

Defence Select Committee - Withdrawal from Afghanistan Inquiry

Adam Smith International Written Evidence

1. Key messages

- 1.1. The criteria for resettlement under the ARAP scheme remains unclear and too narrow: it omits Afghan personnel who were employed by contractors to the UK Government. The Taliban does not distinguish between those who engaged in the UK mission through HMG or via a contractor. The latter are at risk due to their association with the UK mission.
- 1.2. We recommend that the Defence Committee pushes for the ARAP scheme and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) – which is still not operational - to be extended to contractors and their dependents. This includes contractors involved in diplomacy, defence and development efforts contributing to the UK's strategic mission. The ACRS selection and prioritisation criteria needs to be clear, fair and transparent and be extended to include contractors and their dependents.
- 1.3. Communication with Afghan applicants to ARAP has been very limited. Many of those who have applied to ARAP have not received any information regarding the status of their application. They remain fearful of their lives and yet are unable to make plans with any certainty as they hope for a visa.
- 1.4. The UK Government should uphold its duty of care commitments for those local personnel who worked on its behalf in Afghanistan. This is of strategic interest as it impacts on the UK's ability to recruit and engage local personnel and partnerships in Afghanistan and other fragile or conflict-affected countries.

2. Introduction

- 2.1. Adam Smith International (ASI) is a British consultancy firm that delivers aid programmes on behalf of Her Majesty's Government (HMG). ASI was a major implementor of DFID's bilateral aid programmes in Afghanistan between 2002 and 2018, delivering over 50 contracts. ASI employed approximately 500 Afghan staff over this duration; these staff were crucial in delivering HMG-funded foreign aid projects and furthering UK defence, diplomatic and development objectives in the country.
- 2.2. ASI's projects worked at national and provincial levels across counter-narcotics, education, revenue administration, governance, counter-terrorism and mining. The achievements of these HMG-funded projects include building a tax administration system to cover the government wage bill; reforming the education sector to support universal access for girls; increasing the transparency of Afghan budgeting systems; and developing local governance systems to allow for the election of local governors and councils.

2.3. Due to their work on HMG and UK affiliated projects, many former ASI Afghan staff have received specific and direct threats from the Taliban. As such, ASI has been supporting Afghan colleagues in their evacuation efforts, including helping them understand evacuation options.

2.4. Of over 230 former ASI Afghan staff who applied for evacuation to the UK, only 32 received an email from HMG informing them to come forward to the Baron Hotel. Our evidence below draws on first-hand accounts of these individuals' experiences in attempting to get to the Baron Hotel. Please note we have only commented where we have sufficient evidence.

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

3.1. The direct evidence provided by our Afghan colleagues through communications over the course of the evacuation period, suggests that the evacuation failed to adequately align with the principles of a human security approach. Such an approach is championed by the MoD and the British military¹: yet does not appear to have been adequately translated into the operational planning and execution process, as detailed below.

3.2. The selection of the Baron Hotel as the processing point for evacuations proved dangerous and highly challenging for individuals to reach. Individuals had to navigate large crowds and multiple Taliban checkpoints. Ultimately the most successful route required individuals to travel through an extensive sewage network. The majority of the ASI staff who were called forward attempted to make it to the Baron Hotel on numerous occasions, often being forced to travel at night, and failed to make it. One colleague described it as “virtually impossible with young children.” Many were injured during the journey. The difficulty reaching the Baron Hotel forced people to make the devastating choice of leaving dependents behind: one colleague twice attempted to make it to the Baron with his wife and young children and found it too difficult. He subsequently made the decision to attempt it again the next day with only his oldest child: they made it successfully, but his wife and younger children now remain stranded in Kabul.

3.3. Given the Taliban checkpoints, a number of other country embassies coordinated transport for their citizens/Afghans eligible for evacuation. This was not provided by MoD to any of our former staff. We believe this would have enabled more ARAP cleared individuals to reach the Baron Hotel, and it would have crucially better supported those who were most vulnerable given the young age of their dependents.

3.4. Our colleagues who attempted to reach the Baron Hotel but who failed reported that they ultimately regretted the attempt. They stated that: their children were severely traumatised by the scenes (one girl became temporarily speechless after the attempt); they became more fearful after their attempt to leave because it had

¹ See for example JSP 1325 Pt 1 (open source). Annex A to Chapter 5 details refers to the Afghanistan context and notes that “PJHQ ‘O’ Plan and follow on orders will include a gender analysis of the area of operations”. Our experience suggests that sufficient gender analysis was absent during the planning phase of this evacuation operation.

been noticed in their neighbourhoods: “everyone left behind is exposed to the Taliban for attempting airport and failed”.

