

## AFGHAN SOLIDARITY COALITION

### SUBMISSION TO DEFENCE COMMITTEE: WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

#### Introduction

1. The evidence is submitted by the Afghan Solidarity Coalition (ASC), a grouping of organisations that have been working on research and peace-building activities with local partners in Afghanistan. This group has helped evacuate at risk colleagues and continues to coordinate activities including fundraising and resettlement assistance to Afghan human rights activists, women peace builders, artists, film makers, researchers, doctors and LGBTQI activists.
2. The members of the Coalition include:
  - [UKRI GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub](#) – an international research network based at the London School of Economics, working with over 40 partners and local and global civil society, practitioners, governments and international organisations over to advance gender justice and inclusive peace. Afghanistan is a focus country for research with three key projects there
  - [LSE Centre for Women Peace and Security](#) - a research centre for scholars, practitioners, activists and policy-makers to develop strategies to promote justice, human rights and participation of women in conflict-affected situations around the world
  - Middlesex University London ([Dr Neelam Raina](#)) and University College London ([Prof Brad Blitz](#)), who are part of the GCRF Gender, Justice and Security Hub and lead Hub projects focusing on Afghanistan
  - [International Civil Society Action Network](#) - (Sanam Anderlini) promotes inclusive and sustainable peace in countries affected by violent conflict, extremism, militarism, and closing political space
  - [MOSAIC Lebanon](#) – a gender/LGBTQI focussed organisation
  - [Open Asia Foundation](#) – an Afghanistan based organisation that promotes democracy, human rights, justice and rule of law as well as to take cultural initiatives
  - [FUUSE](#) - an Emmy and Peabody award winning company based in Norway specialising in creating music and film projects rooted in art, culture, and activism to encourage dialogue around social and political issues
  - [Women for Peace and Participation](#) - promotes the social and political inclusion of women and youth in Afghanistan in peacebuilding processes at the grassroots, national and global levels.
3. Since February 2019, members of the Hub have been working collectively on a UK government ODA funded research programme which included three projects in Afghanistan covering empirical studies on forced displacement, return and political

reintegration, culture and conflict, peacebuilding, and conflict prevention activities, principally led by Afghan women.

4. The ASC was formed in August 2021 to coordinate the efforts of Hub members with other agencies who were also trying to evacuate and resettle their colleagues. Over the course of our collaboration, we have gathered names and information regarding 285 Afghans at risk, including their families, 67 of whom have applied for ARAP and all of whom meet the criteria for UK assistance. Of these 28 have been evacuated. ARAP is designed for HMG employees and those funded through British agencies including the British Council, and the ACRS scheme for which they are eligible has not yet opened.
5. The focus of our evidence is the evacuation of Afghans who had worked with the UK military, the UK government and other UK funded bodies, and addresses the following questions in bold:

***How successful was the evacuation? Did it go according to plan?***

6. The evacuation was initially focused on the evacuation of UK nationals, then those most closely perceived to be at risk, due to their association with the UK military, and as set out in the ARAP scheme.
7. The ARAP scheme was published on 29 December 2020, 10 months after the US agreed with the Taliban in February 2020 that NATO troops would withdraw from Afghanistan by 2021. Since the policy was endorsed by NATO in March 2020, there was considerable peace-building activity, and engagement with international organisations, including universities and partner NGOs.
8. By early August, as the Taliban occupied parts of Afghanistan, members of the yet-to-be-formed ASC reached out to colleagues, to establish that they were safe, and to explore whether they should evacuate. By 12 August we had already considered ways in which colleagues might be evacuated.
9. Throughout early August, colleagues submitted 67 applications to the ARAP scheme, in the hope they would be evacuated. This did not include family members automatically and was/is gender-blind, meaning that the specific needs of women are not recognised, despite women being explicitly acknowledged by the UK as a priority group.
10. The ASC compiled a list of initially 350 names, that were shared with the office of the Permanent Secretary to the Home Office, and Defence Secretary Ben Wallace. Over two weeks we exchanged multiple emails, and each time provided the lists of colleagues who were ARAP eligible, and in need of evacuation.

On 18 August 2021, one of our colleagues with a UK visa received a call from the Polish Embassy in Delhi, offering him seats on an evacuation flight. We subsequently sent our lists to the Polish Ambassador, who issued 'call forward' emails to our colleagues. Over the next three nights 25 people were evacuated to Poland.

