more logistics support and a much higher training and contractor burden than the Mi-17 Hips. It is a classic example of overcomplication.

Q136 **Chair:** We are going to move on now to the evacuation itself from Kabul airport—an incredible, extraordinary international effort. On reflection, Dr Jack, what are the lessons to be learned from a British perspective? What



gaps in capabilities has that exposed on the UK side?

**Dr Watling:** The first thing to flag is that, yes, it did go very well. However, it could also have gone rather catastrophically badly and would have, essentially, taken the Taliban to determine that they did not want us there anymore for that to have changed. We had very limited capacity to intercept indirect fire. The UK had very little mass at readiness that it could get onto the ground. Initially, we were talking about one company as the forward element that we could get in. That expanded to around three battle groups.

There was not a huge amount more that was at readiness that could have been pushed out there. When we hear the Chief of the General Staff say that you do not need mass in modern operations, it highlights that, when you are dealing with urban environments, where there are lots of civilians, and when you are trying to establish a cordon, people matter. The numbers that you can get in matter a lot. The best part of a division, in terms of the infantry component, was deployed across NATO, and they were barely able to sustain a perimeter, with the Taliban co-operating, around that international airport. If the Taliban had taken a different view to our presence, it would have become very hairy very quickly.

Q137 **John Spellar:** What is your definition of “well”? You said that it went well.

**Dr Watling:** We got out significantly more people than we anticipated being able to get out. In the UK’s case, we managed it without casualties, although, tragically, a number of our US colleagues were killed.

Q138 **John Spellar:** But we left large numbers behind. Was that constrained by our ability to get in or the number of seats on planes going out?

**Dr Watling:** It was constrained by the capacity for those individuals to get into the airport and for us to process them.

**Brigadier Barry:** I wonder if I could give a slightly different perspective. You could do a thought experiment about, “What if the UK had tried to do this on its own?” In August, in Kabul, it was very dependent on US airpower: airborne ISR, like drones, and armed aircraft, both drones and manned. Whether the UK could have rapidly projected that level of airpower to do such an evacuation on its own, I do not know.

In addition, the UK is reducing its amount of strategic airlift. The Government have decided to take a calculated risk, prioritising efficiency over effectiveness, by retiring the 14 C-130s. Their argument is that, as the capability of the A400M improves, that gap will be bridged, but that is a peacetime efficiency argument. If you reduce your numbers of aircraft, your flexibility to do rapid reaction operations using strategic lift is going to reduce. In fact, there is an ironic contradiction in the Integrated Review and Defence Command Paper: it sees UK forces doing more further away and, in terms of accompanying partners on operations, going into more risk, but, at the same time, there is a significant down



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arrow on fixed and rotary-wing airlift. It seems to me that that internal contradiction has been demonstrated yet again by the evacuation.

Q139 **Mr Francois:** Brigadier, on retiring the Hercules, are there not three fundamental problems? First, the special forces guys who you would have to fly into harm's way prefer the Hercules to the A400M, for a whole variety of reasons; secondly, when you turn the key in the Herky Birds, you start, and the A400M has an appalling reliability record; thirdly, you still have to pay a small fortune to take all the very special kit that we cannot talk about off the J and put it onto the A400M, and then pay through the nose to integrate it. Other than that, it is a good idea, is it not?

**Chair:** Three yeses will work.

**Brigadier Barry:** I agree with Mr Francois.

**Chair:** Good. That is what we thought you might say anyway. Emma, take us forward on what next.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** My apologies for not being here at the start. The Chair has told me that we have five minutes left in this session.

**Chair:** As well as a potential vote pending, unfortunately.

Q140 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** In those five minutes, what are your predictions for the future of Afghanistan? Is it anticipated that it will once again become a base for global terrorism?

**Dr Watling:** The first thing is that there are 3 million people who are facing the likelihood of famine and starvation. There are then a further 14 million who have an acute food shortage. That is a crisis that will hit within the next six to eight months, and we are already on the cusp of it, so the first thing is a humanitarian catastrophe.

On the second, I would say that there are three different branches. The first is one in which the Taliban say, essentially, live and let live in a lot of the more rural parts of the country, where they have less influence, but retain control of the urban centres—in particular, Kabul—so long as those people do not challenge their right to govern. If that is the case, they will be fairly stable and the capacity to get aid into the country will improve. However, terrorist organisations do not like unstable states. They like weak states that are stable, and so that is the circumstance in which there is the most likelihood of a renewed terrorist threat from Afghanistan.

On the other two, first, there is an opposition to the Taliban that leads to very violent repression—not just a few people being bumped off in the night but genuine, systematic repression. What emerges after that would probably be a rather more extreme Taliban organisation.

The third is that you start seeing the pressures from the humanitarian crisis leading to civil conflict, so it is not repression of civilians but a genuine outbreak of fighting.



Putting aside the humanitarian implications of that, I would say that I disagree with General Carter's assessment that the moderates in the Taliban are going to prevail. Usually when political organisations are under pressure, their biggest concern is to prevent internal fracturing; you do that by going to the more radical end of your own party, and so I would suggest that the much more likely trajectory is that hardliners in the Taliban come forward and set out their own objectives, not least because a lot of Taliban have been killed and have suffered a lot over the last decade or two, and they will now feel that they have sacrificed a lot for a cause and will want to see that the values that they have been fighting for are being upheld. Some of the things that are particular points of friction for us, such as female education, will, I suspect, be precisely those areas that they are least likely to concede on.

**Brigadier Barry:** There are two questions for the Taliban. The first is whether they will live up to the obligations of the Doha agreement to crack down on international terrorism. The US will be watching extremely carefully for this. There is another question, which is an important known unknown: are they a revolutionary regime that is prepared to inflict pain on their people? Are they, like Lenin and Stalin's Russia or Mao's China, prepared to impose their doctrine, regardless of the suffering of the Afghan people? I do not think that there is enough understanding of that at the moment.

Q141 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I just wanted to quickly come back on that. For a lot of people who are watching this or who have looked at what has happened in Afghanistan, in the picture that you have just painted there, Dr Watling, none of it looks good for the future of Afghanistan. What is the answer? Our Foreign Secretary said he would not rule out fresh military intervention. Is that really the answer? If not, what is?

**Dr Watling:** The first question is whether we are prepared to tolerate, to some extent, a terrorist presence in Afghanistan in exchange for stability and, therefore, an improvement in the humanitarian situation. There is a prioritisation of our own interests that we need to be quite clear about there, because there is a divergence.

