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Afghanistan: Troop withdrawal and Taliban takeover

NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

TOP LINES

- British and American forces are leaving Afghanistan as the Taliban seize most of the country. The Taliban has reached the capital, Kabul, and the Afghan President has fled the country.
- A withdrawal against the backdrop of a worsening security situation was clearly not envisaged, and leaves the Afghan Government, its people and its armed forces at clear risk of a return to Taliban rule.
- The UK Government must do what it can to support the establishment of a transitional government which includes all Afghan tribes and members of the previous government. It must also ensure the safety of remaining British service personnel, British citizens and those working for British organisations who face acute risks on the ground.
- The security situation in Afghanistan has serious implications for the security of the UK and its allies. Taliban rule could facilitate a resurgence of ISIS and al-Qaeda, which has been held at bay by NATO presence in Afghanistan since 2001.
- Afghanistan sits between the three primary state-based threats identified by the Government's Integrated Review – Russia, China and Iran. The withdrawal of NATO and the inability of the Afghan government to maintain internal security provides an opportunity for malign actors who may threaten and ultimately undermine our interests abroad.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The situation in Afghanistan is worsening by the hour. It reflects a catastrophic miscalculation of the capacity and legitimacy of the Afghan government, and the resilience of Afghan forces. Now that the Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has fled “to prevent a flood of bloodshed”, the future of Afghanistan is more uncertain than ever. ¹The images of people trying to make it out of Kabul are utterly desperate, as the Americans deployed another 1,000 troops in a bid to secure the airport. ² The U.S. acting ambassador has also left Kabul.

¹ Al Jazeera, [Afghan President Ghani flees country as Taliban surrounds Kabul](#), 15 August 2021

² BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-58227029>, August 2021

Afghanistan faces a tragic step backwards in the gains for which UK soldiers, diplomats, NGO workers, and their coalition and Afghan partners, have worked so hard. There are very serious questions about the failed political and development strategy of the last ten years.

- The priority now must be for the government to accelerate efforts to get UK nationals and eligible Afghans out of the country.
- The UK Government has been far too slow to provide sanctuary to Afghans who have served alongside and supported the British presence in Afghanistan. Even now, there are reports of Afghans facing unacceptable bureaucratic hurdles and the FCDO suspending scholarships for young Afghans. **The UK resettlement scheme must urgently be expanded to ensure people to whom we owe a huge debt are not abandoned.**
- **The Taliban's return is likely to lead to a refugee crisis.** The UK Government must put in place specific safe and legal asylum routes and help support Afghans who are fleeing to neighbouring states.
- **The government must immediately consult with our allies in NATO and key countries in the region about the implications of the collapse of the Afghan government.** There needs to be a quick and coordinated approach from the international community to the changing situation on the ground, and a strategy to try to protect the gains made in the last 20 years on human rights.
- **There is a risk of a humanitarian disaster, particularly for women and girls,** while the UK Government has slashed development support to Afghanistan by 45%. The UK must ensure aid can reach those in need to prevent a humanitarian crisis. This will require a coordinated international effort.
- The UK Government must work with allies to lay out a strategy to prevent Afghanistan becoming once again a safe haven and operational hub for international terrorism that threatens national security.
- The UK Government should outline clear red-lines over international recognition of any transitional Afghan Government which includes the Taliban. These red-lines should include ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for terrorism, that the education of girls remains a priority, and that there will not be a return to the draconian criminal justice system when the Taliban previously ruled the country.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

US and coalition forces are in the process of withdrawing from Afghanistan, bringing 20 years of their presence to an end. Around 150,000 British service personnel served in the country over this period, of whom 457 were killed. Since the US-led invasion in 2001, an estimated 241,000 combatants (including UK and other forces), civilians, aid workers and others have died in the Afghanistan and Pakistan conflict zone.³

The UK's combat mission in Afghanistan formally ended in October 2014. Since January 2015, UK forces have been deployed purely as part of NATO's training mission in the country. At the beginning of 2021 the UK's contingent in Afghanistan stood at approximately 1,100 personnel.