11. During the evacuation we appealed to the UK government to evacuate our colleagues. From 17 August 2021 – and continuing at the time of writing - we have approached the Home Office, MoD, FCDO, British embassies in surrounding nations, as well as the funding body UKRI<sup>1</sup>, the Chief Scientific Advisor<sup>2</sup> for FCDO<sup>3</sup> and the Head of Profession at FCDO<sup>4</sup>.
12. By the last week of August, it was clear that the UK government had not prioritised all our colleagues for evacuation. Call forward emails were sent to nine out of 13 on our list indicating that they had been granted leave outside the rules. There has been no indication as to why the other four were not called forward. The call forward emails were all received after those evacuated by Poland had boarded their flight on 22 August. The FCDO sent a follow-up email on 29 August to some colleagues stating that although they missed the evacuation, they would still be supported if they wish to relocate to the United Kingdom. To date, no such support has been received.
13. The scope of the evacuation was not made known to us, and therefore it is difficult to suggest that it might have gone according to plan. From our perspective, most of our colleagues who were led to believe they were ARAP eligible, and had the right to be evacuated, were not sent call forward emails.
14. The presence of a plan was not clear to any civilians we know on the ground, and it was not apparent at Baron Hotel or at Abbey Gate. There was no assistance from anyone from the British Military for those who were called forward by FCDO. The calls forward coincided with the high security warnings from the airport and yet there was no clarity on how this would be managed, enhancing risk and anxiety for many. Colleagues who received calls forward from FCDO were provided no assistance to reach the airport. They went twice but were unable to access the entry gates.
15. The call forward emails did not account for the realities of families at risk. More than one colleague received a call forward email in which they were the only named

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<sup>1</sup> Email sent 17/08/2010 to UKRI International Development Team. Email sent 30/08/2010 to UKRI CEO.

<sup>2</sup> Email sent to Chief Scientific Advisor at FCDO 23/08/2010 and 15/09/2021

<sup>3</sup> Email sent to Deputy Head of Global Economic Issues Department & Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser at FCDO 22/08/2021  
Email sent to Dep Director Education Gender & Equality in the FCDO 22/08/2021

<sup>4</sup> Email sent to Head of Profession at FCDO 21/08/2021, 31/08/2021, 02/09/2021, 04/09/2021, 07/09/2021, 15/09/2021

person, while other emails included the names of dependents. There seems to be no consistency in whose name was included.

16. As a result of the lack of communication and mixed messages received from senior civil servants in the UK, and the inability of the UK military to evacuate our colleagues we were forced to appeal to other NATO countries. We approached several governments and international actors<sup>5</sup>. Of these several responded, as did NATO generals, and officials, as well as diplomats of other states.
17. The UK evacuation did not serve our colleagues. They were only assisted by the governments of Poland, Italy, Spain and Sweden.
18. As a result of the shambolic evacuation, and the delayed call forward emails, colleagues identified as being associated with the UK, have been left vulnerable to reprisal. Most worrying is that some of our colleagues have seen their personal data released by the MOD in the email breaches of September 2021.
19. In addition to the data breach, those who were identified as ARAP eligible and/or who had received call forward emails from the UK government were further endangered by the repeated emails from the FCDO ATREU/ARAP team, and then by recommendations that they should consider making their way to a border, to seek the protection of the UK High Commission in the neighbouring states. This advice fails to consider the extremely dangerous situation on the ground. Land border routes are patrolled and controlled by a range of actors, not all Taliban. ISIS-K and other intelligence and surveillance actors are present and, combined with an acute shortage of cash and food and shifting power dynamics between communities, travelling in Afghanistan is incredibly dangerous and should be immediately discouraged.
20. We note that the above states are not party to the UN Refugee Convention and have weak systems of human rights protection and refugee protection.

***How many UK nationals and Afghan nationals and families who worked with or for UK Armed Forces remain in Afghanistan?***

21. The numbers of Afghan nationals who have worked to advance UK interests, with ODA funding, must be considered alongside the number of those who worked for or with the UK armed forces. They equally meet the UK Government's criteria for Leave Outside usual Rules and have been called forward by the UK Government for evacuation. Our list of 285 individuals and families is only a sample of those left behind.

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<sup>5</sup> Italy, Turkey, Spain, Canada, Albania, Bosnia, Hungary, Slovenia, North Macedonia, Poland, Nato Office in Rome (Alessandro Cattaneo), Royal College of Defence Studies (Iain Huddleston), Allied Joint Force Command NATO in Netherlands (Major Leonard), Institute of Migration (IOM/UN), UNHCR, UNOCHA, UNHAS, UNFP, UNDP, ICRC

### ***What can now be done to enable them to leave?***

22. With the assistance of international NGOs, the US has supported the evacuation of Afghan national on charter flights to Pakistan. They have paid the costs of evacuation, on average \$1200-1500 per person. Some of our colleagues have been placed on these charter flights by international NGOs. The UK government could similarly sponsor these outbound flights.
23. The UK could, through diplomatic coordination with other NATO allies, prioritise air evacuations of those with Leave Outside usual Rules or ARAP approval using commercial or charter airlines and expedite onward visa processing.
24. The FCDO ATREU/ARAP team has been advising Afghan nationals who received the call forward emails to consider making their way to the border and then to the High Commissions in the neighbouring state. Rather than endangering them should they follow this advice, the UK government should instead ask the UK High Commissions in those states to provide electronic letters and supporting documents granting safe passage to those countries; and then follow up with its promise to evacuate to the UK with the assistance of the International Organisation for Migration.

