

Written evidence submitted by the Ministry of Defence

1. Executive summary

1.1. More than 150,000 British Armed Forces personnel have served in Afghanistan since 2001. They have achieved an enormous amount. 457 tragically lost their lives, and many more were injured.

1.2. The primary objective when we deployed to Afghanistan 20 years ago was to ensure that it could not be used as a base for international terrorism in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks and after Allies invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. There have been no terrorist atrocities against UK interests launched from Afghan soil in the two decades since. This is testament to the brave service of the UK Armed Forces, along with NATO Allies and the Afghan Defense and Security Forces. We will continue to work with our international partners including the UN and NATO to ensure that Afghanistan does not once again become a safe haven for terrorism.

1.3. The sequence of events that led to Op PITTING – the biggest UK military evacuation operation in over 70 years - can be traced back to the Doha Agreement in 2020. The Government has been clear that this limited options in relation to future presence in Afghanistan.

1.4. In April 2021, the US announced that they would be withdrawing troops from Afghanistan by 11 September. In parallel, NATO announced it would be ending its mission in Afghanistan (Op RESOLUTE SUPPORT) and the withdrawal would start by 1 May. This kept with the principle of 'In Together, Out Together' that has guided the Alliance's Commitment to Afghanistan over the last 20 years. The US subsequently announced in July 2021 that their military mission in Afghanistan would conclude by 31 August.

1.5. The rate at which the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) collapsed over the summer of 2021 was unexpected. Nonetheless, the MOD was prepared. We maintain in extremis, contingent, evacuation plans to support Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) diplomatic missions around the world. Whilst Op PITTING itself was a two-week long operation, the planning had begun long before that. As the US withdrawal took shape, the MOD's plans were continuously reviewed and refined, up until the point of execution.

1.6. Op PITTING was a cross-Government effort: our armed forces, diplomats and civil servants completed the biggest and fastest emergency evacuation in recent history, overcoming significant challenges, in the most harrowing conditions - and bringing around 15,000 people to safety in the UK and helping 36 other countries airlift their own

nationals. Over 1,000 British troops, commanded by the Joint Force Headquarters, airlifted to safety an average of 1000 people a day.

1.7. Op PITTING has given way to Op WARM WELCOME – a huge cross-Government effort to ensure Afghans newly arrived here have the support needed to rebuild their lives, find work, pursue education, and integrate into their local communities. Defence is supporting this through the provision of planners and logisticians to other Government departments. MOD is also supporting the cross-Government integration efforts by using the knowledge, skills and experience that exists within the Defence community to develop a pastoral offer for those Afghans who served alongside our Armed Forces.

1.8. Our commitment to Afghanistan, and those who supported our mission there, continues. Regrettably we were not able to evacuate all those we wanted to during Op PITTING. The Ministry of Defence is working with Partners across Government and countries in the region to facilitate safe passage out of Afghanistan for eligible people remaining in Afghanistan and travel back to the UK.

1.9. On 13 September, the Home Office also set out further detail on the Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) which will provide a safe and legal route for up to 25,000 Afghans over the coming years.

2. Pre-evacuation

What part did the UK play in the decision by the US and NATO to withdraw from Afghanistan? Was the option of remaining without US forces considered? How realistic would that have been? & What discussions were there with a) the US and b) other NATO Allies about delaying withdrawal of NATO forces? What would have been the consequences of delaying withdrawal?

2.1. The Defence Secretary has been clear that the “die was cast” for the situation in Afghanistan following the February 2020 Doha Agreement between the Trump Administration and the Taliban.

2.2. NATO Foreign and Defence Ministers met on 14 April 2021 and decided that all NATO forces should withdraw from Afghanistan, in keeping with the principle of ‘In Together, Out Together’ that has guided the Alliance’s commitment to Afghanistan over the last 20 years. On the timings for the evacuation itself, President Biden announced in April that the US would withdraw all its troops from Afghanistan by September 11, the 20th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the US. The Chief of the Defence Staff at the time said that this was “not a decision we hoped for” although the UK respected the view taken by the US.

