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The UK and Afghanistan

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Select Committee on International Relations and Defence

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Q in footnotes refers to a question in oral evidence

SUMMARY

Afghanistan's relative prioritisation as a UK national security issue has slipped since 2010, but the scale of the challenges facing the country, and their potential impact on UK interests, have not diminished. Our report and its conclusions and recommendations come at a critical time in Afghanistan's history. The Afghan state remains very fragile, with limited control of territory. The Taliban's insurgency continues, and terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province, operate in the country. Afghanistan is the source of 95% of the heroin on UK streets.

Afghanistan has endured more than 40 years of conflict, instability and external interference since the Soviet invasion of 1979, and suffered extraordinarily high levels of civilian casualties. It is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked 170 out of 189 countries in the 2019 Human Development Index. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded its problems: more than a third of Afghans are in acute humanitarian need, and the poverty rate is expected to increase to 72% of the population. In 2019 there were more than five million Afghan asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons.

In conducting our inquiry, we focussed principally on the current situation in Afghanistan and the country's future prospects, rather than on past events. We were struck by the fact that, despite the scale of the UK's involvement, both military and economic, over recent years, there were few traces of a coherent overall policy approach.

The Afghan state is highly aid-dependent, and there are few prospects for domestic revenues to increase. We conclude that reducing official development assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan would disrupt the provision of basic services, and have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable. The UK is a major donor to Afghanistan, and we welcome the Government's decision to maintain the level of aid to Afghanistan in the 2020–21 financial year. Ongoing international funding is likewise essential for the viability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and we welcome the UK's pledge of £70 million for 2021, in addition to its support and training to the ANSF through NATO's Resolute Support Mission.

The Afghan government's accountability to its citizens is limited by its reliance on international military spending and aid. Government appointments are regarded as a source of spoils, and warlords and militia leaders retain roles inside the state. As a major donor of on-budget support, (provided directly to the government), we call on the UK, with its international partners, to call out the corrupt practices of individuals within the Afghan government, and shift away from on-budget support to other ways of delivering aid if these levels of corruption continue.

We heard that the expectations of Afghan citizens about human rights and participation in governance have changed for the better since 2001, making any future attempt to roll back these freedoms more difficult. There has been a considerable improvement in the participation of women, particularly in urban areas, and in freedom of speech, association and access to information. This progress has, however, been impeded by challenging issues including the security situation, the limited reach of the Afghan government into rural areas, a lack of political will, and a culture of impunity. We call on the Government to

speak out on human rights abuses, including those perpetrated by officials, the Afghan security forces and militias.

Afghanistan is the largest source of heroin in the world. The drug economy is a crucial part of domestic power dynamics, while many rural jobs and livelihoods depend on poppy cultivation. We conclude that the UK's presence in, and funding for, Afghanistan appears to contribute little to countering the narcotics trade. Effective action will only be possible once a greater degree of security is achieved, and the UK should work with any future Afghan government on this agenda. There are many ways to work with the Afghan government on this, including supporting economic development.

In September 2020, talks began in Doha between the Afghan government and the Taliban. This followed an agreement between the US and the Taliban, which committed to the withdrawal of all foreign troops by May 2021. We regret that this agreement was not conditional on the outcome of peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban: this has undermined the Afghan government's leverage. We also regret President Trump's plans to withdraw 2,500 troops from Afghanistan by 15 January, which has the potential to further destabilise the security situation. We appreciate that the situation is now uncertain, as a result of the passage by Congress of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 which constrains the Trump Administration's ability to withdraw troops. We urge the UK to emphasise to the US and to NATO Allies the importance of their ongoing presence in Afghanistan until a peace deal is reached. The Government must engage with the incoming Biden Administration on Afghanistan as a matter of urgency.

The support of the US and Afghanistan's neighbours will be critical to the success of talks in Doha, and the implementation of any agreement. We consider that it should be a priority objective of the Government's policy to secure a binding international commitment by all of Afghanistan's neighbours to non-intervention and to economic co-operation.

A successful outcome to the Afghan peace talks must include a ceasefire, the reconciliation and reintegration of armed groups, respect for the rights of all Afghan citizens and a commitment not to provide support for terrorist groups. However, while the Taliban has shown willingness to engage in the talks, its commitment to a negotiated settlement and to power-sharing is unclear. It remains closely associated with al-Qaeda and the Haqqani Network, and its undertaking on terrorism in the February 2020 US-Taliban deal was imprecise. Any settlement agreed at the Doha talks must firm up that commitment. We are concerned that the Taliban remains ideologically opposed to the progress made on human rights since 2001. Progress on these rights, particularly of women and minorities, are in danger of being reversed.

We conclude that the Government should be giving careful consideration to how, in the event of the Doha talks resulting in an agreement, it will handle its future relationship with the Taliban, which will necessarily be part of any power-sharing arrangement. The future of international security assistance to Afghanistan is unclear: a government with Taliban representation might not accept such assistance, and the UK and NATO Allies would need to consider what kind of assistance to provide to such a regime. The provision of ODA would pose difficult questions for the UK about conditionality on the grounds of human rights and terrorism, and the extent to which it could enforce its

terms. We request that the Government shares its thinking on these issues with Parliament.

Finally, we conclude that it is essential for the long-awaited Integrated Review to demonstrate how Afghanistan fits into UK's long-term strategic aims for national security and foreign policy. The UK has had limited opportunities, and shown little inclination, to exert an independent voice on policy on Afghanistan. Instead, the UK has followed the lead of the US, and has been too reticent in raising its distinctive voice. It should now call for a multinational approach to Afghanistan within NATO, and be precise about its aims, including regional stability, counter-terrorism and countering narcotics production and trafficking.

The UK and Afghanistan

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1. Afghanistan is “trapped by its geography”.¹ A poor, landlocked country in a region of strategic importance, its challenges are long-standing.
2. Hussain Haqqani, Director for South and Central Asia, Hudson Institute, said Afghanistan had been created “as a buffer state”² and “the countries between which it was created as a buffer have plans for it that do not match the aspirations of its peoples”.³ Lord Sedwill KCMG FRGS, former Cabinet Secretary and former National Security Adviser, said it had been “a theatre in which regional rivalries have played out” and “neighbours have meddled”.⁴ Its neighbours saw Afghanistan “through the prism of geopolitical state interest” and were driven by their “national insecurities”.⁵
3. Box 1 sets out a timeline of Afghanistan’s political history since 1979.

Box 1: Afghanistan timeline

1979: The Soviet Union took over effective control of Afghanistan following the overthrow and death of President Amin.⁶

1988–89: The Soviet Union withdrew troops.

1992: The Soviet-backed regime of Dr Mohammad Najibullah was overthrown by the mujahideen (decentralised guerrilla groups taking inspiration from Islam).⁷ Civil war broke out.

1996: The Taliban (an ultraconservative and principally Pashtun-ethnic political and religious faction that emerged in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, led by a former mujahideen fighter, Mullah Mohammad Omar)⁸ seized control of Kabul.

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- 1 [Q 100](#) (Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh)
 - 2 Afghanistan’s borders were finalised in the 1890s to reflect the concerns of the British Empire and Russia. Whitney Azoy, Middle East Institute, ‘Post-Buffer Afghanistan: A Nation-State Here to Stay?’ (17 April 2012): <https://www.mei.edu/publications/post-buffer-afghanistan-nation-state-here-stay> [accessed 5 January 2021]
 - 3 [Q 51](#). The state has multiple ethnic groups within its borders, and its border with Pakistan cuts through ethnic Pashtun communities.
 - 4 [Q 85](#)
 - 5 [Q 100](#) (Dr Avinash Paliwal)
 - 6 Office of the historian—US Department of State, ‘The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the US Response, 1978–1980’: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]
 - 7 Britannica, ‘Mujahideen’: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mujahideen-Afghani-rebels> [accessed 5 January 2021]
 - 8 Britannica, ‘Taliban’: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Taliban> [accessed 5 January 2021], Britannica, ‘Civil war, mujahideen-Taliban phase (1992–2001)’: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Afghanistan/Civil-war-mujahideen-Taliban-phase-1992-2001#ref727635> [accessed 5 January 2021] and [Q 87](#) (Lord Sedwill)

Around 1996: Al-Qaeda, a militant Islamist organisation founded by Osama bin Laden and Arab fighters who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, re-established its headquarters in Afghanistan.⁹

1997: The Taliban was recognised as ruling Afghanistan by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. It controlled about two-thirds of country.

