



House of Commons  
Defence Committee

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# Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Government Reponse to the Committee's Fifth Report

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**Fifth Special Report of Session  
2022–23**

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## The Defence Committee

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# Fifth Special Report

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The Defence Committee published its Fifth Report of Session 2022–23, [Withdrawal from Afghanistan](#) (HC 725) on 10 February 2023. The Government response was received on 17 April 2023 and is appended below.

## Appendix: Government Response

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### The Doha Agreement and fall of the Afghan Government

1. *The signing of the Doha Agreement served domestic US Administration priorities, by enabling the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan to a defined schedule. The absence of the United Kingdom, other allies and the Afghan Government from the negotiating table was unfortunate, although it is unclear whether the United Kingdom Government made any request to be included. The agreement emboldened the Taliban and gave it a timeframe in which to plan its future operations. The Afghan National Security and Defence Forces had become reliant under Western tutelage on air support and logistics contractors to operate effectively. Their withdrawal made the subsequent collapse of the Afghan Government inevitable.* (Paragraph 19)

2. *Although the Defence Secretary assured us that he had attempted to find a way to retain a military presence in Afghanistan without the US, we recognise how difficult this would have been in practice. This shows the limits of NATO's military capability without US involvement.* (Paragraph 25)

3. *Optimism bias and failures in intelligence and analysis meant that the rapid collapse of the Afghan Government was a greater surprise to the military establishment than it might have been.* (Paragraph 32)

US Ambassador Khalilzad's (Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation) negotiations were bilateral and did not include Coalition partners. Ministers, CDS and other senior officials at the time worked with the Afghans, and Allies including the US to try to maintain our strategic direction and broker a workable peace. UK influence on the decision to withdraw was ultimately limited by a decision process and timescale that was led by the US President himself. The UK made clear our concerns and advocated strongly for a continued presence in some form.

As evidence in the report describes 'When the House of Commons was recalled on 18 August, during the airlift from Kabul Airport, then Prime Minister Boris Johnson mentioned that the UK had explored options to remain in Afghanistan beyond the deadlines announced by the US, but had concluded that' "the West could not continue this US-led mission—a mission conceived and executed in support and defence of America—without American logistics, without US air power and without American might". Extensive attempts by NATO and smaller groups of nations failed to gain traction in no small part due to the large gap left by US withdrawal. The UK also requested an extension to the withdrawal date which was rejected.

Noting the extensive support structures in place at the time of the drawdown of NATO and Coalition forces, there was an increasing chance of a collapse at some point. The key

question was when, on which estimates differed. A collapse was predicted by many sources despite the withdrawal process markedly reducing the intelligence footprint. Noting that President Ghani fled the country on 15 August 2021, this further damaged our ability to hold the initiative as the Taliban advanced on Kabul.

**4. *If the initial goal of the NATO deployment was mainly to prevent terrorist attacks against Western nations originating in Afghanistan, current evidence suggests that while there have been no such recent attacks to date, Afghanistan is once again becoming a safe haven for international terrorism. And it is impossible to argue that the mission has been a success if its goal was in part to ensure Afghanistan's stability as a functioning state, with basic human rights for its population, including women and girls. The fall of the Afghan Government represented a serious strategic blow to NATO and its allies.*** (Paragraph 35)

**5. *Technically, NATO forces were not defeated in Afghanistan. However, this must not prevent the recognition that the end of the NATO mission has been severely detrimental both to the people of Afghanistan and to the security of the region, as well as to Alliance and UK military credibility.*** (Paragraph 36)

The MOD agrees that the fall of Kabul has had an adverse impact on regional security. This was not an outcome HMG wished for and we had actively worked to avoid a full withdrawal. During the 20-year campaign no attacks were hosted from Afghanistan and the lives of countless Afghans improved across a broad spectrum of activities. The MOD and the FCDO are actively monitoring the security situation in Afghanistan and neighbouring Pakistan as closely as possible, drawing on a range of sources.

### **The Evacuation and Relocation of Eligible Afghans**

**6. *We welcome the award of medals to Armed Forces personnel who served on Operation PITTING, and recognise the success of the military operation element of the evacuation from Afghanistan—though this must not mask the wider context that the operation was only necessary because of the Taliban's advances following the end of the NATO mission.*** (Paragraph 49)

The report notes that “the military elements of the evacuation from Afghanistan were a success.”<sup>1</sup> We welcome this recognition, along with the positive reflections on the medallic recognition for those Armed Forces personnel involved. The relocations programme was a whole force effort in the UK and in-country. MOD Civilian staff in Kabul were in-country for a significant period and were amongst the last to leave Kabul and also received medallic recognition. There was also close engagement with Other Government Departments (OGDs). Although the Taliban advance was expected after the Doha agreement, the timing of any such advance would have been extremely hard to gauge. The challenge for defence was that a withdrawal conducted too early could have precipitated a collapse. Op CATTALO (the planned withdrawal) was in full flow when the crisis accelerated.