2.3. All options were thoroughly assessed by the UK in advance of the collective NATO decision to withdraw. This included the potential for staying longer beyond the US withdrawal, or increasing the UK presence in Afghanistan. Without the presence of the United States as a framework nation, it was necessary for the UK together with our NATO Allies to move to a new phase in support of the Afghan people.

How effective were the UK's Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams? What was the make-up and training of the Afghan armed forces?

2.4. Operational Mentor and Liaison Teams (OMLTs) were established under NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission which concluded in 2014. OMLTs provided training and mentoring to the Afghan National Army (ANA); they also served as a liaison capability between ANA and ISAF forces, coordinating the planning of operations and ensuring that ANA units received necessary enabling support (e.g. casualty and medical evacuation).

2.5. During Op HERRICK (the UK's contribution to the ISAF combat mission) OMLTs were attached to specific ANA units and stayed with them as they moved around different areas within the UK area of operations. The provision of OMLTs ceased with the transition in 2014 from ISAF to the NATO Resolute Support Mission (RSM).

Following the decision to withdraw, what changes were made to plans for training and equipping the Afghan armed forces?

2.6. On 14 April 2021 the North Atlantic Council decided to end the Resolute Support Mission (RSM). The MOD considered options for continuing to support the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) following the end of RSM; these options included an enhanced Defence Section within British Embassy Kabul to provide support to the Afghan National Army Officer Academy (ANAOA) and further enhance the links between ANAOA and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

2.7. At the time of the decision to close RSM the UK remained committed to continuing to provide financial support to the ANDSF, with £58 million pledged. The UK was not providing equipment to the ANDSF at this stage and there was no intention to begin doing so.

What plans were made for withdrawal of UK forces and the evacuation of UK nationals? What estimate was made of the number of Afghan nationals who should be evacuated?

2.8. The MOD conducted detailed planning for an orderly and deliberate withdrawal of the majority of UK forces from Afghanistan in line with the wider NATO plan for forces to leave the country by 11 September 2021; this drawdown began in May 2021 and was complete in July 2021. The UK had planned to retain a small residual presence in Kabul to support the diplomatic platform; these force elements remained in-country at the time of execution of Op PITTING and were withdrawn as part of the wider evacuation.

2.9. Whilst the evacuation itself was a two-week long military operation, the planning and preparations for this operation began far in advance. In April 2021, very shortly after the US and NATO announcement regarding withdrawal from Afghanistan, a UK military team carried out an in-country reconnaissance mission in Afghanistan to review Op PITTING contingency plans.

2.10. Contingency planning for possible evacuations takes place routinely for those countries considered as most at risk. This includes the in-country diplomatic post's crisis management plan (an FCDO responsibility) and subsequent military planning. Given the

risk associated with Afghanistan, the PJHQ had developed a Joint Contingency Plan (JCP) for a potential Non-combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) that included detailed information on force requirements, deployment options, evacuation courses of action, readiness states and details of the recognised eligible persons picture. The planning specific to Afghanistan was kept under review (particularly noting the deteriorating security situation), in close collaboration with the FCDO, until it was enacted on the night of 13th August. These plans are delivered by the Chief of Joint Operations on behalf of the MOD.

3. ARAP Pre-evacuation

3.1. On 29 December 2020 the Defence Secretary and Home Secretary announced the introduction of the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP). This scheme offered relocation or other assistance to current and former Locally Employed Staff (LES) in Afghanistan and launched on 1 April 2021. Under ARAP, any current or former LES directly employed by HMG assessed to be at serious risk of threat to life are eligible to apply regardless of their employment status, rank or role, or length of time served.

3.2. Prior to ARAP being launched in April 2020, 1,400 people who were eligible for the earlier ex-gratia scheme were relocated to the UK.