October 2001: US-led bombing of Afghanistan following the September 11 attacks. Anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces entered Kabul shortly afterwards.

December 2001: Afghan groups agreed a deal at a conference in Bonn, Germany.¹⁰

2004: The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan was ratified.¹¹ The first presidential elections were held.

2005: Parliamentary elections were held.

Source: BBC News, 'Afghanistan profile—timeline' (9 September 2019): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12024253> [accessed 5 January 2021]

4. Kate Clark, Co-Director, Afghanistan Analysts Network, said “war and peace” were “the biggest challenges facing Afghanistan”. The war was “40 years old”; it had “started with a communist coup and a Soviet invasion and has carried on in various guises ever since”.¹² International terrorist networks including al-Qaeda and ISIS remain active in Afghanistan.¹³ Box 1 sets out a timeline of Afghanistan’s political history since 1979.
5. The war was now “Afghans killing Afghans, but with foreign support”.¹⁴ From January to September 2020, 2,117 Afghan civilians were killed and 3,822 wounded in fighting.¹⁵ In 2019, for the sixth year in a row the number of civilian casualties (those killed and injured) exceeded 10,000; the number of civilian casualties over the preceding decade exceeded 100,000.¹⁶ Dr Terence McSweeney, Solent University and the London School of Economics and Political Science, said “hundreds of thousands” of Afghans

9 Britannica, ‘Al-Qaeda’: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/al-Qaeda> [accessed 5 January 2021]

10 The Bonn Agreement established an Interim Authority for Afghanistan, the legal framework until the adoption of a new constitution, and the integration of all armed groups into the new Afghan armed forces under the authority of the Interim Authority. UN Peacemaker, ‘Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn Agreement)’: <https://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-bonnagreement2001> [accessed 5 January 2021]

11 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *The Constitution of Afghanistan*: <http://www.afghanembassy.com/pl/afg/images/pliki/TheConstitution.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

12 **Q 1.** It is estimated that 500,000 Afghan civilians were killed between 1979 and 1988. Accurate data for the period 1989–2001 is not available; it is estimated that at least 9,800 civilians died between April 1992 and March 1995 although the true death toll is likely to have been significantly higher. World Peace Foundation, ‘Afghanistan: Soviet invasion and civil war’ (7 August 2015): <https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocitiyendings/2015/08/07/afghanistan-soviet-invasion-civil-war/> [accessed 5 January 2021]. About 157,000 people were killed in Afghanistan from 2001–2020, of which more than 43,000 were civilians. Watson Institute, Brown University, ‘Costs of War’: <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs/human/civilians/afghan#:~:text=About%20157%2C000%20people%20have%20been,those%20killed%20have%20been%20civilians> [accessed 5 January 2021]

13 **Q 55** (Erica Gaston) and **Q 58** (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

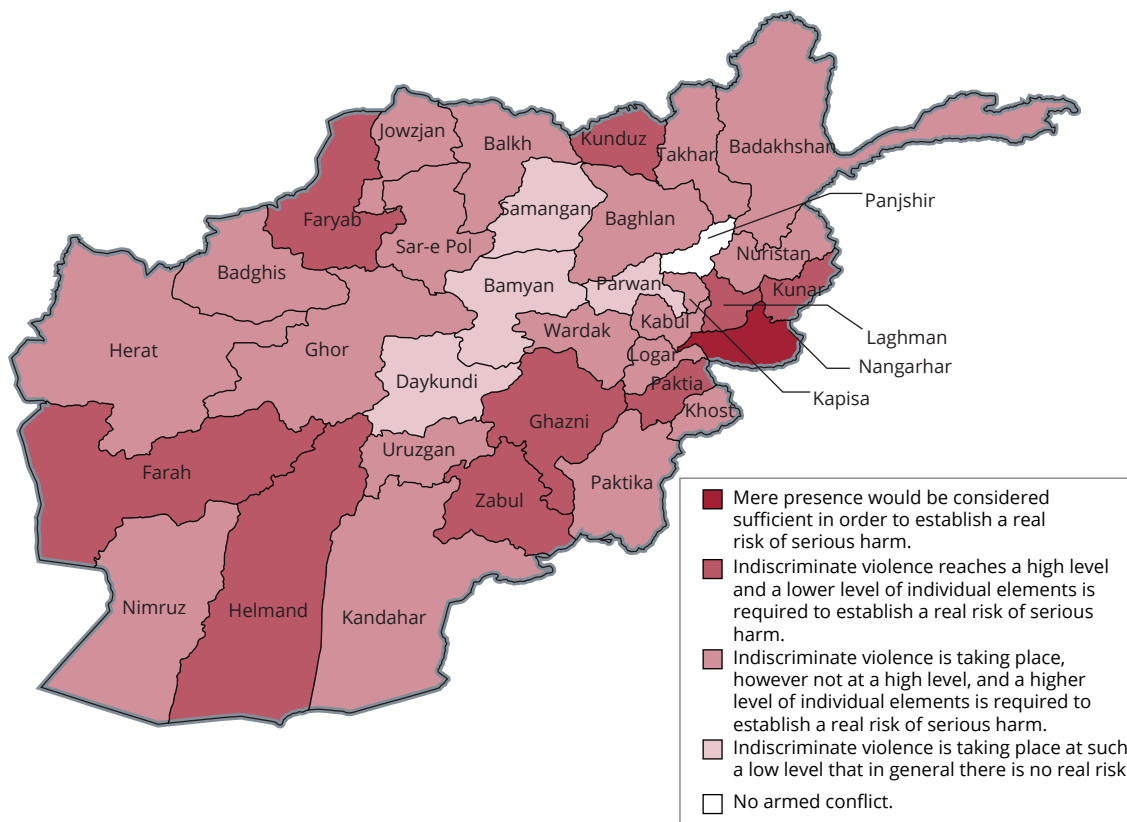
14 **Q 1** (Kate Clark)

15 UNAMA, ‘Afghanistan peace talks fail to slow civilian casualty toll’ (27 October 2020): <https://unama.unmissions.org/afghanistan-peace-talks-fail-slow-civilian-casualty-toll> [accessed 5 January 2021]

16 UN OHCHR, ‘Afghanistan: 10,000 civilian casualties for sixth straight year’ (22 February 2020): <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25594> [accessed 5 January 2021]

had been “injured and displaced by the conflict which has now lasted for a generation”.¹⁷ Figure 1 shows a map of violence by province.

Figure 1: Map of violence by province



Source: European Asylum Support Office, ‘Country Guidance: Afghanistan’ (June 2020): https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Country_Guidance_Afghanistan_2019.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]

6. The population of Afghanistan is approximately 38 million.¹⁸ Two-thirds of the population is under the age of 25,¹⁹ and the median age of Afghan citizens is 18 years old.²⁰ It remains one of the world’s poorest and least developed countries. Mr Haqqani described it as “a ... country with fewer resources than are necessary to run a functioning government”.²¹ The Afghan state is highly dependent on foreign funding, both official development assistance (ODA) and the spending of foreign armies.²²
7. Afghanistan’s lack of access to the sea makes it particularly dependent on its neighbours for trade. Their political and security concerns, including tense relations with other states, often undermine the needs of Afghanistan. Limited control of territory by the Afghan government and the precarious

17 Written evidence from Dr Terence McSweeney (AFG0002)

18 World Bank, ‘Population, total—Afghanistan’: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POPT.TOTL?locations=AF> [accessed 5 January 2021]

19 Written evidence from the World Food Programme (AFG0010)

20 Jacob Ausubel, ‘Populations skew older in some of the countries hit hard by COVID-19’, Pew Research Centre (22 April 2020): <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/22/populations-skew-older-in-some-of-the-countries-hit-hard-by-covid-19/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

21 Q 51

22 Q 1 (Kate Clark)

security situation impede the development of infrastructure including roads, pipelines and railways.²³

8. According to Hameed Hakimi, Research Associate, Asia-Pacific Programme, Chatham House, Afghans face “multiple and intersecting deprivations in health, education, living standards, employment and security.”²⁴ The World Food Programme said:

“A child born in Afghanistan will stand a 50% chance of starting life below the poverty line, but a 90% chance of being born into a family whose income cannot meet their basic needs. That child will stand a 40% chance of being physically and mentally stunted by malnutrition.”²⁵