³ NATO, Statement, [North Atlantic Council statement on the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations](#), December 2020

Following the US and NATO announcements on troop withdrawal, the Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, confirmed that British troops would withdraw in line with coalition plans.⁴

In a statement on Afghanistan on 8 July 2021 the Prime Minister said: *All British troops assigned to NATO's mission in Afghanistan are now returning home. For obvious reasons, I will not disclose the timetable of our departure, but I can tell the House that most of our personnel have already left.*⁵

Following the April 2021 withdrawal announcement, James Heappey MP, Minister for the Armed Forces, suggested that the UK could have a role in the broader counterterrorism mission that was being discussed with the US and NATO allies. He also said that some military equipment would be gifted to the ANSF and suggested that training and mentoring of Afghan military personnel could continue, either remotely, or on existing military courses within the UK:

*Afghanistan remains one of the world's least developed countries, according to UN measurements. It is shaped by continued political fragility, conflict and aid dependence. Its future remains highly uncertain, US intelligence community analysis reportedly suggests its Government may survive for only six months once foreign troops withdraw. Even if the Government remains, the World Bank suggests it will continue to need significant aid to fund basic expenditure into at least the late 2020s.*⁶

PEACE PROCESS

The US and its allies hold that the original objectives of the campaign in Afghanistan have been achieved and that a military presence is no longer appropriate. President Biden has been unequivocal in his view that maintaining the “conditions based” approach to withdrawal, that has been the mantra for the last two decades, would mean coalition forces staying in Afghanistan indefinitely.

The US and its allies have instead committed to building a new relationship with Afghanistan, premised on support for the Afghan Government, the peace process and the Afghan National Security Forces. However, the withdrawal of international military forces, in the absence of a negotiated peace settlement and ceasefire, has led to chaos.⁷

The peace talks which began under the Obama Administration have made no progress since negotiations started.⁸ Several international attempts to bring the Taliban and Afghan Government together have, thus far, ended in failure. US proposals for an interim transitional government, appointed on the principle of equity, were rejected by President Ashraf Ghani, who presented a three-point plan for governance that uses the framework of the current

⁴ [Ministry of Defence press release, 14 April 2021](#)

⁵ House of Commons debate, 8 July 2021, c1104

⁶ Ibid

⁷ House of Commons Research Paper, [Operation Enduring Freedom and the Conflict in Afghanistan: An Update](#), 2001

⁸ U.S. to launch peace talks with Taliban, [U.S. to launch peace talks with Taliban - The Washington Post](#), 18 June 2013

constitution, culminating in presidential elections. This approach has been dismissed by the Taliban.⁹

Talks due to be held in Istanbul at the end of April 2021 were postponed after the Taliban said it would not participate in any conference making decisions on the future of Afghanistan until “all foreign forces completely withdraw from our homeland”.¹⁰ In a Communique at the beginning of May 2021, the Special Envoys and Special Representatives of the EU, France, Germany, Italy, NATO, Norway, the UK and US called for:

*The immediate resumption, without preconditions, of substantive negotiations on the future of Afghanistan with the aim to develop and negotiate realistic compromise positions on power sharing that can lead to an inclusive and legitimate government and a just and durable settlement.*¹¹

They reiterated that “the process of troop withdrawal must not serve as an excuse for the Taliban to suspend the peace process and that good faith political negotiations must proceed in earnest”.

On 8 July 2021, as coalition forces moved towards withdrawal, the Iranian Foreign Ministry announced that an Afghan Government delegation had met with Taliban representatives in Tehran. In a joint statement reportedly released afterwards, the Afghan Government and the Taliban stated that “war is not the solution to the Afghanistan problem” and that “all efforts must be directed towards achieving a peaceful political solution”.¹²

THE RISE OF THE TALIBAN

The withdrawal of international military forces has gone ahead in the absence of a peace deal and against a backdrop of escalating violence in Afghanistan.

Over the last year, the US estimates that Taliban attacks against Afghan Government forces have numbered between 80 and 120 per day. There have been targeted killings of prominent figures in civil society, the media, judiciary and government, particularly women. Recent heavy fighting between Afghan and Taliban forces in Helmand, Kandahar and Badghis Provinces has forced thousands of Afghan civilians to flee their homes.¹³

The UN has estimated that, in the first three months of 2021, the number of civilians killed and injured (1,783) was 29 per cent higher than for the same period in 2020. That same report attributed 61% of casualties to the Taliban and other anti-government forces. In early May 2021, an attack on a school in Kabul left 55 people dead, predominantly girls, and hundreds injured. Afghan Government officials blamed the Taliban for the attack, although they denied any involvement.¹⁴

⁹ Voice of America, [Afghan President offers three-step peace plan](#), 30 March 2021

¹⁰ Mohammed Naeem (Spokesman for the Taliban office in Qatar), 13 April 2021

¹¹ European External Action Service, press release

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/97988/afghanistan-communic%C3%A9-9-special-envoys-and-special-representatives-european-union-france_en, 7 May 2021

¹² Al Jazeera, [Afghan gov't delegation meets Taliban in Iran](#), 8 July 2021

¹³ BBC News, [Afghanistan: Taliban flag raised above border crossing with Pakistan](#), 14 July 2021

¹⁴ UNAMA, [Reports on the Protections of Citizens in Armed Conflict](#), July 2021

A number of analysts have blamed Islamic State (IS), which continues to be active in Afghanistan, in particular in Kabul and Jalalabad in the east. On 14 May 2021, IS claimed responsibility for an attack on a mosque in Kabul that killed 12 people, including the cleric leading prayers. The Taliban views IS as a strategic rival and has fought the terrorist group since 2015.