**7. *The same praise, however, cannot be given to the efforts of the UK Government's civilian operations in support of the evacuation. Our colleagues on the Foreign Affairs Committee have taken extensive evidence and reached persuasive findings in these areas. While it was never going to be possible to evacuate everyone who met the eligibility***

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1 HCDC Report HC 725: Withdrawal from Afghanistan, Summary, para 3.

***criteria as part of the operation, there was an obvious lack of effective co-ordination across Government, with real and painful human consequences for those who reasonably expected to be evacuated but were not. The processing and prioritisation of potential evacuees under the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) could and should have been much further advanced by the time that the need for the evacuation became urgent.*** (Paragraph 50)

In the run up to the fall of Kabul, it was vitally important to reassure the Government of Afghanistan that the Coalition, and by implication the UK, were in support. The UK was subject to rules in force from the Government of Afghanistan and open acknowledgement of the advanced work on evacuations would have sent a message that UK were wavering. We note the Committee's reflection on supporting civilians as part of the end of the Afghanistan campaign. We would offer the following observations:

- a) Paragraph 38 a) of the report highlights a "lack of preparedness for the actual number of potential applicants, resulting in under-resourcing, which in turn caused backlogs in applications and errors in decision-making." We note that ARAP was initially designed primarily to support those who worked directly for HMG, covering a maximum of 829 principals (approximately 4100 people) over a timeframe of 5 years. The speed of the collapse of the Afghan government changed the pace of relocations, increasing the scope and number of people that HMG sought to protect and relocate under ARAP. By the end of Operation PITTING 7055 people had been relocated to the UK under ARAP, substantially more than the scheme was designed for and over a considerably shorter period;
- b) Paragraph 38 a) also notes that "Only one locally employed civilian had been relocated to the UK as at 1 June 2021." ARAP came into force on 1 April 2021. However, this figure does not account for the 1400 eligible people who were relocated to the UK as part of the ex-gratia scheme (EGS) that preceded the launch of ARAP. It also does not reflect preparatory work undertaken to enable relocations to the UK to begin at scale, in the context of COVID, and other factors described below;
- c) Paragraph 38 c) cites "unclear, frequently changing scheme criteria." HMG took decisions to ensure we could protect the most vulnerable as the security situation deteriorated. There was a responsibility on HMG to ensure that it did not accelerate a loss of functioning security or confidence in the Afghanistan Government by relocating Afghans who were contributing to it.
- d) Paragraph 38 c) highlights exclusions to ARAP stating 35% of all interpreters were excluded. Defence did dismiss a number of locally employed civilians for a range of disciplinary and conduct-related reasons, some of which were very serious. These decisions were reviewed in the context of the situation in Afghanistan based on the information available at the time. We now have provision in the Immigration Rules that allow those dismissed for minor reasons to be eligible for ARAP;
- e) Paragraph 38 c) also notes that those who had fled Afghanistan were also not in scope of the policy. A decision was initially taken to focus on those at most

risk as they were in Afghanistan and therefore not prioritise those living in safe third countries. However, the rules and policy were amended to support those individuals who had fled to third countries;

- f) Paragraph 39 notes that 16 Air Assault Brigade deployed first. The operation was led by Joint Forces Headquarters who were the first to deploy;
- g) Paragraph 45 highlights that written evidence submitted to the Committee “found that Government departments lacked co-ordination and consistency in their dealings and communications with Afghan applicants for evacuation, through the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy.”<sup>2</sup> The ARAP process was by necessity a two-stage process: firstly the MOD or the sponsoring Department would confirm eligibility and then once eligible, an individual would be called forward to provide documentations and biometric checks. If they failed these checks, they were subsequently excluded;
- h) Paragraph 51 notes “Theoretically the ARAP remains open at the time of writing.” The Secretary of State for Defence has confirmed that ARAP remains open;<sup>3</sup> and,
- i) Overall ARAP operated in a context of considerable external constraints placed upon relocation efforts e.g., the difficulties posed by operating the scheme from a non-permissive environment and “red list” country during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eligible Afghans were subject to requirements not only from HMG (e.g., COVID-19 test), but also from the Afghan government which stipulated identity documents were needed for all eligible individuals to travel.

**8. We recognise the ongoing efforts of the UK Government and of organisations including the Afghan Solidarity Coalition and the Sulha Alliance to evacuate eligible Afghans remaining in Afghanistan or in third countries. It is concerning, however, that, according to the MOD’s own estimates, several thousand eligible Afghans— whose safety is by definition at risk in Afghanistan—remain to be evacuated under the ARAP well over a year after the end of Operation PITTING. We recommend that the Government set out in their response to this report what action they are taking to ensure safe passage to the United Kingdom for eligible Afghans who remain to be evacuated under the ARAP. (Paragraph 54)**

- a) We owe a debt of gratitude to those Afghan nationals who risked their lives working alongside UK forces in support of the UK mission in Afghanistan. We have rightly committed to relocating to the UK all ARAP eligible Afghans and their families. We are honouring that commitment and ensuring that when they arrive in the UK, they are set up for a successful new life.
- b) Since the start of the ARAP scheme, we have relocated over 12,200 vulnerable Afghans to the UK (applicants and their family members), including some 5,000 since the end OP PITTING. Getting Afghans with confirmed ARAP eligibility to safety outside of Afghanistan is a key priority. We continue to support the

2 HCDC Report HC 725: Withdrawal from Afghanistan, para 45

3 HCDC Report HC 725: Withdrawal from Afghanistan, para 51

movement of ARAP-eligible Afghans into the safety provided by our third country partners at best pace and in a way that minimises risk to life in an increasingly challenging operating environment on the ground in Afghanistan.