There is also a question as to how regional actors step in. Pakistan has a very strong relationship with the Taliban. To what extent will they exercise a level of control?

The third thing I would say, which is not necessarily a good thing but calibrates our expectations, is that we will not see massacres in the streets in terms of people who are protesting against the Taliban being shot. The way that will play out is that the organisers of those protests will be visited in the night afterwards and, very quickly, the news will get around and people will then encourage their family members not to protest, because the consequences are not worth it.

You will see quite a clear drawing of where the lines are, and that will be socially enforced rather than enforced through explicit violence.



**Chair:** We will definitely explore these issues a bit further with the next panel.

Q142 **Sarah Atherton:** Just to sum up, do you think there should be an independent whole-of-Government inquiry into the withdrawal of personnel from Afghanistan?

**Brigadier Barry:** I am pretty clear that, regardless of this, the MoD needs to do a similar exercise to the SDR new chapter it did after the 2001 attacks. The British lost almost three times as many people in Afghanistan as they did in Iraq, and the scale of the British, US and NATO defeat in Afghanistan is even greater than the scale of their failures in Iraq. That would argue for an inquiry, but one conducted much more briskly than the Chilcot inquiry. I fear that, with the prospects of a COVID inquiry, the UK body politic may be suffering from a degree of inquiry fatigue, but an inquiry is even more justified than it was into Iraq.

**Dr Watling:** There is a very considerable risk that, if an inquiry is started, it will be seen as an adversarial attempt to establish blame and responsibility, people will try to protect reputations and a huge amount of energy and effort will be sucked into providing very careful statements to it that do not necessarily shed a huge amount of light. The critical thing is to make sure that there is internal reflection. The indications I have had are that that is starting and that we are able to have that public conversation. If it has to be forced through an inquiry, I would say that that is a suboptimal method that I hope does not prove necessary, but, if it is not happening, that would be an option that would need to be explored.

Q143 **Chair:** Without even putting our outcomes together, we have already proved why asking questions is so important and why there are absolutely lessons to be learned. Thank you very much indeed, Dr Jack Watling and Brigadier Ben Barry, for your contributions today, which are much appreciated.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Sara de Jong, Peter Gordon-Finlayson, Professor Brad Blitz and Dr Neelam Raina.

Q144 **Chair:** Let us continue with our second panel. I am delighted to invite members of the Sulha Alliance and the Afghan Solidarity Coalition to continue our discussion. We are now going to be looking a little bit more into what is going on with the Afghan people. Thank you very much indeed. Could I invite one from each of the organisations that are here in front of us just to say a couple of words about what your organisation does and what your involvement is in Afghanistan?

**Dr Raina:** We are not an organisation. We are a loose coalition of academics, researchers, activists, women's human rights organisations



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and LGBTQI activists. We have come together as a loose coalition to help those who nobody else has helped. That is who we are.

Q145 **Chair:** That is the Afghan Solidary Coalition. What about the Sulha Alliance, please?

**Dr de Jong:** We are an organisation that is advocating for the rights and protection of Afghans who worked for the British armed forces, either as interpreters or as other locally employed civilians in Afghanistan. We also started out as a couple of individuals who were advocates, most of whom were veterans and have served in Afghanistan, including my colleague here, Peter, whereas I am an academic at the University of York and a senior lecturer in politics who was studying this process. Together, we realised that we needed to combine forces and set up this organisation, which has been operational for a few years now.

**Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. You listened to the first panel session, where we really were looking at the macro. We are going to look at the micro now and start off with the evacuation and the support for Afghans being brought back to the UK.

Q146 **Richard Drax:** Welcome. It is very nice to see you all. The first question can be for Peter and Sara. The numbers eligible for resettlement under the ex gratia and ARAP schemes increased incrementally from 2020 as the eligibility criteria were expanded. Did these changes keep pace with the increased risk faced by vulnerable individuals?

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** I would say that they have never been commensurate with the level of risk being faced. If we see the extraction for some individuals as an increase in risk, the interpreters and former LECs have been at the same level of risk, arguably, for decades. They have been persecuted and killed, in many cases, for decades. Arguably, we are still not at the level where we, in the Sulha Alliance, would like to see these people being looked after enough, so my answer, simply, would be no.

**Dr de Jong:** It is important to say that, as some of you probably know, in 2017, so exactly four years ago, I was sitting here alongside Tom Tugendhat to discuss with the Defence Select Committee the protection of locally employed civilians. At the time, there were two different schemes alongside one another. The ex gratia scheme was one of them and still exists, and the other was the intimidation scheme.

The Defence Select Committee wrote an excellent report, published in May 2018, which slammed the intimidation scheme. It was a scheme for those people who did not fall under the ex gratia scheme but who were still facing serious threats. There were hundreds and hundreds of applications to the scheme, but none of those who applied were relocated. Julian Lewis, in his write-up of that report, called the scheme useless and was very concerned that the scheme was conducting relocations to the UK only in extremis. He urged the Government at the time to move to a more needs-based approach to resettlement.



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The Home Office country guidance reports on Afghanistan have long recognised that people who are associated with western troops have a particular risk profile. The European Asylum Support Office has recognised that same risk profile, as has the UNHCR. The reason why we, as the Sulha Alliance, came together was that, for a number of years, we had individuals reaching out to us who did not fall under the ex gratia scheme but who were still facing threats to their lives, some of whom had already left Afghanistan and were stuck in third countries, and some of whom were still in Afghanistan.

Of course, we need to credit Ben Wallace with the fact that, finally, he was the first Minister who took up your recommendation to design the new Afghan relocations and assistance policy. Unfortunately, it was announced in December 2020 but only launched in April 2021. It was literally only launched at that point, so people who had been applying under the ex gratia scheme but who would not meet those very stringent criteria would, on 31 March, simply be told, "Go and check our website again tomorrow, because then we might have more information for you". They would not hold those applications on record and reach out to those people proactively.

There were people who had long been in the pipeline and applied for the intimidation scheme, whose claims of intimidation had somehow been researched but, as you might know from the previous report, those people conducting the research into whether these people were under threat were not allowed to leave Kabul airport themselves, because it was too risky for them.

Q147 **Richard Drax:** I suspect that, based on your answer, I can predict the response to the next question, which, if I may, I will aim at both organisations, and perhaps one from each could answer, unless, of course, more want to. Are the resettlement criteria for those individuals remaining in Afghanistan sufficiently clear and comprehensive?