9. The COVID-19 pandemic had “exacerbated” this “already fragile situation”. Ill-equipped health facilities have been overwhelmed, and the “already desperate” socio-economic conditions have worsened, with serious negative effects on trade, jobs and livelihoods.²⁶
10. In addition to the security and economic situation, the Afghan state faces serious problems including “poor governance”, the “lack of a political settlement”²⁷ and “endemic corruption”.²⁸

2020 and a possible future settlement with the Taliban

11. 2020 saw the opening of an opportunity for negotiating a political settlement. This is significant for Afghanistan and for countries such as the UK which have been heavily involved diplomatically, economically, and militarily since 2001.
12. There have been two main developments:
- First, in February 2020, “driven ... by the desire of the US to leave Afghanistan”,²⁹ the US signed an agreement with the Taliban. This committed to the withdrawal of foreign troops by May 2021. The Taliban agreed that it would not allow terrorist groups to use Afghan soil to threaten the security of the US and its allies. President Trump has announced that the US will withdraw 2,500 troops from Afghanistan in mid-January 2021.³⁰

23 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group ([AFG0013](#))

24 [Q 1](#)

25 Written evidence from the World Food Programme ([AFG0010](#))

26 *Ibid.*

27 [Q 86](#) (Lord Sedwill)

28 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#))

29 [Q 2](#) (Kate Clark)

30 BBC News, ‘US troops in Afghanistan: Allies and Republicans alarmed at withdrawal plan’ (18 November 2020): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-54980141> [accessed 5 January 2021]. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 was passed by the US Congress with bipartisan support in January 2021, overriding a Presidential veto. This introduced additional reporting requirements for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, including an assessment of the impact on the US counterterrorism mission and the role of US allies, including NATO. Detailed reports should be submitted by the Department of Defence, in consultation with the Department of State and the Director of National Security, to relevant congressional committees, or no additional expenses for the withdrawal will be permitted. It is unlikely that these can be completed in time for a withdrawal of 2,500 troops on 15 January. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, [section 1215](#) [accessed 5 January 2021]

- Second, in September 2020, peace talks were opened in Doha between the Afghan government and the Taliban.
13. Considerable uncertainty remains over the implementation of the US–Taliban deal and whether the peace talks will progress. Following the election of Joe Biden as the next US president, there is uncertainty over US policy on Afghanistan and the extent to which he will implement the US–Taliban deal agreed by President Trump.
 14. Nonetheless, and while Afghanistan faces multiple challenges, Mr Hakimi said it was “a historic moment”.³¹ Having the Afghan government and the Taliban “sitting in the same room and talking, with the Taliban trying to be civil” was “an achievement”.³²

Background on the UK and Afghanistan

15. From its participation in the 2001 US-led invasion onwards, the UK has considered Afghanistan a key foreign and security priority.
16. In 2001, then Prime Minister Tony Blair said the UK’s three objectives were “to pursue those responsible for the [9/11] attacks, to eradicate Bin Laden’s network of terrorism, and to take action against the Taliban regime that is sponsoring him”.³³ The UK took a leading role in NATO combat operations until 2014. At its peak, the UK force level included 9,500 personnel.³⁴ Box 2 provides a timeline of UK military engagement in Afghanistan since 2001.

Box 2: Timeline of UK military engagement in Afghanistan since 2001

2001–02: The UK responded to the 9/11 attacks by action with the US to remove al-Qaeda from Afghanistan and hunt Osama bin Laden. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established, based on UN Security Council Resolution 1386 (2001).³⁵

2003: NATO took the lead of ISAF.³⁶

2003–06: ISAF expanded across Afghanistan.³⁷

2006–09: Ground military operations in Helmand province.³⁸

2011–14: Handover of security from ISAF to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).³⁹

31 Q 2

32 *Ibid.*

33 ‘Text: Tony Blair’s statement’ *The Guardian* (7 October 2001): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/07/afghanistan.terrorism11> [accessed 5 January 2021]

34 Cabinet Office, ‘Policy paper: The UK’s work in Afghanistan’ (14 January 2014): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-work-in-afghanistan/the-uks-work-in-afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]

35 United Nations Security Council, ‘Resolution 1386 (2001). Adopted by the Security Council at its 4443rd meeting, on 20 December 2001’: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/1386> [accessed 5 January 2021]

36 NATO, ‘ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan (2001–2014) (Archived)’ (1 September 2015): https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm [accessed 5 January 2021]

37 Cabinet Office, ‘Policy paper: The UK’s work in Afghanistan’ (14 January 2014): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-work-in-afghanistan/the-uks-work-in-afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]

38 *Ibid.*

39 NATO, ‘ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan (2001–2014) (Archived)’ (1 September 2015): https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm [accessed 5 January 2021]

2014: The ISAF mission was completed.⁴⁰ The UK withdrew combat troops.⁴¹

2015: NATO's Resolute Support Mission was established to provide training, advice and assistance to the Afghan security forces and institutions. The UK is a contributor.⁴²

The total audited cost of UK operations in Afghanistan from 2001–02 to 2013–14 was £21.3 billion.⁴³

Up to 10,000 UK troops have contributed to NATO missions in Afghanistan to date.⁴⁴ There were 456 British troops killed during the campaign (2001–14) and over 600 personnel sustained life-changing injuries.⁴⁵

17. At the start of military operations in 2001, Tony Blair said the UK was “taking action” on “three fronts—military, diplomatic, humanitarian”.⁴⁶ During the period of combat operations, the UK’s engagement was “not simply ... a ‘war in Afghanistan’”: it sought to “address the country’s poverty, insecurity, poor infrastructure, weak governance and fragile economy”, and participated in “a wide range of projects to improve education, healthcare and governance”.⁴⁷
18. Afghanistan became the fifth-largest recipient of UK bilateral ODA in 2002,⁴⁸ and remained in the top six from 2003 until 2005, rising to third in 2008 and second in 2010.⁴⁹ Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), said the UK had provided “over £3 billion in development assistance” to Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban administration in 2001.⁵⁰
19. In the period since 2015, Afghanistan has generated less attention in the UK, as other national security priorities have come to the fore.⁵¹ However, the

40 *Ibid.*

41 Cabinet Office, ‘Policy paper: The UK’s work in Afghanistan’ (14 January 2014): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-work-in-afghanistan/the-uks-work-in-afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]

42 NATO, ‘ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan (2001–2014) (Archived)’ (1 September 2015): https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm [accessed 5 January 2021]

43 This figure includes non-recoverable VAT at current prices (2015). Letter from the Ministry of Defence (13 January 2015): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/494526/FOI2015-08279-Cost_of_the_wars_in_Iraq_and_Afghanistan.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]

44 [Q 115](#) (Lord Ahmad)

45 Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s War in Afghanistan 2001–2014*, 1st edition (London: Vintage, 2017), p 1

46 ‘Text: Tony Blair’s statement’, *The Guardian* (7 October 2001): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/07/afghanistan-terrorism11> [accessed 5 January 2021]

47 Cabinet Office, ‘Policy paper: The UK’s work in Afghanistan’ (14 January 2014): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uks-work-in-afghanistan/the-uks-work-in-afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]

48 ODI, *The UK’s approach to linking development and security: assessing policy and practice* (May 2012), p 3: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7658.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]. A figure is not provided.

49 DfID, *Statistics on International Development 2002/03–2006/07* (October 2007), pp 27 and 29 [accessed 5 January 2021]; DfID, *Statistics on International Development 2004/05–2008/09*, p 26 (October 2009): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67720/final-printed-sid-2009.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]; DfID, *Statistics on International Development 2014* (October 2014), p 29: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/403381/SID-2014-revised-UNDP-figure-feb15.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]; ODI, *The UK’s approach to linking development and security: assessing policy and practice*, p 3 [accessed 5 January 2021]

50 [Q 115](#)

51 [Q 86](#) (Lord Houghton)

UK remains a significant contributor. There are 850 UK troops currently deployed to NATO’s Resolute Support Mission,⁵² and the UK has “one of the largest and most active diplomatic efforts”.⁵³ The UK provides £70 million in funding for the Afghan National Security Forces each year⁵⁴ and is the third largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan, providing £167 million in official development assistance (ODA) in 2020–21.⁵⁵

20. No select committee of either House has published a report on the UK’s engagement in Afghanistan since 2014.⁵⁶

This report

21. In Chapter 2 we consider the UK’s role in and policy towards Afghanistan. In Chapter 3 we consider the Afghan state and governance. In Chapter 4 we consider the Afghan economy, including aid dependency and the illicit drugs trade. In Chapter 5 we consider the Taliban and terrorist groups in Afghanistan, including the links between them. In Chapter 6 we consider external actors and their objectives in Afghanistan. In Chapter 7 we consider the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and NATO training. Finally, in Chapter 8 we consider the peace talks in Doha, and possible future international and UK support for Afghanistan.
22. We thank our Specialist Adviser, Dr Weeda Mehran, Department of Politics, University of Exeter, and all our witnesses.