3.3. The initial estimate of Afghan nationals eligible for evacuation was for a total cohort of approximately 8000 persons – including British nationals, other individuals with leave to enter or remain in the UK, and those eligible under ARAP. However, this figure grew as planning developed and further cohorts were included under Category Four of ARAP.¹

3.4. When the North Atlantic Council decided to end the Resolute Support Mission, the MOD initiated Op OUTWORD to plan and deliver an accelerated ARAP. This included the allocation of a military planning team to augment the existing civilian team with the objective of extracting up to 3000 ARAP eligible persons from Afghanistan by the end of August 2021.

3.5. Prior to Op PITTING, the MOD was relocating ARAP eligible persons to the UK by dedicated charter aircraft; between July and August before the commencement of Op PITTING nearly 2000 were evacuated via this method. Once Op PITTING began ARAP personnel were transported between Kabul and locations within the broader Middle East by military aircraft. They were then transferred onto a combination of charter and military aircraft for onward flights to the UK.

What assessment was made of whether and how long the Afghan armed forces would be able to resist the Taliban?

3.6. The MOD, FCDO and other agencies across Government work closely together on feeding intelligence into the Joint Intelligence Committee, who provide an

¹ This cohort comprises those who worked in meaningful enabling roles alongside HMG, in extraordinary and unconventional contexts, and whose responsible HMG unit builds are credible case for consideration under the scheme (in some cases this includes people employed via contractors to support HMG Defence outcomes).

assessment to Ministers. As the Prime Minister has said, it is clear from subsequent events that the collapse of the Afghan forces was faster than expected.

How were plans for evacuation changed once the speed of the takeover by the Taliban became apparent?

3.7. The Op PITTING contingency plans included a number of graduated response options that were scalable dependent on evacuation demand and the threat to the force and to evacuees. Given this context, the plan was adaptable and refined to the circumstances that saw a more rapid takeover by the Taliban than initially thought likely.

4. Op PITTING

On which elements of the evacuation did the MoD lead or support and how effective was coordination with other Government departments? What was the effect of other operations, for example in Iraq?

4.1. Given the scale and required speed of the evacuation, the significant risk and the MOD's responsibility for extracting entitled persons, the MOD assumed the leadership role in delivering Op PITTING. This included the operation of the Temporary Safe Location in the UAE; providing security to the Evacuation Handling Centre at the Baron Hotel; and inserting forces to secure a section of Kabul airport alongside a large US Security Force, which was critical in enabling an evacuation to take place. The evacuation was a cross-government effort. Throughout the planning and execution of Op PITTING cooperation between the MOD, FCDO, Home Office and Border Force was critical to delivering an effective and timely evacuation.

4.2. Once Op PITTING was initiated on 13 August, Ministers met regularly to review the progress of the evacuation, with several meetings chaired by the Prime Minister. The Minister for the Armed Forces (MOD), the Minister for Immigration and Future Borders (Home Office) and the Minister for South Asia (FCDO) met daily to review the evacuation. Senior officials from across Whitehall, senior Defence personnel (military and civilian) including the overall operational commander, and the British Ambassador in Kabul, Sir Laurie Bristow, also met daily under the chairmanship of the National Security Adviser to ensure that critical information was brought together in one place and operational decisions could be made in real time.

4.3. Throughout Op PITTING resources were prioritised where the need or risk was greatest. The impact on other operations was minimal and critical requirements were balanced as required.

What UK and other military equipment was left for the Taliban and how could it be used against the UK? What efforts were made to deny the Taliban any UK military equipment left in country?

4.4. During Op PITTING and the withdrawal of the UK military from Afghanistan spare capacity was used on flights to return as much equipment to the UK as possible. However, people were prioritised over equipment at all times in order to evacuate as many UK nationals and eligible persons as possible. Consequently, a small amount of equipment was left behind or gifted to partner nations, such as the United States. All sensitive equipment and anything considered attractive to criminal and terrorist organisations was recovered during withdrawal or rendered inoperable according to established military evacuation procedures.