**Professor Blitz:** I would say absolutely not. The scheme is not only not operational, but the numbers of people at risk have been, quite honestly, underestimated by the British Government, as we heard in the previous session. There are far more people who are at risk and who would benefit from a relocation or resettlement scheme than are being accounted for by the British Government.

Q148 **Richard Drax:** Can you put a number on that? Do you have any idea of numbers? What are we talking about—hundreds, thousands?

**Dr Raina:** Over the last six or eight weeks, we have had over 1,500 people on our list, and we are academics. We do not work as an alliance on the ground. People have found us and reached out to us. These are individuals who are reaching out again and again. Our list has grown by 20 to 30 people every day since 15 August. People have attached photographs of what has happened to them and their children, and they are reaching out to us, begging and pleading to be helped. We alone know of 1,500 people.



**Professor Blitz:** I really feel it is absolutely critical to put on record that the statement that was published by Ben Wallace yesterday, in which he said that there are 200 ARAP-eligible people remaining in Afghanistan, does not tally with the data that we have, nor the information coming out of Afghanistan that has been shared with our partners. This is a gross underestimate of people who are at extreme risk.

Q149 **Chair:** Can you put a more refined number on that, if you are saying that it is not 200?

**Professor Blitz:** You have just heard that we have collected names of about 1,500 people, and we are just a collection of academics, principally working at Middlesex University, UCL and the LSE.

Q150 **Richard Drax:** Before we got out as many as we could, the fear was that those left behind would be mistreated, disappear or, worse, be shot. What evidence do you have that that is happening, or is it not? How safe are these people who have been left behind, or are they all in hiding?

**Dr Raina:** We have people who have been shot in queues for bread. We have women and children who have been beaten up for waiting and begging for food outside a shop that has closed. I have photographs of people who have been beaten up for accessing their own cash at an ATM in long queues. There are photographs of people receiving money from their loved ones overseas through the Western Union transfer system, who have been beaten black and blue. I have photograph upon photograph; I do not sleep anymore.

If you are asking for numbers, let us go back a few weeks ago, when Laure-Hélène gave evidence. We have spent £3.5 billion over the last 20 years on development aid in Afghanistan. All of that aid goes to some people who know some people who contract and deliver the British Government's targets and their focus for achieving the SDGs. All these people have worked for the UK Government and stand to be at risk through that association. These are not individuals. It would be me who works for you, but my brother would also be at risk, and they would come looking for his wife too.

**Professor Blitz:** In addition, something that is extremely disturbing is not only the mistreatment of children but forced and early marriage, which is taking place right now. Children are being sold into slavery by families who are desperate to make ends meet. There was a press release from UNICEF about this just last week, but, of course, we have known about this. There is extreme gender-based violence taking place. There is violence on multiple levels and in multiple forms that is taking place right now.

Q151 **Richard Drax:** Before I hand over to colleagues who I know are dying to get in, because this is a fascinating topic, can I quickly ask, either Peter or Sara, for your contribution to my question on individuals remaining in Afghanistan?



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**Dr de Jong:** In terms of the estimate, we are speaking about the ARAP scheme as it replaced the intimidation scheme, which was primarily, initially, for people who worked for the MoD. Our colleagues will also find that some of the people who they are, rightly, advocating for do not necessarily fall under a scheme that was never designed for that particular group. I am speaking here about people who worked as locally employed civilians for the MoD.

We had about 7,000 LECs who worked for the British armed forces in Afghanistan initially. In the *Lost in Translation?* report that you published a few years ago, about 3,500 of those were interpreters, so about half. In more recent months, they have started to say that we had approximately 2,850 interpreters who worked for us. In April 2021, under the ex gratia scheme, we had brought over only about 450 people. You can imagine, of course, that that must mean that the others are still left behind.

Interestingly, when the ARAP scheme was launched, they had to do an equality assessment, in which they also had to do a planning estimate. They claimed that they expected an uptake of about 230 to a maximum of about 800, and we never understood why that planning estimate was so incredibly low, given that it did not even correspond with simply the number of interpreters. We are not even talking about other locally employed civilians, such as cultural advisers or security guards, who are also incredibly at risk.

From the moment that the scheme was introduced, we have focused on a number of different exclusions, pointing out that, unfortunately, the scheme excluded more people than it included. The first one was that people who were dismissed for disciplinary reasons were excluded from relocation by default. "Eligible for Relocation by default" was one of the categories of ARAP and, to be frank, the only one that was initially applied. As soon as you were dismissed, you were rejected from the scheme, and they would never even apply category 1, which is being at imminent risk. You simply got a rejection. We had to encourage applicants to write a comeback and say, "I want to be considered also under category 1 of imminent risk".

35% of local staff were dismissed from their role. These are numbers that Johnny Mercer released at the time. It raises very many questions about why so many local staff members were dismissed, and there is a strong suspicion that it is because, at some point, British armed forces reduced in numbers and, hence, local staff did too. When you look at exactly when those dismissals took place, you can see a very strong reduction in numbers through dismissal comes at a time that the operation becomes smaller. We have very convincing evidence that many were dismissed for very small reasons, such as returning late from leave.

Another group of people who were immediately excluded from ARAP initially were contractors. Again, we had to expose some extremely harrowing cases. You might remember that interpreters at the British



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embassy in Kabul were excluded from the ARAP scheme that they played a part in making possible, because they were contracted. Many of them had worked for the British embassy for 15 or 20 years, but because they were not directly employed by HMG, they were excluded from the ARAP scheme. To be frank, it took an email from them and sharing their stories with the press for that to change.

The final group of people excluded were those who were not working in an exposed role, but our definition of “exposed” might be different from that of the Taliban.

**Richard Drax:** I am going to stop you there because I know a lot of other people want to get in.

**Chair:** This has, understandably, prompted a number of questions from colleagues.

Q152 **Mr Jones:** It was very interesting listening to Ben Wallace yesterday being asked questions about this. He now seems to be sidestepping it and saying that it is the responsibility of the Home Office rather than the MoD. It strikes me that we have set up an incredibly complex system here between the Home Office, Foreign Office and MoD. No one seems to be grasping the nettle in terms of what is going on here.

I just want to know what your assessment is. It must be a nightmare for individuals trying to work out which scheme they are eligible for. I have a family in my constituency, for example, whose relatives got out of Afghanistan and are in Pakistan. In terms of trying to get any sense out of the Foreign Office or anyone else about how they access these schemes, frankly, it is non-existent. I accept that the Defence Secretary has been very loud and bold in some of his statements, but what it really needs is just for someone to get a grasp of this, and no one has.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** There are a couple of challenges there, in that the situation is different almost on an individual-by-individual basis. For example, if you have a wife of a former interpreter who does not have a passport or a visa, the ability for her to, first, move out of Afghanistan, which is probably the first phase, is very challenging. To get to the British High Commission in Islamabad and be able to present her credentials as a wife and, therefore, be put into the relocation scheme there is a particular route for that kind of individual.