52 [Q 115](#) (Lord Ahmad)

53 [Q 116](#) (Lord Ahmad)

54 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

55 FCDO, ‘Development Tracker Afghanistan’, <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/countries/AF> [accessed 5 January 2021]

56 House of Commons Defence Committee, [Afghanistan](#) (Fifteenth Report, Session 2013–14, HC Paper 994)

CHAPTER 2: THE UK AND AFGHANISTAN FROM 2014

Changes to the UK approach from 2014

23. The UK's policy and strategy towards Afghanistan shifted from the middle of the last decade. Lord Houghton of Richmond GCB CBE DL, former Chief of the Defence Staff, said the most significant factors that influenced this change had been “more to do with things external to Afghanistan than inside it”.⁵⁷ Afghanistan had “became a lesser security priority”; “other things—Russian malevolence, the growth of ISIS and all that—were taking far more attention”.⁵⁸
24. Lord Sedwill said “the stamina ... of the Western alliance” on Afghanistan had “started to erode”. There had been a “political recognition” in 2014 of “the domestic unpopularity and practical unsustainability ... of an enduring combat mission”, and the “highly intrusive presence” of foreign troops had become “part of the problem”.⁵⁹
25. At the same time, there had been a “need to justify the ... endeavour”. First there was “almost a moral imperative” to defend “the engagement and the sacrifice”. Second, there had been a need to “play, and to be seen to play, a leadership role ... particularly within NATO”. Third, there had been “a strong need to sustain a narrative ... of progress and success”.⁶⁰
26. The UK had made “a significant policy change” to “support for, not ownership of, Afghans’ future”.⁶¹ The UK’s military approach had become “an economy-of-force operation”.⁶² Sir Richard Stagg, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan, said the UK’s provision of limited military help to the Afghan government was “a sensible goal”.⁶³ This approach came “at far less cost and UK national risk”, though “with a lot less certainty and control of the outcomes”.⁶⁴
27. Lord Houghton said much of the “emphasis” had shifted to humanitarian and development assistance, institutional capacity building and political reconciliation. This aimed to establish “a more advanced country in humanitarian terms, a far more [self-] reliant country in security terms and ... a slightly more united country in political terms”.⁶⁵
28. **In 2001, following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC, master-minded by al-Qaeda, which was based in Afghanistan and enjoyed the protection of the Taliban administration, the country became a top UK foreign, defence and development policy priority. From 2010 its relative prioritisation as a national security issue slipped, partly in response to external factors, such as the increasingly disruptive international role played by Russia (including its activity in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine from 2014) and the rise of ISIS. The**

57 [Q 85](#)

58 [Q 86](#) (Lord Houghton)

59 [Q 85](#) (Lord Sedwill)

60 [Q 85](#) (Lord Houghton)

61 [Q 86](#) (Lord Houghton)

62 *Ibid.*

63 [Q 24](#)

64 [Q 86](#) (Lord Houghton)

65 [Q 86](#)

protracted and intractable nature of the Afghan conflict and a lack of public support for an ongoing combat mission were also factors.

UK objectives and interests from 2015

29. Lord Sedwill said that “the reason we went into Afghanistan in the first place is the reason we remain engaged: the national security threats that spill out of failed or even fragile states affect us at home and affect our allies”.⁶⁶
30. Witnesses identified threats and interests. First, Baroness Goldie, Minister of State, Ministry of Defence, identified “homeland security and counter-terrorism” as the UK’s “primary interest”.⁶⁷ There was a “continuing fear that an ungoverned and unsecured country could ... become a safe haven for international terrorism”.⁶⁸ In 2014–15, there was concern that ISIS or its affiliate Islamic State Khorasan Province (see Chapter 5) might “undermine the original and enduring purpose of the whole enterprise”.⁶⁹
31. A second threat was “serious and organised crime”,⁷⁰ including countering the trade in narcotics, which Baroness Goldie said was “a key threat to our national security interests”.⁷¹ Ninety-five percent of the heroin on UK streets is from Afghanistan.⁷² There are 261,000 heroin users in England,⁷³ and in 2019 there were 1,329 deaths related to heroin or opium poisoning across the UK.⁷⁴
32. The FCDO defined these first two threats as “foremost” among the UK’s “crucial security and foreign policy interests in Afghanistan”.⁷⁵
33. A third issue was the impact of instability in Afghanistan on a “volatile”⁷⁶ and “strategic”⁷⁷ region. Lord Sedwill said Pakistan’s border regions were “Talibanised, and if the Pakistani Taliban have safe havens in Afghanistan, that poses significant security problems”.⁷⁸
34. Fourth, the UK had an interest in “defending the political legacy of the West’s intervention since 2001”.⁷⁹ The UK’s “long term objectives” were “to support Afghan-led efforts towards a sustainable political settlement, while

66 [Q 85](#)

67 [Q 116](#)

68 [Q 85](#) (Lord Houghton). The Taliban’s insurgency has continued in spite of its agreement with the US. The BBC described the group as being “at their greatest strength since 2001 ... advancing and attacking in districts across Afghanistan”. BBC News, ‘Taliban conflict: Afghan fears rise as US ends its longest war’ (20 October 2020): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-54600781> [accessed 5 January 2021]

69 [Q 85](#) (Lord Houghton)

70 [Q 85](#) (Lord Sedwill)

71 [Q 118](#)

72 Letter from Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon to Baroness Anelay of St Johns (10 November 2020): <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3589/documents/34670/default/>

73 Dame Carol Black, *Review of Drugs - evidence relating to drug use, supply and effects, including current trends and future risks* (February 2020) p 3: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/882953/Review_of_Drugs_Evidence_Pack.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]

74 ONS, ‘Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2019 registrations’ (14 October 2020): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2019registrations> [accessed 5 January 2021]

75 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

76 [Q 85](#) (Lord Sedwill)

77 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

78 [Q 85](#)

79 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

building a viable Afghan state and sustainable, capable Afghan forces”.⁸⁰ Lord Sedwill said that “a big part of the UK’s national security interest was “enabling the Afghans to stabilise Afghanistan for themselves”. This required “underwriting by external financial, military and developmental support”.⁸¹ The UK should also “not neglect, let alone lose” humanitarian and development progress.⁸²

35. Lord Ahmad said “a significant part” of the UK’s legacy would be enabling Afghan girls “to realise their full potential through education”.⁸³ Baroness Goldie said the UK’s legacy would be helping the Afghan government “to start determining its own affairs in terms of democracy, elections and government”.⁸⁴
36. **While the priority afforded by the UK to Afghanistan has fallen since 2014, the scale of the challenges facing the country, and their potential impact on UK interests, have not diminished significantly. Terrorist groups including al-Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province operate in Afghanistan. The country is the source of 95% of the heroin in the UK. The Afghan state remains very fragile, with limited control of territory, and the Taliban’s insurgency continues.**
37. **The Government wishes to safeguard what it describes as the UK’s legacy in Afghanistan since 2001. It wishes to strengthen the gains made in this period, and defines its legacy in terms of improvements in human rights, particularly of women and girls, and the strengthening of the Afghan state since the fall of the Taliban administration.**
38. **There is a real risk that the principal national security challenges still posed by Afghanistan, namely terrorism, narcotics and regional instability, could worsen, and the gains made since 2001 could be lost.**

Government co-ordination

39. The FCDO said the Government had “an integrated approach” to Afghanistan. The National Security Strategy Implementation Group for South Asia “regularly brings together aid, defence and diplomacy officials at Director-General level”, with input on counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, serious crime, migration and security. The National Security Council Officials group “held substantive discussions regarding future Afghanistan policy three times in the last twelve months”, and “discussed significant developments in the peace process and security situation at various points in the year”.⁸⁵
40. The Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy⁸⁶ was “an opportunity to extend and develop the already close co-ordination across HMG work in Afghanistan”. It would “define HMG’s ambition for the UK’s role in the world and long-term strategic aims for our national