The Taliban is estimated to have approximately 60,000 fighters, making it stronger than at any point since 2001. It has also been steadily gaining territory across Afghanistan, with more than half of the country assessed to be under the direct control of, or contested by, the Taliban in the first quarter of 2021. Most of the areas under direct Taliban control are remote and rural and generally among the poorest parts of the country.¹⁵

Minority groups are likely to come under increased threats if order is weakened. Most Hindus and Sikhs have already left the country, and the Hazaras, who are mostly Shia Muslims in a Sunni-majority country, have been subject to violent attacks by the Taliban and other groups.¹⁶

Targeted violence by terrorist organisations against journalists, activists and human rights defenders increased in 2020. The UN reports 23 human rights defenders and media workers were killed.¹⁷ Reporters without Borders estimate that since 2001 at least 100 journalists, including 15 international journalists, have been killed in connection with their work in the country and 60 media outlets have been destroyed or attacked.¹⁸

In 2020, the Afghan Government joined the UK's Media Freedom Coalition which requires commitments to improve media freedom. Human Rights Watch says the targeting of journalists and women in the media highlights the need to uphold press freedom in any peace settlement. It has been reported the Taliban is forcing some outlets to close or censor themselves in areas where they have gained control.¹⁹

SUGGESTED INTERVENTIONS

1. What actions are being taken to protect British personnel working in the British Embassy?
2. What actions are being taken to stop Afghanistan becoming a breeding ground for terrorism directed towards the UK and its allies?
3. What assessments have been of how withdrawal will impact the threat level [of terrorism] in the UK?

¹⁵ House of Lords Select Committee on International Relations and Defence, [The UK and Afghanistan](#), HL208, January 2021. See also "The Americans may leave Afghanistan, but the Forever War will grind on", RUSI Commentary, 16 April 2021

¹⁶ Associated Press, [Afghan Hazaras being killed at school, play, even birth](#), 11 June 2021

¹⁷ FCDO, Human Rights Report 2020, July 2021, p34; UN, Special Report: Killing of human rights defenders, journalists and media workers in Afghanistan, February 2021, p8

¹⁸ Reporters without Borders, RSF asks international criminal court to investigate murders of journalists in Afghanistan, 2 June 2021

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, Afghanistan: Taliban target journalists, women in media, 1 April 2021

4. Will any British Armed Forces Personnel remain in Afghanistan, or are there plans for wider involvement of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force in assisting the Afghan Army?
5. What measures and resources are being put in place to ensure NGOs and aid workers can continue to work on vital projects supporting democracy, equality and justice in Afghanistan?
6. What diplomatic steps is the government taking with countries in the region to support the peace process? In particular, is the UK Government engaging with the Government of Pakistan about its role?
7. Will the Government call for an urgent UN security council meeting to coordinate the international response and send a clear message that we will not walk away from the Afghan people?
8. What guarantees will the Government give that the UK will not offer international recognition to any transitional Afghan Government which includes the Taliban unless it commits to ensuring Afghanistan will not be a terrorist safe haven and girls education will continue to be a priority?
9. What plans does the Government have to increase UK aid to Afghanistan in the wake of the collapse of the government?
10. What steps are being taken to protect minority groups, aid workers and human rights activists?
11. Will the Government commit to undertake an independent inquiry to establish why the Afghan Government collapsed so quickly and determine what lessons can be learned for future UK foreign policy?
12. Will the Government commit to providing expedited asylum processes for refugees escaping Afghanistan?
13. Will the Government provide safe passage to the UK for Afghans who have worked closely with and supported British services in Afghanistan?
14. Will the Government create a specific resettlement scheme for Afghan refugees?
15. Will the Government support an urgent review of live Afghan asylum cases, those in detention and those who are liable for removal in light of their not being able to return safely to Afghanistan.
16. What steps is the Government taking to expedite outstanding Refugee Family Reunion applications for families in Afghanistan?
17. Will the Government allow all those awarded Chevening academic Scholarships to take up their places in the UK immediately?

18. Afghanistan sits between the three primary state-based threats identified by the Government's Integrated Review – Russia, China and Iran. How will the minister ensure that these powers do not take advantage of the conflict to further their own geopolitical ends?
 19. What assessment has the Government made of the likelihood that the Governments of Russia, China, and Iran will move to recognise the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan?
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The author:

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