If you take a former locally employed civilian—perhaps a cook in one of the PBs—who perhaps does have a passport, it is a very different route to, first, get out of Afghanistan and then apply to the correct scheme.

One of the challenges that has already become apparent is the interlinked nature of the multiple and myriad challenges. It is an incredible complex situation.

**Dr de Jong:** When it comes to, specifically, your question about co-ordination—I am sure my colleagues want to say something about this as



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well—there are very evident cases where there was not good co-ordination. We have people who, before Op Pitting, at around the beginning of August, received an email from the MoD that they were eligible for ARAP and would get a relocation offer, and that they had to prepare to leave within two to four weeks. These people sold their possessions and gave up their jobs, but subsequently got a rejection from the Home Office on the basis of public security reasons.

**Q153 Mr Jones:** I have been a Member of Parliament for 20 years and, frankly, in my dealings with the Home Office over the years, it is, frankly, a useless organisation. Is what is needed now for the Government to have a centrally co-ordinated response to this? On Peter's point about people who are in the border regions, the idea of people travelling to Islamabad is nonsense. They should be putting people in there. The real problem is that you have this three-legged stool in terms of the three Departments. Surely, we should have a co-ordinated approach in terms of having one team responsible for it, not only to make sure that individuals know what scheme they can apply to but to get the practicalities that you have just described.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** I would not want to comment on the solution. However, the evidence that I can offer on the problem does fit exactly with what you are saying. Given that the problem is complex and, arguably, needs to be tackled on a case-by-case basis, a team of caseworkers who are able to signpost people in the correct way would, in my view, be a viable solution.

**Q154 Mr Jones:** I will give you one contrast. One of my constituents contacted me during the crisis; they were stuck at Kabul airport. Most of us know that, frankly, the Foreign Office during those days was an absolute waste of space and time. My assistant, to be fair to her, thought laterally, because the individual was married to a US citizen, so I contacted the State Department. I contrast the response there, where that individual, within 48 hours, was out of Afghanistan, in a far more reactive and co-ordinated manner than anything we have. That is the problem. This is never going to work, is it? Do you not think that, possibly, one of the issues is that, although Ministers have made welcoming statements about accepting people from Afghanistan, there is a root cause whereby, "If we keep the numbers down, it would be better"?

**Dr Raina:** We need to go back to what Jack was talking about: co-ordination between MoD and FCDO. FCDO sent out emails after the security breach that happened. One of our colleague's email address was breached and they were sent instructions to cross safely. They were highly encouraged to carefully consider crossing via a land border to get to a third country. Some of you are ex-military. You do not cross a land border in a place like Afghanistan. If they had had a communication with MoD, anybody from MoD could have told them, "Do not send this advice in writing. These are desperate people who will take desperate action based on your advice".



Q155 **Mr Jones:** The issue here is much more fundamental. We have made ministerial statements about welcoming these people, but the ultimate aim is to keep the numbers down as low as possible, is it not?

**Professor Blitz:** I truly believe that the elephant in the room is ARAP. We have managed, with our colleagues, to get 80 people out of Afghanistan. That has been without the help of the British Government. These colleagues have not got to Britain and they do not have protection under ARAP. This has been as the result of civil society actors, private philanthropy and other means. Those colleagues who were lucky enough to get emails from the British Government were encouraged to seek refuge in Tajikistan or elsewhere, or the information simply arrived too late for them. In practice, our colleagues are not being afforded protection by the British Government.

**Chair:** We only have a few more minutes while we are on air. I want to get my other colleagues in, but I do not want to lose sight of some of the important information that you are giving me. If we do not cover the points that you want to get across, I hope that you will write to us further to this. We have some other important issues on which we absolutely want to take advantage of your knowledge.

Q156 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** I have a really quick question following on from my colleague Kevan. Do those of you who are working with people who have been left behind and are eligible have any clarity at all on who it is you need to contact to get them safely into the UK?

**Dr Raina:** In our evidence, we have listed the number of people we have contacted. We have gone all the way up to the Chief Scientific Adviser. We have written several emails to Ben Wallace. We have written to everybody who has an email address.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** There is no clarity though. There is no clear process.

**Dr Raina:** There is no response. There is silence.

Q157 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** You are getting the same response that I got on behalf of my constituents who I was trying to seek help for—utter chaos, multiple email addresses and still some of them have not even been answered.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** We can confirm that that is the case for individuals on the ground as well. They are searching across the board for anybody who will help, so the answer to your question is simply that there is no clear point.

**Dr de Jong:** The important point is that it should not depend on this. Of course, there are some people who have higher social capital and who have contacts to reach out to multiple people, and there are people who do not have that capital. For us, it is really important that they are also protected.



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In terms of the ARAP scheme, just from April to now, the procedure has changed. At some point, they introduced a form and it dismantled the email address. It has been an absolute disaster for people, because the only thing that now exists is an inquiry form. When you fill that out, you never get a reply. There is no information on how long it will take to get a reply. You do not get an inquiry number or a record of it—nothing.

**Q158 Mr Francois:** You know from the history of this Committee—you have read our reports—that we are not slow to criticise the Ministry of Defence, but, in fairness to them, is part of the history of this not that we could have pulled many of these people out years ago? One of the reasons we could not was because the Home Office objected to it in private, because they would have counted against the 100,000 target for immigration purposes. While there were some in the MoD who wanted to do this, it was the Home Office that, for many years, that were the real roadblock, long before ARAP was thought up.

**Dr Raina:** I agree with you, but I will add a couple of points here.

**Mr Francois:** It is not to absolve the MoD but it is to say that this is what lay behind it.

**Dr Raina:** I do not think that anybody who has a mandate with people's votes can be absolved of anything at any point in time.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** That is very true.