80 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

81 [Q 85](#) (Lord Sedwill)

82 *Ibid.*

83 [Q 135](#)

84 *Ibid.*

85 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

86 In February 2020 the Prime Minister announced a government-wide ‘Integrated Review’ of foreign policy, defence, security and international development. The publication of the review has been postponed until 2021.

security and foreign policy”.⁸⁷ Baroness Goldie said Afghanistan was “at the heart of that”.⁸⁸

41. **We regret the further delay to the Integrated Review, and the Government’s decision to announce commitments on defence spending and official development assistance in advance of the publication of the review. It is essential that the final document demonstrates how Afghanistan fits into the UK’s long-term strategic aims for national security and foreign policy.**
42. **We ask the Government to provide us with a detailed breakdown of how its new commitments on defence spending will be allocated.**

The UK as an actor in Afghanistan

43. Witnesses discussed the UK’s influence in Afghanistan since 2001. Ms Clark said the UK had “followed the US lead on Afghan policy, as everyone else has done”. There had been “moments when Britain could have, or perhaps should have, taken an independent line, and did not”.⁸⁹ For example, the UK had sought to negotiate with the Taliban in the early 2000s, but this had been “blocked by Washington”. Had the UK approach prevailed, “the Taliban would certainly be a different organisation and we probably would not have had this war”.⁹⁰
44. Mr Nicholas Williams, Senior Associate Fellow, European Leadership Network, said that the UK’s influence was “at best tactical, never strategic or decisive”. NATO operations in Afghanistan had been driven by the US and “the UK could ‘nudge but not budge’ major decisions”.⁹¹
45. Lord Sedwill said the UK had been “operating as part of an alliance and wider coalition in Afghanistan”. This meant that the UK’s “independent track record of successes and otherwise” was “entirely bound up with the American position and that of our allies and partners”.⁹²
46. **The UK’s interests in Afghanistan are not unique and distinct: they are bound up with those of its allies, led by the US. The UK has had limited opportunities, and has shown little inclination, to exert an independent voice and, along with other NATO Allies, has followed the US’s lead. This is regrettable, not least in view of the UK’s very substantial commitment to Afghanistan, both financially and militarily. The Government should seek to reinforce the need for a multinational approach, and be precise about its aims, including regional stability, counter-terrorism and countering narcotics production and trafficking.**

Afghan interpreters

47. Given the legacy of combat operations, Lord Stirrup, former Chief of Defence Staff, and former member of the Locally Employed Civilians Assurance Committee, Baroness Coussins, Independent Consultant, and former member of the Locally Employed Civilians Assurance Committee, and Sir

87 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

88 [Q 115](#)

89 [Q 8](#)

90 *Ibid.*

91 Written evidence from Nicholas Williams (AFG0021)

92 [Q 86](#)

Richard Stagg said the Government had a moral obligation to protect civilian employees such as interpreters from dangers resulting from supporting UK military operations abroad.⁹³

48. The Afghanistan Locally Employed Staff Ex-Gratia Scheme for Afghans who had worked for the UK was established in 2013 and extended in 2020.⁹⁴ Lord Stirrup and Baroness Coussins said the Government should contact all Afghan interpreters now resident in third countries who might wish to apply for relocation and guarantee the entitlement of their children to accompany them, and said the UK remained responsible for interpreters employed via a civilian contractor.⁹⁵
49. **The UK Government should ensure that all Afghan interpreters who worked for the UK military, including those now resident in third countries, are aware of, and able to access the provisions of, the ex-gratia scheme.**

93 Q 28 and written evidence from Lord Stirrup and Baroness Coussins (AFG0020)

94 Interpreters who had worked for the UK in Afghanistan could choose to relocate to the UK, receive five years of training and a monthly stipend or receive the equivalent of 18 months' salary. In October 2020 the Government announced that the existing scheme would be broadened under new legislation, allowing those who resigned after serving a minimum of 12 months to apply. Over 100 former translators are expected to be eligible to come to the UK under these changes. Ministry of Defence, 'Press release: More Afghan interpreters to move to the UK as scheme extends', (22 October 2020): <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/more-afghan-interpreters-to-move-to-the-uk-as-scheme-extends#:~:text=The%20Ex%2DGratia%20Scheme%20was,equivalent%20of%2018%20months'%20salary> [accessed 5 January 2021]

95 Written evidence from Lord Stirrup and Baroness Coussins (AFG0020). The Government sub-contracted the employment of local interpreters to a private company called 'thebigword'.

CHAPTER 3: THE AFGHAN STATE AND GOVERNMENT

The Afghan government

50. Afghanistan held its most recent presidential election in September 2019. Turnout was reported to be as low as 25% of eligible voters.⁹⁶
51. Both candidates, Dr Ashraf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah, claimed victory. Official results were delayed for months as electoral bodies conducted recounts and audits. In February 2020 the incumbent, Dr Ghani, was declared the winner, with just over 50% of the vote.⁹⁷ Dr Abdullah, who held the role of ‘Chief Executive’ in the previous power-sharing administration, did not concede. Months of negotiations led to agreement on a power-sharing deal in May 2020. The agreement stated that Dr Ghani would be the president and Dr Abdullah would lead peace talks with the Taliban on behalf of the government, as the Chair of the High Council for National Reconciliation, and make appointments to the cabinet.⁹⁸
52. Ms Clark described the relationship between the two men, and between their teams, as “horrible”.⁹⁹ Time had been wasted on “constant internal arguments” over matters such as “who sits in which office”.¹⁰⁰ Their dispute continued “to severely undermine domestic governance”, including delaying the appointment of cabinet members and provincial government roles.¹⁰¹
53. Falanx Assynt said Dr Abdullah retained presidential ambitions and would be likely to seek “to minimise Ghani’s role in intra-Afghan talks”.¹⁰² Ms Clark said that there was “in no way a united front”.¹⁰³
54. Sir Richard Stagg, however, thought Dr Abdullah and President Ghani had “found a *modus vivendi*”.¹⁰⁴ President Ghani had been able to centralise power and “sideline Abdullah to a large extent compared to 2014”. He had not been offered the role of Prime Minister, and President Ghani had brought in younger people and recruited Afghans with foreign passports as advisers and appointees.¹⁰⁵
55. Sir Richard Stagg said the two men had “very different backgrounds”. President Ghani was “technocratic”, while Dr Abdullah was “a more natural politician”.¹⁰⁶ Dr Ayesha Siddiq, Research Associate, South Asia Institute, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, said that while much was made of their differences, these were “not ideological”

96 [Q 2](#) (Kate Clark) and Al Jazeera, ‘Voter turnout falls sharply in Afghan presidential election’ (29 September 2019): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/29/voter-turnout-falls-sharply-in-afghan-presidential-election> [accessed 5 January 2021]

97 Emma Graham-Harrison, ‘Ghani declared winner of Afghan election—but opponent rejects result’, *The Guardian* (18 February 2020): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/18/ashraf-ghani-wins-afghan-presidential-election> [accessed 5 January 2021]

98 Al Jazeera, ‘Afghanistan: Ghani and Abdullah sign power-sharing deal’ (17 May 2020): <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/17/afghanistan-ghani-and-abdullah-sign-power-sharing-deal> [accessed 5 January 2021]

99 [Q 6](#)

100 [Q 2](#) (Hameed Hakimi)

101 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#))

102 *Ibid.*

103 [Q 6](#)

104 [Q 21](#)

105 [Q 6](#) (Hameed Hakimi)

106 [Q 21](#)

but “about very real-term interests ... They want a position in the power structure.”¹⁰⁷