- 3.5. There was confusion surrounding which gate individuals should go to when they reached the Baron Hotel. We believe this was partly due to the URL to an online map provided in the evacuation email malfunctioning. The confusion was also exacerbated by a sign (in English) placed on the back (“South”/ “East”) gate into the Baron Hotel compound that read ‘British Passport holders... [unreadable]’. As a result of this signage, six of our Afghan families waited outside this gate for almost a day thinking they were in the correct location. Despite making several requests to enter, they were not admitted through this gate. While we tried to communicate to them the requirement to move to the front (“North”) gate, these families struggled to believe that they could be so close to safety and yet asked to enter via a different gate which required the navigation of dense crowds and further Taliban checkpoints. We do not believe that any of our families who queued outside this gate subsequently made it onto the evacuation flights: it had been too traumatic for them to reach the ‘wrong’ gate and they had lost crucial time in traversing the crowds to then make it in time.
- 3.6. Our team also supported one British citizen attempt to enter the Baron Hotel. Despite instructions from a very senior FCDO staff member that he report to the back gate of the Baron Hotel at a certain time, and waiting there for many hours, his name was never called out for entry. After hours at the gate, he turned back because his three young daughters could not bear the Taliban indiscriminately whipping innocent people with cables. Two days later, he instructed to report to a location within Kabul to be collected by bus. Again, he waited with his family for hours but his name was not on the list of bus passengers. He was left stranded in Kabul.
- 3.7. When individuals did make it to the correct front (“North”) Gate to the Baron Hotel, there was no orderly process. It required getting the soldiers’ attention and then showing the ARAP clearance documentation. This was not an easy task, and again, those who were most vulnerable (women and young children) were most unlikely to be able to reach the front of the crowds to display their documentation. One of our female colleagues who journeyed through Kabul and reached the vicinity of the Baron Hotel sent this message: "I was here from 8pm till now [12 hours later]. Was beaten (sic) by Taliban. Lost my bag with all my money. Lost my husband's phone. And at the end nothing. We have to go back home. This does not work at all...".
- 3.8. The correspondence to Afghans from MoD, bar one email, has only been in English and not in Dari or Pashto, which has led to confusion in communications.
- 3.9. The majority of our former staff who applied to be evacuated to the UK through ARAP, are yet to receive correspondence on the status of their application, some three months after submitting their applications. They remain fearful of their lives and yet are unable to make plans with any certainty as they retain some hope that their application might be successful.

4. What will be the impact on the willingness of local personnel to work with, and support, the UK in future operations?

- 4.1. Several of our staff applied for resettlement through the ARAP system, but were rejected because they were employed by us as a contractor to the UK Government, and not as a direct employee of the UK government. This is not a distinction being drawn by the Taliban. We are a British headquartered company who were proud to have our work on British development projects publicised by the UK Government in support of their mission in Afghanistan, and our locally engaged staff are therefore as vulnerable and exposed as any locally engaged staff employed by FCDO or what was then the FCO and DFID. These rejections stand in stark contrast to US and Canadian schemes that have been extended to include staff of the contractors through which they have pursued their development objectives.
- 4.2. We believe that this distinction will reduce the willingness of local personnel to work with and support the UK's mission during future operations, not just in Afghanistan but in other fragile contexts where the UK wishes to engage. This is due to the elevated risk from their visible alignment with the UK mission.
- 4.3. It is important to recognise the extent to which local personnel are integral to the delivery of UK aid projects and the broader UK mission. This group extends beyond professional services staff, such as advisers and interpreters, and includes accommodation providers, office providers, drivers, guards, chefs and cleaners, amongst others. Local partnerships with NGOs, civil society and the private sector are also critical to effective delivery of the UK mission.
- 4.4. Former providers of ASI office and accommodation spaces have informed us that their association with the UK mission through UK aid projects has increased their vulnerability to threats from the Taliban. Such landlords have asked what support can be provided for their relocation due to public documentation that links them to the UK mission.
- 4.5. Local support staff, such as drivers, guards, chefs and cleaners who are essential to the functioning of missions, have provided evidence of death threats from the Taliban due to their involvement in the UK mission. Local support staff have applied for the ARAP scheme but with poorer English language skills, on average, than the professional services staff they have found the process more challenging.