- c) Due to operational security considerations, we are unable to provide specific details on our ongoing relocation efforts inside Afghanistan and with our third country partners. However, a finite number of Afghans are eligible for ARAP and we estimate from HMG records that fewer than 620 Afghans eligible for relocation to the UK under ARAP remain inside Afghanistan. We are committed to finding and relocating them and their family members – approximately 3,075 people in total.

### **Mental Health of Veterans**

**9. *The withdrawal from Afghanistan and end of the UK's twenty-year military involvement in the country has understandably had a negative impact on veterans' mental health. This has increased demand on services provided by organisations such as Combat Stress and Help for Heroes as well as the NHS. The announcement of £2.7 million extra funding for veteran's mental health through Operation Courage was welcome, as was the Government commitment to another £5 million for military charities to support veterans. We urge the Government to have an ongoing dialogue with charities working in this area to ensure that they are suitably resourced to engage in their important work.*** (Paragraph 59)

The Government is committed to the support and promotion of positive mental wellbeing for the whole Defence community, including veterans. Lead responsibility for the provision of veteran healthcare is led by the Department for Health and Social Care and its devolved equivalents. We recognise the potential impacts of Operation PITTING and the legacy Afghanistan campaign on those who supported operations from the UK and in-country. On the completion of Operation PITTING MOD units and formations offered Trauma Risk Incident Management (TRIM) briefs and support to all individual Augmentees (IAs) and participants.

- a) The Government recognises that the withdrawal from Afghanistan had a negative impact on the mental health of some members of the veteran community, and we are continuing to ensure there is good statutory support available, as well as partner with a number of charities to ensure robust and relevant mental health support remains available.
- b) In England, through NHS(E), Op COURAGE continues to provide a complete mental health care pathway through which our veterans benefit from personalised care plans, ensuring they can access support and treatment both in and out of hours. Following engagement with stakeholders and service users, the Op COURAGE service has been reviewed and from April 2023, NHS (E) will launch a single integrated Op COURAGE service, bringing together the currently three separate strands for those seeking support and treatment.
- c) For both statutory and non-statutory medical interventions, the mental wellbeing of the Veteran community is supported by the Government working in partnership with many charities, including through COBSEO, the CONTACT group, and the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT).

- d) In September 2021, the AFCTF developed and launched an emergency funding programme 'Sustaining Support: Supporting Veterans and Families Impacted by the Afghanistan Conflict' which awarded £975K to 30 projects in November 2021.
- e) The Office for Veterans' Affairs also worked with the AFCFT to distribute £5M through the Afghanistan Veterans Fund. 51 projects across the UK received grants to increase dedicated support for veterans and their families, with £600k given to mental health charity Samaritans for a new peer support helpline which aims to encourage improved mental resilience and wellbeing for members of the Armed Forces community.
- f) The Government remains open to further engagement and collaboration across the charity sector to ensure adequate and accessible information, support and intervention is available to all in the veteran community.

### Learning Lessons from Afghanistan

***10. The UK contribution to the war in Afghanistan took the lives of 457 UK armed forces personnel and injured thousands more, and cost more than £27 billion. The evacuation from Afghanistan in August 2021 resulted in 15,000 people being brought to the UK but left many behind. It is therefore of critical importance that the UK Government conduct an open, honest and detailed review of the UK's involvement in the country. This review should include military operations and political decisions covering the full timeline of the UK's involvement, from the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 and the invocation of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, to the evacuation from Kabul in August 2021. This thinking would have been helpful to contribute to the update to the Integrated Review that is currently under way.*** (Paragraph 65)

We agree it is vitally important that HMG conducts honest, timely and accurate reviews of operations. The MOD has an active and constantly evolving lessons process headed by the Vice Chief of Defence Staff (VCDS). Over the 20-year Afghanistan Campaign the MOD conducted numerous studies, capability audits, Military Judgement Panels (MJP) and campaign reviews ranging from Op HERRICK to Op PITTING.

Numerous lessons from the tactical to the strategic (with many above the classification of this report) have been gathered and analysed with many processes and procedures adjusted as a result. NATO has its own lessons procedures and review mechanisms which UK staff contribute to. Defence worked closely with the FCDO after Op PITTING and shared lessons. Good progress has been made with changes to doctrine through the Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC) and this is being done in concert with the FCDO and OGDs. The Whitehall Overseas Crisis Risk Committee has been formed and is at the early stages of full capability looking at shared awareness and crisis preparedness.

Lessons learnt from Afghanistan have contributed to the revised thinking present in the Integrated Review (Refresh) work. The MOD assesses that the value of a further wide-ranging review of the totality of the Afghanistan Campaign is limited, would absorb considerable resource and does not coincide with the now-published Integrated Review (Refresh).