Spoils, warlords and strongmen

56. Witnesses said that politics in Afghanistan was a source of spoils. Afghanistan’s “politicians do not represent the public”, as a result of the “financial autonomy” generated by “unearned income” from spending by foreign armies and aid.¹⁰⁸ Politicians did “not have to be bothered about what the people think. They are bothered about who gets what slice of the pie.”¹⁰⁹
57. It was “a very stuck system”:¹¹⁰ “Most of the people ... catapulted to power in 2001 by the Americans ... were military men, many of whom had fought each other in the past ... the commanders, civilian officials of factions, and warlords”.¹¹¹ Shaharзад Akbar, Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, said the “war on terror mentality” had resulted in foreign investment in individuals as allies.¹¹² The system was “underpinned by patronage”: “the central government ... paid off warlords and powerbrokers by tolerating corruption and not enforcing [the] rule of law”.¹¹³ All political actors had “a vested interest” in the system.¹¹⁴
58. Erica Gaston, Non-Resident Fellow, Global Public Policy Institute, Berlin, said “warlords and strongmen, militias and other forces” were now “state actors”, but “retained ... command networks and militia structures in the security forces”.¹¹⁵ Their “source of power and influence” was their ability to provide their followers with state salaries and positions.¹¹⁶ There were also links between certain provincial governors and local armed groups.¹¹⁷
59. A “degree of popular support” for some warlords and commanders conferred some legitimacy.¹¹⁸
60. State office provided control of territory and smuggling networks, and influence over land, mining rights and “trade revenues, licit and illicit”.¹¹⁹ This source of income “compromises taxation and thus the solidity of the state”.¹²⁰ Ms Gaston said many militias and warlords had a “stake” in the opium trade.¹²¹ It was “a key mechanism of keeping ... actors anchored in the political system”.¹²² The illicit drugs trade is discussed in Chapter 4.

107 [Q 54](#)

108 [Q 2](#) (Kate Clark)

109 [Q 6](#) (Kate Clark)

110 [Q 2](#) (Kate Clark)

111 [Q 6](#) (Kate Clark)

112 [Q 7](#)

113 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown ([AFG0027](#))

114 [Q 54](#) (Husain Haqqani)

115 [Q 55](#)

116 [Q 56](#) (Erica Gaston). Ms Gaston said there were a range of security actors in Afghanistan with some form of connection to the state. These included three “quasi-state groups” (the Afghan Local Police—disbanded in September, the Afghan National Army Territorial Force—attached to the Afghan army in 2018, with around 20,000 soldiers, and a “loosely tethered group of forces ... called the uprising forces or the patsunians”), and “auxiliary forces or militias ... working alongside predominantly US military and intelligence officers”.

117 [Q 56](#) (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

118 *Ibid.*

119 [Q 56](#) (Erica Gaston)

120 [Q 56](#) (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

121 [Q 56](#)

122 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown ([AFG0027](#))

61. **Power in Afghanistan remains personalised, factionalised and mired in corruption, despite some moderate improvements in recent years. Government appointments are regarded as a source of spoils, and warlords and militia leaders retain roles inside the state. Many are involved in the illicit economy, leveraging their access to state resources.**
62. **We request that the Government provides us with information on the support it has given to strengthen Afghanistan’s democratic processes, particularly its elections.**

Centralised political system

63. Laurel Miller, Director—Asia Programme, International Crisis Group, and former Acting US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, described the Afghan constitution as “winner-take-all” and “extraordinarily centralised”: “the President appoints not only a large portion of the parliament but every governor, every district governor and every chief of police, as well as senior positions within the administrative structure and the executive branch”.¹²³
64. Historically, Afghanistan had a decentralised system of government.¹²⁴ Sir Richard Stagg said there was “scope” for a more decentralised approach to “work reasonably well”. He thought that “in the south and east, the rather patriarchal Pashtun society may be content with a more Islamic style of governance than we would think ideal, whereas in Mazar-i-Sharif or Herat you may find a rather different way of running the country”.¹²⁵ He said that this could be achieved by reaching an agreement on the interpretation of the constitution between the Afghan government and the Taliban¹²⁶ (see Chapter 8). Lord Houghton said there was “an inevitability about a return to power and authority being more dispersed”. This would put “localised power in the hands of local power brokers, who I fear will in turn have fingers in the pies of drugs, corruption, extortion, violence and politics”.¹²⁷
65. James Dobbins, Senior Fellow and Distinguished Chair in Diplomacy and Security, Rand Corporation, and former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Ms Miller did not see prospects for constitutional change.¹²⁸ At the Bonn Conference in 2001 “the Afghans themselves were very insistent on a unitary government and a strong executive”.¹²⁹ Ms Miller said there was “not majority support for the changes that would reduce the degree of centralisation”.¹³⁰
66. **Afghanistan’s system of government is highly centralised, but in practice there are regional and ethnic loyalties. Whether amendments to the constitution are required to address this important matter will be a matter for the Afghans themselves to decide, whether in the peace talks in Doha or thereafter.**

123 [Q 43](#). Also see written evidence from Shabnam Nasimi ([AFG0029](#)).

124 [Q 29](#) (Sir Richard Stagg) and [Q 87](#) (Lord Houghton)

125 [Q 23](#)

126 [Q 29](#) (Sir Richard Stagg)

127 [Q 87](#)

128 [Q 43](#)

129 *Ibid.*

130 *Ibid.*

Ethnicity in Afghan politics

Afghanistan's 2004 constitution recognised 14 ethnic groups.¹³¹ Box 3 gives information on ethnic groups, religion and language.

Box 3: Ethnic groups, religion and language

Ethnicity

Minority Rights Group International notes that “no reliable current data on ethnicity in Afghanistan exists”.¹³² It cites the following percentages as estimates (with the other groups combined accounting for 8%).

- Pashtun 42%
- Tajik 27%
- Hazara 9%
- Uzbek 9%
- Turkmen 3%
- Baloch: 2%
- Nuristani
- Pamiri
- Arab
- Gujar
- Brahui
- Qizilbash
- Aimaq
- Pashai¹³³

Languages¹³⁴

- Dari (Afghan Persian) 50%. An official language, and generally considered the *lingua franca*
- Pashto 35%. An official language.
- Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) 10%.
- Up to 30 other languages.¹³⁵

Religion

99% of the population identify as Muslim. Around 85% are Sunni and 14% are Shia. The remaining one per cent consists of Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and Baha'i.¹³⁶

131 Australian government, *DFAT country information report Afghanistan* (27 June 2019) p 9: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-afghanistan.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

132 Minority rights Group International, ‘World directory of minorities and indigenous people’: <https://minorityrights.org/country/afghanistan/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

133 *Ibid.*

134 There are some issues with the accuracy of statistics on ethnic groups and spoken languages in Afghanistan. This accounts for some inconsistencies in the data for ethnicity and language.

135 All figures are approximate. Australian government, *DFAT country information report Afghanistan* (27 June 2019) p 9: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-afghanistan.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

136 *Ibid.*

67. President Ghani is Pashtun. Lord Sedwill said that there are “essentially two big federations” within the Pashtun ethnic group: the Durranis, who “have traditionally provided the ruling class in Kabul”, and the Ghilzais, from which significant Taliban leaders have emerged.¹³⁷ The Taliban’s ethnic support base is discussed further in Chapter 5.
68. Dr Abdullah is of mixed Tajik and Pashtun heritage, but is often regarded as Tajik, as a result of his association with the Northern Alliance.¹³⁸
69. The FCDO said Afghanistan “continues to operate as a multi-ethnic state, with minority groups represented at all levels of government”.¹³⁹ The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) said the 2004 constitution “favours the Pashtun majority in terms of the election of President”. It was “difficult to ensure diverse ethnic representation” under these arrangements.¹⁴⁰ Uzbek and Tajik leaders had “criticised Ghani’s previous administration for allegedly prioritising Pashtun interests”.¹⁴¹
70. Falanx Assynt said that President Ghani’s appointments reflected “little commitment to improving the balance of ethnic political representation”. Three key figures in the government—President Ghani, Dr Abdullah and Marshal Rashid Dostum¹⁴²—had “strong Pashtun, Tajik and Uzbek political support bases, respectively”. There was “an enduring risk that each of these key figures will prioritise appealing to their own supporters”.¹⁴³
71. The Hazaras, Afghanistan’s third-largest ethnic group “remain significantly underrepresented at a national level”; Falanx Assynt said this was likely to continue.¹⁴⁴ The Hazaras have a long history of suffering state persecution on both ethnic and sectarian grounds.¹⁴⁵ The human rights of minority communities are discussed later in this chapter.
72. Ms Gaston said it was possible to “sometimes overstate ... ethnicity” as a factor at a national level, although some factions were aligned with ethnic groups. For example, the influence of the “Tajik-dominated Jamiat network” over the Ministry of Interior and the Afghan police remained disproportionate.¹⁴⁶ Dr Antonio De Lauri, Research Professor, Chr Michelsen Institute, Bergen, too tended “to disagree when I hear analysts talking about ethnic conflict ... the situation is more complex”.¹⁴⁷ Ms Gaston said that there was, however, “a stronger ethnic allegiance at a provincial level”.¹⁴⁸

137 [Q 87](#) (Lord Sedwill). He said this was an “oversimplification for brevity”.