**Dr Raina:** We are here because it is a democracy. The point is that, if the MoD had thought about getting people out, and the Home Office was driving in another direction, as per the previous conversation with Jack, there is a trajectory here of British interests. If British interests allow you to reach where you want to reach, and some people are put under the bus in the way they have been, there needs to be an understanding of us as a nation and what we stand for. Either we stand for no betrayal and getting people out—they helped you and the MoD stood by them—and one half of the Government cannot look away—

**Q159 Mr Francois:** I understand your point. I am not trying to absolve anybody, but what I am saying is that we could have done this years ago. We finished active combat operations in 2014. We had years to get these people out, but one of the reasons why we did not do anything until the whole thing collapsed, as I understand it, is because the Home Office always privately refused to take them.

**Dr Raina:** But it continues to happen. It is not over yet. The Home Office is still refusing to take them.

**Chair:** We are leading into the next question, Mark, so that is a nice segue.

**Mr Francois:** With respect, you are completely missing my point.

**Dr Raina:** I agree with you.



Q160 **Stuart Anderson:** In the previous session, Dr Jack touched on whether the UK Government did enough with eligible Afghans or UK citizens to get them out in time or encourage them to leave prior to the D-day, when we had to evacuate everyone else. Was enough done in that process?

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** We are not aware of any information that was put about to inform the community of what was going to happen, so much so that we have seen a significant number of former interpreters who had been resettled in the UK go back to Afghanistan to collect family members and who then got caught up, and many of them still remain in Afghanistan now.

**Dr de Jong:** It is important to say that the community that we specifically look at did not need any encouragement to get out of Afghanistan. As Mark highlighted, they had been applying to the intimidation scheme and the ex gratia scheme for years and years, to try to get out. The problem was that the opposite was going on—a disincentive—because, against our advice, the Afghan relocations and assistance policy did not allow any applications from third countries, and it was only after very senior military staff, led by Lord Dannatt, made a statement on this, that, on 1 August, Patel and Ben Wallace finally announced that you could make applications from third countries. We had people who were stuck in Afghanistan because that was their only chance to apply to the Afghan relocations and assistance policy. If they had left the country, they would not have been eligible.

Q161 **Stuart Anderson:** You said that Afghan nationals needed no encouragement. I had constituents stuck over there, as every MP would. Some of them had gone over for a wedding or to visit people. I am not saying what is right or wrong, but was there the sense of urgency from the locals? These people could come and go, and they did regularly, but they got stuck there.

**Dr de Jong:** It might be different for my colleagues, but we specifically focus on Afghan interpreters and other locally employed civilians who have worked for the British armed forces. They had been at risk and desperate to get out for a long time. There were some individuals, as Peter just highlighted, who had applied in 2019 to have their wives and children join them. They had been waiting for more than two years to have their wives and children come. Only those people went back to collect their wives and, finally, they got an approval from the Home Office to do so. On the whole, the people who we work with had a risk profile that existed long before Op Pitting and the Taliban takeover, and these people were desperate to get out.

Q162 **Stuart Anderson:** I have a follow-up on that. I want to see if you believe that the messaging by the UK Government was clear enough to get people out who were eligible. I want to focus on that word “eligible”, because I will come back to that in a minute.



**Professor Blitz:** For the last three weeks of August, we were in constant contact with our colleagues. These were researchers working with us, journalists, activists and people who were supporting our UK Government-funded research programme in Afghanistan. Several of them sought to leave Afghanistan. Some of them applied directly for the ARAP scheme. We also supported and helped them apply for the ARAP scheme. This was throughout the last two weeks of August, on the basis of the information that was presented.

None of them received a call-forward email before the airport closed. Those who did receive a call-forward email had already accepted the very kind offer of the Government of Poland, which took 25 of our colleagues. They were waiting and waiting to hear. When you ask about the sense of urgency, this is a photograph that one of our colleagues took during Operation Pitting. There were crowds and crowds at the airport. It was extraordinarily dangerous. People understand the sense of urgency. What they did not understand is why these emails went nowhere, why there was no one to contact and why, in the end, the very few lucky ones had to turn to other NATO countries to be evacuated, and not the British.

Q163 **Stuart Anderson:** I am just going to continue on this point. I understand that and accept those points. What I want to do is to come back to that word "eligible". You have categorically said that what the Secretary of State for Defence, Ben Wallace, said yesterday is wrong. You have also said that you have 1,500 people. Are these all eligible under the same definition of what the MoD would class as eligible?

**Dr Raina:** The women we are working with are women who have worked in counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism. They have been at the forefront of deradicalisation in the provinces of Afghanistan. They have helped people stay safe. They are the frontline workers. They are women's human rights defenders who are the front line of the safety and security of the country. They align with the UK Government's priorities. They are funded by UK aid directly. I would think that they are eligible.

Q164 **Stuart Anderson:** I do not doubt that what they have done is amazing. You have said that about £3.5 billion of UK aid has gone over there. By definition, you have said that everybody who has been involved in that, and their families, are eligible. That would be a slightly different eligibility to what Ben Wallace was on about yesterday. I am not trying to defend either way. We are a Committee. It is only fair to say that he was mentioning the eligible numbers that he sees by his definition.

**Professor Blitz:** We dispute that definition. Under category 4 of ARAP, there is a much wider sense of who is at risk, why they are at risk and, therefore, the basis of their claim to protection by the British Government. I am sorry to say that there has been an effort to revise down this sense of risk, while, in fact, on the ground, that risk has increased and has been materialising day by day. We have just illustrated some of the threats that people are experiencing.



Quite honestly, I cannot countenance the idea that we are just going to try to put people in categories because it is simply more manageable, while underestimating and undermining the risk that they have experienced as a result of their work and service with the British Government, either directly or indirectly, or in support of British institutions, like our universities, which have benefited from this research.

Q165 **Stuart Anderson:** The Chair will correct me if I am wrong, but if you have 1,500 people who you believe are eligible under the scheme, maybe those could be forwarded from the Committee to the MoD, and they can define whether or not they are eligible. If they are, we can look to solve that problem. I cannot say who is eligible from who you have identified, but we can at least put them in front of the people who can define whether they are eligible, if that would help.

**Dr de Jong:** Do you want some numbers from us as well?

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** We can give you some numbers from the former LEC community. Just to pick up on your point, there is a confusion here between the Government's stated numbers and those who we see left behind—the 1,500 and the ones who we track as well.

During Op Pitting, there were around 10,000 to 15,000 people at the Baron Hotel. A relatively small number of those were called forward under the ARAP scheme. The vast majority turned up because they saw that that was the exit point. My communication with JSF HQ, which was running the evacuation, was that it was turning around only between 1% and 1.5% of people who they were taking through the first checkpoint. During processing, they were realising that these people were vulnerable and would qualify under category 4. At that point during the extraction, the number who were extracted and defined as eligible under category 4 expanded hugely.