How successful was the evacuation? Did it go according to plan?; & How many UK nationals and Afghan nationals and families who worked with or for UK Armed Forces remain in Afghanistan? What can now be done to enable them to leave? What criteria will be used?

4.5. Op PITTING was the biggest UK military evacuation for over 70 years and enabled around 15,000 people to leave Afghanistan and get to safety, in addition to the

families already welcomed under the ARAP programme for those who served alongside our Armed Forces and worked with the British Government.

4.6. Under the ARAP scheme to date around 7,000 Afghans (principals and their families) who worked in support of the UK defence mission were relocated.² 311 eligible ARAP applicants were originally called forward to be evacuated under Op PITTING, but did not manage to get out before the conclusion of the immediate evacuation operation. We remain committed to resettling these individuals. So far 32 of these individuals have since made their way to a third country and 24 have reached the UK. The ARAP scheme is not time-limited and remains open. We will continue to do all we can to support those Afghans who have supported us.

4.7. Support to other groups of individuals at risk of persecution will be considered under the Afghan Citizens' Relocation Scheme, details of which have been announced by the Home Office. This will provide a safe and legal route for up to 25,000 Afghans over the coming years.

5. Post Op PITTING

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?

5.1. The Integrated Review and Defence Command Paper remain the Government and Department's vision of the UK's role in the world through to 2030. These strategic papers took account of our withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is quite right though that we consider the new situation in Afghanistan for our evolving defence strategy and the future of UK military operations and this work is underway.

What extra support for UK veterans will be provided to help with the mental health and other effects of withdrawal?

5.2. The MOD is acutely aware of the impact recent events may have on the veterans' community. That is why in response to events in Afghanistan:

- The Defence and Health Secretaries jointly chaired a mental health summit bringing together experts to discuss support for those who served and their families;
- We made an additional £2.7 million available to Op COURAGE to expand services supporting those experiencing complex mental and/or physical trauma, or alcohol and substance misuse; and
- We announced a further £5 million for the Armed Forces Charity sector to enable a range of projects to support veterans, including those who served in Afghanistan.

² The figures within this paragraph are subject to change. The Defence Secretary has committed to providing an update on the relevant figures concerning ARAP when the House returns.

5.3. This builds upon the £17.8 million already allocated to veteran specific mental health services through Op COURAGE and existing initiatives.

5.4. The Government has announced additional support for Afghans arriving in the UK under Op WARM WELCOME – including extra funding for housing, as well as immediate medical and mental health support. This has also seen UK veterans reunited with some of the Afghan personnel who they served with in Afghanistan. In recognition of the fact that a number of Afghan evacuees will have specific links to Defence, the MOD is supporting the cross-Government efforts to integrate new arrivals by using the knowledge, skills and experience that exists within the Defence community to develop a pastoral offer for those Afghans who served alongside our Armed Forces.

Annex A: Timeline in relation to the Withdrawal from Afghanistan**September 2001**

- On 12 September, the day after the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center and Pentagon, NATO invoked Article 5.

October 2001

- On 07 October Op ENDURING FREEDOM began, and US, UK and Allies launched military strikes against Al-Qaeda training camps with the objective of removing the terrorist threat. The first UK troops were deployed to Afghanistan.

April 2006

- The British redeployed in strength, focusing on Helmand Province in the south. Over 3,000 troops were sent to help with reconstruction efforts.

June 2009

- On 19 June, Op PANTHER'S CLAW, a British-led offensive involving over 3,000 troops, was launched in Helmand. After five weeks of fighting, the Taliban were driven from their former stronghold, key strategic crossings were secured, and a lasting ISAF presence was established in the area.