138 BBC News, ‘Who is Abdullah Abdullah? Afghanistan’s three-times presidential contender’ (27 September 2020): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-27138728> [accessed 5 January 2021]

139 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

140 Written evidence from the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

141 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#))

142 A former warlord appointed as Marshal by President Ghani. Emran Feroz, ‘Afghan warlord’s promotion highlights the bankruptcy of America’s longest war’, *Foreign Policy* (17 July 2020): <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/17/afghan-warlord-abdul-rashid-dostum-power-sharing-war/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

143 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#))

144 *Ibid.*

145 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#)) and the Hazara Research Collective ([AFG0008](#)). The Hazara were persecuted during Taliban rule, and remain under attack by Islamic State Khorosan Province (see Chapter 5) and the Taliban.

146 [Q 56](#)

147 *Ibid.*

148 *Ibid.*

73. **Ethnicity remains a potent political factor in Afghanistan, particularly at a local level, although its significance can be overstated. The Pashtun majority is largely dominant in politics, while the Hazara community and other minorities remain marginalised.**

Corruption

74. Deborah Lyons, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan, and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), described corruption as a “silent terrorist”, which “removes money that should be directed to services for the Afghan people” and undermines their confidence.¹⁴⁹ A recent report by UNAMA stated:

“Afghanistan has been consistently ranked among the ten most corrupt countries in the world by Transparency International, except for a brief moment in 2015 and 2016 when it rose into the bottom 20. It has been consistently mentioned by Afghans in popular surveys as one of the biggest frustrations of their daily lives.”¹⁵⁰

Corruption remained “endemic” particularly in the police, the courts, educational institutions and the Ministry of Health.¹⁵¹

75. Ms Clark said this in part stemmed from international involvement.¹⁵² The UK and US’s engagement had “turbo-charged corruption”, with “huge sums of money... suddenly being poured into the economy”.¹⁵³ Afghanistan’s reliance on international donors is discussed in Chapter 4.
76. Foreign income undermined accountability: “the people in charge have financial autonomy from the [Afghan] people”. Afghan citizens lacked “representation” and “agency” as a result.¹⁵⁴ Graft had “essentially insulated the elite ... from holding themselves accountable to the public”.¹⁵⁵
77. Sir Richard Stagg thought corruption might lessen as Western engagement decreases.¹⁵⁶

Action to combat corruption

78. Ms Lyons said there had been “encouraging signs of increased accountability” by the President and the Cabinet. For example, “all senior political figures and civil servants must register their assets and identify their financial holdings”. However, this was not enough.¹⁵⁷
79. The government had “established institutions and mechanisms” to curb corruption but “prosecuted few cases”.¹⁵⁸ The ODI recommended that the Afghan government should “staff anti-corruption institutions, improve investigative capacity and competence” and “strengthen the

149 Q 14

150 UNAMA, *Afghanistan’s fight against corruption: Crucial for Peace and Prosperity* (June 2020): https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/afghanistans_fight_against_corruption_crucial_for_peace_and_prosperity_english.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]

151 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch (AFG0022)

152 Q 5

153 Q 22 (Sir Richard Stagg)

154 Q 6 (Kate Clark)

155 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch (AFG0022)

156 Q 22

157 Q 14

158 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch (AFG0022)

Attorney General's Office". There were "longstanding concerns over major procurement and financial cases" which had "been outstanding since 2016".¹⁵⁹

80. Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown, Director, the Initiative on Nonstate Armed Actors, and Senior Fellow, the Brookings Institution, said President Ghani's administration had "not managed to significantly curtail corruption" and had become "increasingly dependent for its survival on ... very problematic powerbrokers".¹⁶⁰

International and UK anti-corruption efforts

81. Ms Lyons said donors needed to demonstrate that they were focused on tackling corruption. The UK and EU ambassadors in Kabul co-chaired an anti-corruption committee, which had "been a driving force in working with the Afghan government". The UK and EU had proposed establishing an anti-corruption commission, and urged the Afghan government to ensure the 2017 anti-corruption strategy was renewed.¹⁶¹
82. Dr Felbab-Brown said that there had been "steady pressure from donors" on corruption and accountability. However, "the international community" had "never adequately prioritised acting against ... the predatory economic activities of powerbrokers". Donors "systematically under-resource and sometimes altogether ignore" the illicit activity of government elites.¹⁶²
83. **Corruption remains endemic in Afghanistan. It has been significantly exacerbated by foreign funding. While the Afghan government under President Ghani has committed to tackling corruption and taken some steps, little progress appears to have been made.**
84. **The Afghan government's accountability to its citizens is limited by its reliance on international military spending and aid, and very low reliance on taxation. This insulates the elite.**
85. **We welcome the UK Government's efforts to combat corruption in Afghanistan, including work with the EU in Kabul on this agenda. As a major donor of on-budget support to the Afghan state, the UK should be willing, with its international partners, to call out the corrupt practices of individuals within the government and others in positions of influence.**

Human rights

86. Witnesses first discussed improvements to human rights in the country. Ms Clark said that, "particularly in urban areas, Afghanistan has changed since 2001". There was "a measure of free speech and free association" and the state "does not clamp down on women's rights or minority rights".¹⁶³

159 Written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028)

160 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown (AFG0027)

161 Q 14

162 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown (AFG0027) Much of the aid provided by donors is on-budget assistance (see Chapter 4). OECD guidance defines assistance as on-budget/direct budget support when the fund disbursed is managed according to the national budget/treasury procedures of the partner country. This includes both general budget support (discretionary) and earmarked assistance. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Finance, 'Budget Hearing': <http://www.budgetmof.gov.af/index.php/en/2012-12-10-12-13-57/faq/194-what-is-on-budget> [accessed 5 January 2021]

163 Q 3

87. Issues specific to the rights of women and girls are discussed in a separate section below.
88. Ms Akbar said there had been progress in the legal framework including combating torture, freedom of expression and press freedom. The Afghan government discussed “international commitments to human rights as well as commitments to Islam”.¹⁶⁴
89. The FCDO and the BBC World Service pointed to improvements in media freedom.¹⁶⁵ The constitution allowed for “freedom of the press and of expression”, and private media had “boomed” since 2001, with “approximately 60 private TV channels and 175 radio stations”.¹⁶⁶ The Mass Media Law prohibited censorship and Afghanistan had signed the Global Pledge on Media Freedom.¹⁶⁷
90. The ODI said that “the most significant progress on rights and freedom of expression” had been through the Freedom of Information Act”.¹⁶⁸ Afghanistan “tops the Global Right to Information Rating”.¹⁶⁹
91. Witnesses said that that some of the progress that had been made on human rights could endure. Sir Richard Stagg thought “that the Afghan people, having had some chance of a say in their country’s governance, will be reluctant to see that removed from them”.¹⁷⁰ Ms Clark said that people were “used to these freedoms”. Many were “internal changes to do with aspirations and expectations”; should the Taliban return to power in some form, it would “have difficulty trying to impose its rules and its idea of what a good society is on many Afghans”.¹⁷¹
92. However, others said that gains in human rights were “fragile”.¹⁷²
93. First, Human Rights Watch said that “too often” protections were “laws on paper only”.¹⁷³ Reforms to the judicial system had been delayed.¹⁷⁴ Human rights training had “not been accompanied by measures to hold accountable those who have committed serious violations”.¹⁷⁵
94. The issue was not lack of “training, or capacity, but political will”;¹⁷⁶ there was “a strong culture of impunity”.¹⁷⁷ Afghan governments since 2002 had “very seldom prosecuted cases of torture and extrajudicial killing”, “particularly ... when cases have involved senior officials”. As a result, “abusive police and militia forces” had “little reason to change their behaviour”.¹⁷⁸ Ms Gaston said powerbrokers protected their networks from disciplinary action.¹⁷⁹ Calls

164 [Q 5](#)