Now, we are stuck with this slightly strange problem where some people during that period were deemed eligible under category 4. People who would have met that categorisation if they were in that checkpoint at that time are left behind, so whilst the Government can claim that they extracted 13,000 people during Op Pitting, all of whom were eligible, you have a huge swathe left behind by that same definition of eligibility of those who were extracted. Therefore, we end up with this mismatch between a huge number that the Government are able to claim they have extracted and those who are left behind, depending on a different categorisation. Is that clear?

**Stuart Anderson:** It makes perfect sense. In essence, you could say that 50,000 would meet category 4 there today in terms of how you defined that. I am just plucking a number.

Q166 **Chair:** That leads on to my next question, which is to do with the eligibility of those Afghans who turned up at the Baron Hotel, who you



just mentioned. First, in terms of the people who were doing the processing, we have absolutely huge admiration for the armed forces and the way that they are very flexible. Throw them any job and they will do it. Did we have the right people doing that job? Paras do not sign up to do this type of paperwork when they are 18 or 19 years old. They did it. That was what was required of them, but were they the right people to be doing this process, if you are suggesting that 99% of the people then got through?

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** I am not sure that any of us would be best placed to know who exactly was doing the processing and whether they were the best people to be doing it. That is probably an internal question for the MoD and a valid one. In terms of the blockage as to why perhaps more ARAP-eligible individuals were not extracted during the extraction, one has to look at the bigger picture. The processing ability was an impediment to the speed with which people could be extracted. However, we could look at the way that Op Pitting was planned and suggest that there might have been other ways to have a single point of exit, which then became public knowledge, for a large swathe of Kabul to turn up at.

**Chair:** Where everybody turned up.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** Yes. We in Sulha Alliance focus on former LECs. We see that, comparatively, a relatively small number of former LECs were extracted compared to the total, leaving quite a few former interpreters and LECs still in Afghanistan.

Q167 **Chair:** Who was doing the contacting? If you were in Kabul, did you receive an email that prompted you to then come down? Who sent that email?

**Dr Raina:** The email was sent by FCDO, but the title of the email said, "The British military will help you evacuate. Come to Baron Hotel".

Q168 **Chair:** From which source was the email sent—from London?

**Dr Raina:** FCDO, Afghan.

Q169 **Chair:** When you say FCDO, is it FCDO local?

**Dr Raina:** It is a local FCDO email address.

Q170 **Chair:** The email was coming from Kabul, not London.

**Dr Raina:** There were multiple email addresses used.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** What happened was that a huge number of staff were brought in under the aegis of ARAP. There was an ARAP team using multiple different emails from multiple different deployed user accounts, some of which were non-UK accounts, which were then stood up. We saw this cross-cutting between FCDO, MoD and ARAP efforts, and so there was quite a lot of mixed messaging.



This evolved through the extraction process, so that, towards the end, we saw buses being laid on to go into the city to collect people and try to get them into the airport. Only one or two eventually did before the blast went off and the whole thing shut down.

We also saw cross-cutting efforts between nationalities. I am aware of at least one former British interpreter who was extracted by the Danes and is now in Denmark, speaking not a word of Danish and in a rather problematic situation, because the Danes grant only a two-year visa, and so, in theory, he will be deported back to Afghanistan in two years' time, unless he gains asylum in Denmark. There were cross-cutting inter-departmental and inter-NATO issues.

**Dr de Jong:** Not everybody received a call-forward letter. We had people who had applied in April, May and June, who were told that they were eligible but simply did not get a call-forward letter. These are people who we are still tracking as well, and nobody knows why they did not receive a call-forward letter.

**Dr Raina:** Let us be clear about the fact that the email address is not Afghanistan but FCDO.gov.uk, which can come from anywhere. The call-forward letter, which I have on my screen here, is just an email that they received. There was no help to get to the airport or inside the airport. Let us also be very clear about the fact British troops were some of the troops at Abbey Gate. It was the American soldiers who would not let our colleagues get through, despite having this letter in their hands.

Q171 **Mr Jones:** What amazes me, which comes back to the point I made earlier on, is that this was chaos. You have three Departments, all doing their own thing. That is bad enough. For the poor people trying to respond to this, it must have been a nightmare. What saddens me is that it seems to be still going on now. Months and weeks later, we do not have a situation whereby UK Government plc has said, "Let us put a joint unit together and sort this out". We had Ben Wallace yesterday saying, "It's not me, gov. It's the Foreign Office". I find that astounding. It was bad enough at the time, but the idea that it is still going on now is just amazing.

**Dr Raina:** Let us also put that in the light of the fact that we are one of the few Governments that are still this chaotic. The Germans have done a seamless operation, from the door, into a taxi, into a bus that was not searched by armed Taliban, and straight into Abbey Gate. Security check, stamp, stamp, and "Off you go; sit in the hangar. Your phone will not work, so message your family now that you are in. Goodbye". They are doing this by land and by air, day in, day out, seamlessly. Either Afghanistan is this crazy chaos that nobody seems to know how to fix, or some Governments know how to do it.

Q172 **John Spellar:** It was replicated exactly when the COVID pandemic started and they had a large number of people from south Asia who were stranded while visiting family. For example, the Germans, the Italians,



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the Canadians and the Irish were all very efficient at getting their people back to their countries, and the British Foreign Office was hopeless, so I am afraid that this is not unprecedented.

**Dr Raina:** Just to finish off on the point that you are raising, we have suggested a central implementation group that consists of women peacebuilders, local people to the region and experts on counterterrorism who understand the realities on the ground and have been working to get on people out, to work with the Government. We said this on 25 September to Victoria Atkins, suggesting that we are happy to help with any co-ordination efforts, because we are talking to all three divisions.

**Mr Jones:** We still have the situation, even now, where you have the Home Office in one sector, the MoD in another and the Foreign Office in another. I find that amazing. Let us put to one side the chaos that happened during the evacuation. If we still have that now, there is no way that this is ever going to work. It comes back to my point, which I do worry about, that, irrespective of what Ministers have said about helping everyone to get out, it is whether the Home Office has a policy of trying to keep the numbers down as low as possible. I suspect that that is what it is.

Q173 **Chair:** We may learn some more perhaps—and I look to the Committee—if we invite these other NATO partners to put forward their own systems as to what they are currently doing, as a comparator for when we put our report together. That might be quite interesting to do.

**Dr de Jong:** This is the topic of my research at the University of York. We have international partners who do the same thing as we do, in the United States, Canada, Germany and France, so we can also get up-to-date comparative information very quickly.