February 2010

- On 13 February, Op MOSHTARAK, the largest joint offensive commenced, involving 15,000 British, American and Afghan troops, to eliminate the Taliban from their strongholds in central Helmand.

May 2011

- On 2 May, Osama bin Laden, the founder and first leader of al-Qaeda was killed in Pakistan following a US Special Forces Operation.

July 2011

- On 20 July, British troops handed over responsibility for security of the capital of Helmand province, Lashkar Gah, to Afghan forces.

December 2014

- On 12 December, the final phase of the UK's combat operations in Afghanistan (Op HERRICK) came to an end.

February 2020

- On 29 February, US and Taliban sign the Doha Agreement which commits all international forces to withdraw from Afghanistan within 14 months. NATO endorsed the deal on the same day.
- As part of this, US agree to reduce in-country presence to 8600 troops in the first 135 days.

September 2020

- On 12 September, negotiations begin in Doha between the Afghan Government and other groups, including the Taliban.

November 2020

- On 17 November, the US announce they will further withdraw the number of troops that remain in Afghanistan from 4500 to 2500, with Coalition troops overall falling to 5400.

February 2021

- On 16 February 2021, UK National Security Council (NSC) agrees to retain UK troops presence (c750) beyond 1 May deadline set in deal.

April 2021

- On 14 April, the US confirms that all international troops will withdraw from Afghanistan by September 2021. The NATO North Atlantic Council also releases a Ministerial Statement stating that the withdrawal of Resolution Support Mission will begin by 01 May.
- On 15 April, NSC reaffirmed that the UK's primary interest is to identify and mitigate CT threats to the UK, to oversee a safe and orderly drawdown of UK troops and examine potential future postures.
- On 21 April, JFHQ carry out in country reconnaissance mission and review of Op PITTING Joint Contingency Plans.

May 2021

- On 29 May, internal MOD 2* Commitments Management Group (CMG) held to discuss Op PITTING. Meetings are held at a minimum of weekly thereafter, with the tempo subsequently being increased to daily.

July 2021

- On 5 July, NSC held to determine size and shape of future presence on Afghanistan held, including future of Embassy presence and CT.
- On 23 July Warning Order prepared to reduce notice to move period for those assigned force elements for Op PITTING.
- On 29 July, the internal MOD 2* CMG starts meeting on a daily basis.

August 2021

- On 6 August The Taliban capture their first provincial capital (the city of Zaranji in Southwestern Nimroz) without resistance.

- On 13 August Kandahar and Lashk Gah fall.
- On 13 August, FCDO hardened Travel Advice to urge British Nationals to leave Afghanistan and Op PITTING was activated. UK announced deployment of 600 troops to Kabul Airport, including 16 Air Assault Brigade.
- On 14 August, the British Embassy in Kabul was closed due to the deteriorating security situation.
- On 15 August, despite the Taliban issuing a statement saying that they had no plans to take Kabul 'by force', they entered via the outskirts of Kabul from several directions.
- On 16 August, the first flight arrived at RAF Brize Norton with 370 evacuees. This included 320 British Embassy Kabul staff.
- On 17 August, US forces took control of the airport in Kabul with help of British military and the RAF began mass airlifts. The Evacuation Handling Centre became operational at Barons Hotel and the FCDO Rapid Deployment Team arrived at Kabul.
- On 18 August, the Border Force Rapid Deployment Team moved to Kabul.
- On 24 August, despite the UK and other Allies requesting an extension of the US deadline for Afghan withdrawal at the UK-hosted emergency G7 meeting, the US announced that the 31 August deadline would remain.
- On 26 August, a suicide bombing occurred near to the airport killing between 180-200 people including 2 British nationals and the child of a British national, and 13 US Service Personnel.
- On 28 August, the final evacuation flight for civilians departed followed by the final evacuation flight carrying military personnel later that day.
- On 29 August, the evacuation / withdrawal phase of Op PITTING concluded.

15th October 2021