### ***What criteria will be used?***

25. The UK Home Office has already produced a Guidance Note, setting out categories for consideration when assessing asylum claims. In addition, we recognise that all have the right to seek asylum, and that the UK government should stand by its international commitments, including of humanitarian protection. The UK government should then abide by the standards of international protection agencies, and provide assistance to those with objective claims of persecution and who are demonstrably at great risk.
26. These categories of risk include:
  - a. At risk due to ethnic or religious or gender identity (Hazaras, Shias, LGBTQI)
  - b. At risk due to employment – directly or through subcontracts/contracts with foreign donors (unilateral UK Aid or multi-donor aid, of which UK was part) (building and estate management, accounts and legal, drivers, translators), nurses, doctors, human rights activists, SGBV support networks, women/girls rights actors)
  - c. At risk due to category of work done – sexual gender-based violence, rape survivors, reproductive health, counter terrorism, translation, informers, reporters, stringers, interpreters, blue collar workers in UK embassies, offices, compounds, security actors, ANSF staff, employees of the previous government.
  - d. At risk due to personal health - injuries or critical health conditions, which need immediate medical attention.

- e. At risk due to a combination of the above factors

***What effect will the withdrawal have on future operations, and what will be the impact on the willingness of local personnel to work with, and support, the UK in future operations?***

27. The indignity and injury caused by the shambolic exit from Afghanistan shall provide valuable leverage to religious militancy and terrorist groups for years to come. The rise of the Taliban and the absence and unwillingness of the international community to assist Afghans, will be used as evidence in the rhetoric of violent groups and actors like ISIL-K, Daesh, Al Shabab, Boko Haram and many others. The establishment of the Haqqani network in a mandated position of power is a major outcome of the withdrawal.
28. The withdrawal and the chaos, panic, insult, injury and desperation it created will have a lasting impact on the development outcomes and indicators for Afghanistan. Rule of law, access to humanitarian aid, involvement of violent actors (state and non-state), people trafficking, and modern slavery are all emerging risks and threats to the stability of the nation. Reports of school closure and lack of safety of girls and women have been visible – the withdrawal and the hastiness of it, is directly related to these damaging outcomes for Afghanistan.
29. The impact of this withdrawal will have a most negative impact on future cooperation and collaboration with Afghan partners; and indeed, will affect relations with partners in other developing country contexts, and especially in conflict-affected states.
30. The political outfall of this shambolic withdrawal will have enormous cultural significance for South Asia. The catastrophic failure of UK Strategic Communications over Afghanistan, will have a direct impact on any future military engagement, including withdrawal in terms of collaboration, trust, dialogue, cooperation and respect.
31. The British withdrawal and the absolute silence of Home Office and MoD about evacuation, lack of clarity over resettlement routes and their timelines, and the celebration of getting a ‘lions share’ of the people out by the Prime Minister have created a major breach of trust in the UK.
32. There was very little coordination between evacuation and withdrawal efforts and the civil society actors, NGOs, CSO, International NGOs. As a result some key staff and actors have left Afghanistan and this leaves many organisations with people at risk, and little ability to remain open and functional. Departure of international actors from the nation makes it impossible to coordinate any efforts on the ground for safety, governance and rule of law due to lack of donor engagement.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/19539592.lions-share-eligible-afghans-now-evacuated-pm-says/>

33. The implications for the mismanaged withdrawal extend well beyond future military operations. Through its foreign, security and development programmes and financing, the UK government has made multiple commitments to Afghanistan and its people. These include using ODA money to support research, community development, conflict prevention, democracy and peace-building initiatives. Such activities were premised on the creation of 'equitable partnerships'. That ethic has been undermined by the failure to protect Afghans who have been working closely with UK-based actors, and on whose behalf they have worked to advance UK interests.
34. The Global Challenges Research Fund, and other international funding instruments such as the Newton Fund, which are available to researchers and their associates in conflict-affected states, is now at great risk. The legitimacy of these ODA initiatives has been called into question by the exposure of the UK government's inability to protect partners in their hour of need; and also, by the unwillingness of other funding bodies to intercede.

## Conclusion

35. The UK failed to communicate the aims of the evacuation clearly. The ARAP initiative was poorly defined and understaffed. As a result, many individuals, including several hundred Afghans were misled about the UK's intentions. Rather than try to migrate when the borders were open, they waited on the UK government, for the promise of evacuation. That promise did not come, or when it did, it was too late.
36. The UK government still has a responsibility towards those who received call forward emails, and others who are ARAP eligible, as well as those who are not ARAP eligible, but at demonstrably great risk of loss of life. Their lives have been endangered through their association with UK government funded initiatives, and colleagues.
37. The UK government has further endangered Afghan nationals because of the Ministry of Defence ARAP team - on two occasions - publishing email addresses of high risk Afghans. Their safety has been further compromised by the recommendation that they should seek to cross an international border, policed by the Taliban, to receive the protection of the UK government.
38. The UK government has a responsibility to protect those Afghan nationals now by evacuating them; as we have suggested, there are multiple options including putting on charter flights or issuing visas so they may board commercial flights out of Afghanistan.
39. UK's foreign interests in various regions shall be viewed in light of this damaging withdrawal and abandonment of Afghanistan.

## **Contributors**

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