**Chair:** It is another great example of lessons to be learned and to continue to be learned, because the problem has not gone away. Let us now look at a problem that also has not gone away, which is the safety of those who remain behind. Emma, do you want to take us forward on this one?

Q174 **Mrs Lewell-Buck:** To be honest, Chair, we covered it before. From the earlier discussion, it is clear that nobody, not even our Government, knows how many eligible people are still trapped in Afghanistan who could come here. In terms of what the Government are doing for those people left behind, we have already covered that.

The thing I would like to go on to is about the humanitarian situation. We are already hearing some quite heart-breaking and desperate stories. I know from other areas, such as Yemen, that this will only be the tip of the iceberg. These will not be the worst stories that we are now hearing. Is any of the humanitarian aid getting to the people who need it?

**Dr Raina:** A couple of months ago, the Taliban declared that they would watch over the involvement of female humanitarian actors in the delivery of aid. Without that inclusion, we know that women and girls will be at



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the back of the receiving line for any aid that does get to Afghanistan. We have to be careful about the humanitarian aid being gender-blind, and we have talked and talked about it to everybody we can.

**Dr de Jong:** Most of the people who we are in contact with are in hiding, which means that they are now often dependent on family members, because they are not able to work or to go out at all. They would not be at all able to approach any Taliban-facilitated aid.

In terms of the follow-up, we see a very differential picture, because there are people who get very specific information about how to make their way to Pakistan and what support they would receive there, but there are also other emails. Even last week, we got emails from people who did not understand what is expected of them. Literally, the only message is, "I appreciate that you find yourself in a scary situation and life is not easy right now, but please be assured that we are working hard to process applications. Please continue to keep safe and we will be in touch with a decision in due course".

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** Is that from our Government?

**Dr de Jong:** Yes, it is from the ARAP team, sent last week.

**Mrs Lewell-Buck:** That email is disgraceful.

**Chair:** I do not disagree.

Q175 **Stuart Anderson:** Doctor, you raised a really interesting and very important point that we must make sure that aid is not gender-blind. With the Taliban in control of the country and aid going through them, how do we succeed in this?

**Dr Raina:** There are several things that are happening at the same time. There were many requests by aid agencies on the ground to the Taliban Government. The Taliban Government are not one monolithic unit, which does not help. There has been increased pressure, quietly and publicly, on the Government to include this. The fact that they need aid, multiplied with the fact that these women are already being victimised by all levels of violence, just makes it an impossible situation. If there are various ways of laying pressure or providing approachable solutions that people could get guarantees or assurances from, that would be useful, but the fact is that this conversation about the inclusion of women and the gender biases within the humanitarian package has not even taken place, and we need to have that conversation now, before this humanitarian aid starts going out at any level in increasing quantities.

Q176 **Richard Drax:** We heard from a previous witness that there is unlikely to be a battle between the fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists in the Taliban. I cannot see the Taliban wanting everyone to starve to death, because that would potentially create a civil war, which I would have thought is the last thing they need. Is there any evidence that there is some common sense amongst the Taliban to say, "Prevent this. We have



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to make sure that the food and aid does get to those who need it", to prevent this humanitarian disaster that he and you have spoken about?

**Dr Raina:** If we are still continuing the line of pressure where you are expecting the Taliban to step up to the plate that was at Doha and prove their mettle by providing women and girls education and other access, and if the reputation angle is what is being pursued, this will work. If you are expecting a common-sense approach to kick in about humanitarian aid and people not starving, and that is the angle that the Government have been pursuing, looking for assurances of common sense from the Taliban, I do not think we have too much of a choice.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** It is really important and really vital to not see Afghanistan as a functioning state and one in which the Taliban is a single, coherent entity, in full control and able to act and govern. That is not an accurate depiction. The Taliban is a highly fractured group. When I was serving there, I saw fractures between tribes within the same village.

In terms of aid arriving in the country, think about the level of corruption going on here. Aid will be taken at the highest level and given to preferential groups in return for influence or favour. The groups that we advocate for, that are typically now being seen as opposition to the Taliban regime, are probably those who are most likely to be excluded from aid. Hopefully, that helps to paint a bit more of an accurate picture.

Q177 **Chair:** Just building on that as we come to a conclusion, first, just to confirm a few things, do emails and the ability to communicate with the very people who we have been talking about continue at the moment? Is there any threat to that being closed down in any way?

**Dr Raina:** No, not anymore.

Q178 **Chair:** A typical thing that an authoritarian regime may do is to limit their ability to communicate with the outside world, but at the moment that is working and we anticipate that continuing in that way.

**Dr Raina:** We were worrying about it on 30 August, because the Taliban dismantled three mobile phone towers in the city of Kabul. We were panicking because, if there is a communication blackout, there is nothing we can do.

Q179 **Chair:** Secondly, on Spin Boldak and these other border crossings, are they being used?

**Professor Blitz:** They open and close.

**Dr Raina:** The Pakistan border at Torkham has been officially opened for passage. It opens and closes at certain times. There is an immigration space and an entry stamp that you can get. When you get to Torkham, the queues are spectacular.

Q180 **Chair:** They are. Are people tending to leave the country? Is the Taliban content on seeing the middle classes continue leaving, or are they trying



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to hold people back?

**Professor Blitz:** The problem is also on the other side as to whether or not people would be admitted to Pakistan or Iran, et cetera. That also fluctuates.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** Our experience has been that, if you can arrive at Torkham or Spin Boldak crossing with a passport and a visa, you will be let through without too much trouble. I have seen people pass through quite successfully, with relative ease, in the last week or two compared to the last month, when it was much harder. Passage is now quite possible and is functioning. However, you have to have a passport and a visa. If you are a former interpreter, you do not want to apply to the Taliban regime for a passport.

**Dr de Jong:** Here, again, we need to learn from other countries. On 10 November, Germany was quite successful in having a direct flight from Kabul to Doha. These alternative routes need to be explored in more detail.

Q181 **Chair:** Finally, building on Richard's question, which was to do with the Taliban's ability to run the country, your points were very profound. That is the experience that many of us have learned already. This is not a monolithic organisation. They cannot control their own. In fact, we have had reports that, because they have not been ruthless enough in their interpretation of Sharia law, they are haemorrhaging and losing people to ISIS-K, which pays a little bit more. Can you confirm that that is a concern: that terrorist groups are able to perhaps recruit, simply because the Taliban is not doing enough or because it has become the establishment?

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** That is a little bit challenging for this Committee to comment on. From my experience, Afghanistan is a very tribal country, where power is based on local warlords and powerbrokers. Those local powerbrokers will sometimes court ISK, the Taliban or perhaps al-Qaeda. Defining these individual groups and throwing in the Haqqani network and so on is very challenging.

Q182 **Chair:** Now apply that to the cities, because they have swelled in size. They are very different from 1996. Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat are much bigger places. The tribal structures have less of an influence there, do they not?

**Dr Raina:** Let us remember that we have spent quite a lot of time, energy and money on counterterrorism in Afghanistan. The push and pull factors that FCDO, including RUSI, have been talking about forever, in terms of how people go towards violent extremism—ISK category—and how they pull towards or push away, are ticking all the boxes. There is no reason to think that radicalisation and violence will not be a direct outcome soon.

Q183 **Mr Jones:** You talked about the Germans having a flight out, but could



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you tell us what your experience is of neighbouring countries such as Pakistan? Peter, you were saying that people can get across the border with a passport. What is their attitude?

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** Again, one of the challenges there is that you are asking people who have not been able to earn a wage in Afghanistan for some time now, because of the threat, and so have very little money, to travel to Pakistan. Where are they going to stay? We see those who have access to means being able to travel to Pakistan and stay in a relatively safe place.

One of the problems we are seeing here is that, in order for people to be processed at the British High Commission in Islamabad, they need to have had a TB clearance certificate prior to them going to that meeting. That is not communicated at all. The reason for that is that, to have the TB test, you need to take your passport with you. A couple of times, we have seen people turning up to their appointment at the British High Commission, handing over their passport to get processed for a visa for a couple of weeks, going to their TB appointment, being rejected because they do not have their passport, and having to go back and get their passport. It is a nightmare.

**Dr Raina:** Are you talking about the reception of these people by Pakistan or by the UK High Commission in Pakistan?

Q184 **Mr Jones:** That is the point I am trying to get to. I have been to Peshawar and I know it is quite a wild area and an interesting place, but is there any FCDO or MoD presence up near the border?

**Dr Raina:** No.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** It is being run by the Pakistani military.

**Dr Raina:** It is run by the Ministry of Interior. There are different Departments set up by the Pakistani Government to deal with the Afghanistan crisis. There is a crisis bureau, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is chaos between the three of them.

Q185 **Mr Jones:** The point is that, if I was an interpreter fleeing Afghanistan into Pakistan, the last people I would want to have any business with would be the Pakistan military.

**Dr de Jong:** That is exactly right.

Q186 **Mr Jones:** Why do the FCDO not put a team up there?

**Dr Raina:** I do not have an answer to that question.

**Dr de Jong:** This is exactly why alternative routes need to be explored. For our community of people, that particular link is one of the more difficult ones. In the email in which they get guidance on the Pakistan crossing and what to do once they are there, one of the things that they



need to supply is some information, which will be supplied to the Pakistan Government.

Q187 **Mr Jones:** You are not going to do it, are you?

**Dr de Jong:** We get a lot of emails from people who are extremely worried and concerned about sharing their data, because the email says very explicitly that the Pakistan Government can subsequently do whatever they want to with that data.

**Dr Raina:** There are specific vulnerabilities as well, such as Hazaras, LGBTQI activists or women who are unaccompanied by men from Afghanistan. None of these people find Pakistan a viable place to go to. Let us not forget that Pakistan is very quietly deporting those who manage to get in illegally across the borders. We have quite a few phone numbers of people who are offering to get people across the border. There is a lot of trafficking.

Q188 **Mr Jones:** What about in the north? The Germans have done a deal with Tajikistan into the north. What is happening there?

**Dr Raina:** At one point in time in September, Tajikistan said, "If you can prove to us that you have associations with any Government Department or business in Tajikistan and they can give you a supporting letter, you can cross the Friendship Bridge and come to our country, but you need a passport and a valid letter". They did open the door but the conditions were very steep. Quite a few people managed to get across but there was no UNHCR or any such agency to welcome them on the other side, so they would be going from Afghanistan straight into the deep in Tajikistan.

**Professor Blitz:** It is really important to recognise that, with the exception of Iran, none of these neighbouring countries are signatories to the refugee convention. They have really very weak human rights regimes.

**Dr Raina:** We did write to the FCDO outposts in all of these countries. I have emailed all the British ambassadors in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and all the FCDO outposts. We have emailed to ask, "Will you take some people?"

Q189 **Mr Jones:** I would have thought that a starting point would be for the FCDO to send a team up to the border to see who is there, for starters. There must be people there who have managed to get across the border. I accept what Peter said about it being difficult, but if you were an interpreter, the last people you would want to give any information to would be the Pakistan army. I certainly would not, knowing their form. Why have the FCDO not sent teams up there?

**Professor Blitz:** There was a mission, and Lord Ahmad also visited.

**Dr Raina:** Lord Ahmad visited all those countries.

**Professor Blitz:** That is right. He visited the neighbouring countries.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Chair:** But he did not go to the border.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** He did not go to the border. He went to the capitals.

Q190 **Chair:** If you are an Afghan wishing to get to Britain, Spin Boldak is probably not the border that you would end up wanting to cross. You would probably go north through Kunduz and out that way, would you not?

**Dr Raina:** Spin Boldak also has a large ISK presence.

**Chair:** That is what I am talking about. You are going to run into a whole different set of challenges. We are over time. We will draw it to a conclusion. This has been a fascinating discussion and very helpful to our inquiry.

**Peter Gordon-Finlayson:** One final point that we would like to make is really crucial. It is on eligibility. One of the things that would be reasonably easy to enact and hugely beneficial would be an appeals process for the ARAP scheme. Going back to the way that people were dismissed, for example, it is not fair on the soldiers who dismissed those interpreters to suddenly have additional measures linked to those decisions to dismiss, which, effectively, is a live-or-die for those interpreters. I have contacts with former NCOs who I have informed that their decision to dismiss an interpreter for stealing or fighting has led to that person being ineligible for ARAP, and they are absolutely devastated. An appeals process for that would be a reasonably simple and absolutely crucial measure.

**Chair:** Thank you for that. It has just exposed and illustrated another chapter as to why a wider inquiry is all the more necessary. On behalf of the Committee, can I thank Dr Sara, Dr Neelam and Professor Brad Blitz for your contributions today in our second panel? That brings to a conclusion our penultimate session in our inquiry into Afghanistan from the Defence Select Committee.