165 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#)) and the BBC World Service ([AFG0015](#))

166 Written evidence from the BBC World Service ([AFG0015](#))

167 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

168 Written evidence from the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

169 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

170 [Q 22](#)

171 [Q 3](#)

172 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

173 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

174 [Q 94](#) (Dr Sima Samar)

175 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

176 *Ibid.*

177 [Q 5](#) (Shaharзад Akbar)

178 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

179 [Q 56](#)

from civil society for warlords and militia leaders to be held accountable had “gone largely unheard”.¹⁸⁰

95. Dr De Lauri said that there was an external dimension: “CIA sponsorship” of militias had resulted in “virtually no public oversight ... or accountability for human rights violations” by these groups, including “numerous extrajudicial killings of civilians”.¹⁸¹
96. Second, the Shia Hazara minority were “regularly subjected to targeted killings, violence, and discrimination based on their ethnic and religious identity”. The Afghan government and the international community’s response had “been largely inadequate or missing altogether”.¹⁸²
97. Third, in spite of progress on media freedom (see above), the Afghan government had “failed to investigate and prosecute dozens of cases of violence against journalists by security forces”.¹⁸³ In 2018, Reporters Without Borders cited Afghanistan as the world’s deadliest country for journalists.¹⁸⁴
98. Fourth, the ODI said the Afghan government’s approach to civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) was “increasingly hostile”; planned NGO regulations¹⁸⁵ “would cause the closure of many organisations”.¹⁸⁶
99. **There has been significant improvement in human rights in Afghanistan in the past two decades, particularly in Kabul and other urban areas. Witnesses highlighted improvements in women’s rights, freedom of speech, freedom of association and access to information.**
100. **Our witnesses said the expectations of Afghan citizens about human rights and participation in governance had changed for the better, making any future attempt to roll back these freedoms more difficult.**
101. **However, significant human rights challenges remain as a result of weakness in the rule of law and a lack of political will to enforce legislation which protects human rights. We are particularly concerned by reports of the lack of accountability, and sometimes impunity, of senior officials, militias and security forces, and ongoing threats to minorities, journalists and human rights defenders.**

The UK and human rights in Afghanistan

102. Ms Akbar said the UK had “been one of the advocates of the human rights agenda in Afghanistan”, and had engaged with Afghan civil society and human rights institutions.¹⁸⁷ Afghanistan’s donors, including the UK, had supported programmes such as training on open media, and reforms to

180 [Q 56](#) (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

181 [Q 57](#)

182 Written evidence from the Hazara Research Collective ([AFG0008](#))

183 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

184 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

185 The proposed Law on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) would regulate the registration, establishment and monitoring of NGOs in Afghanistan. According to Amnesty International, it “infringes on human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and association, guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Afghanistan is a state party”. Amnesty International, ‘Afghanistan: Draft NGO law threatens civil society organization in Afghanistan’ (27 June 2020): <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/2599/2020/en/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

186 Written evidence from the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

187 [Q 8](#)

improve education and access to justice. These had “had significant impact in fostering a more open society and building awareness about human rights”.¹⁸⁸

103. On media freedom, the FCDO said the British Embassy in Kabul provided “capacity-building for Afghan government communicators and programming to promote open debate”. In 2019–20, it “implemented projects worth around £300,000 to improve access to information, journalist safety and support female journalists”. The Embassy maintained “a regular and honest dialogue with government “ on media freedom.”¹⁸⁹
104. The BBC reached “more than 50% of people in Afghanistan every week” and delivered “impartial trusted news and information to the population”. BBC Media Action projects “help to strengthen local media”.¹⁹⁰
105. However, the impact of donors’ projects had been “limited”: “urban Afghans have benefitted disproportionately from donor assistance, and donor support has had little effect in curbing systemic human rights violations or ensuring that government officials adhere to the rule of law”.¹⁹¹ The ODI described “efforts to build and strengthen Afghanistan’s institutions (including the judiciary and the rule of law)” as “amongst the least successful areas of international engagement.”¹⁹²
106. The UK, along with other donors involved in the military campaign, had “seldom called out widespread abuses by Afghan National Security Forces they partnered with and trained, or the failure of Afghan judicial institutions to address impunity”. The “military effort” had taken “priority”, and “the UK failed to deliver a clear message that Afghan government institutions needed to address human rights abuses”.¹⁹³
107. Ms Akbar said there had been “a decrease in UK funding to human rights in Afghanistan ... in the past 10 years” and “recently there has been a considerable reduction in direct support to human rights institutions, and to the human rights agenda as a whole”.¹⁹⁴ Lord Ahmad however said the UK was “absolutely committed to supporting projects on human rights” in Afghanistan; it was “an FCDO human rights priority country—it appears in our annual human rights report”.¹⁹⁵
108. Witnesses made recommendations to the UK and other donors. First, Ms Akbar said “we expect our international partners to be strong advocates for human rights values”.¹⁹⁶ The UK should: press for the enforcement of legal prohibitions of coerced confessions; call for the investigation and prosecution of allegations of the recruitment and sexual exploitation of children; and “invite the UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment to visit Afghanistan”.¹⁹⁷
109. Second, the UK “must pressure and support the Afghan government to better protect its ethnic and religious minorities”. The UK had “the capacity

188 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

189 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

190 Written evidence from the BBC World Service ([AFG0015](#))

191 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

192 Written evidence from the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

193 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

194 [Q 8](#)

195 [Q 130](#)

196 [Q 8](#) (Shaharзад Akbar)

197 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

to be a global leader ... and promote the rights of persecuted minorities”, such as the Hazaras.¹⁹⁸

110. Finally, Ms Akbar said the UK needed to investigate “its own soldiers causing civilian casualties in Afghanistan”, in order to “demonstrate to the Afghan public the UK’s commitment to the human rights of all Afghans”.¹⁹⁹
111. **We welcome the UK’s support for civil society and human rights institutions in Afghanistan, which have contributed to fostering a more open society and greater media freedom.**
112. **We welcome the BBC World Service’s provision of impartial news and information in three languages in Afghanistan.**
113. **We regret that UK efforts to improve the rule of law and judicial institutions appear to have had limited impact. We request that the Government provides its assessment of why this is, and how limited progress in Afghanistan compares with the output of similar UK programmes to support the rule of law in other countries.**
114. **The UK must be willing to speak out on human rights abuses. We are concerned by reports that the UK has turned a blind eye to abuses by the Afghan security forces and militias.**
115. **The UK should publicly champion the rights of minority communities, such as the Hazaras.**

Rights of women and girls

Current situation

116. Dr Sima Samar, Special Envoy of the President and State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, said there was “no doubt that the participation of women and progress on women’s rights in Afghanistan” was “remarkable”.²⁰⁰
117. First, girls now accounted for “between 37% and 40% of the children attending school”. There were “between 25% and ... 33% of girls participating in higher education”.²⁰¹ Mark Bowden, Senior Research Associate, ODI, said there was “strong and increasing local demand for girls to stay in education”.²⁰²
118. Second, Dr Samar said women were trained as doctors and midwives.²⁰³
119. Third, women were active in business.²⁰⁴
120. Fourth, there were “more women in the judicial system”. One hundred and seventy female judges had been appointed in different provinces and there were female prosecutors. A special prosecutor’s office for the elimination of violence against women had been established.²⁰⁵

198 Written evidence from the Hazara Research Collective ([AFG008](#))

199 [Q 8](#)

200 [Q 92](#)

201 *Ibid.*

202 [Q 32](#)

203 [Q 92](#)

204 *Ibid.*

205 *Ibid.*

121. Fifth, there were “more than 3,000 women police” and around 1,800 women in the army.²⁰⁶
122. Sixth, women were active in politics. There was a 25% quota in parliament, although most female MPs were “ethnically or politically connected or related”.²⁰⁷ Dr Samar said “a woman sitting beside a warlord in parliament is itself a big achievement.”²⁰⁸ President Ghani had “created positions in the provinces for women deputy governors” and appointed a woman as permanent representative to the UN.²⁰⁹
123. However, there remained many problems.²¹⁰
124. First, lack of security was “one of the worst failures”.²¹¹ The “pull-out of Western forces” had led to increasing areas of Taliban control, and “where the Taliban has more control, progress for women will have slipped backwards”.²¹² Women were “threatened and assassinated”.²¹³ As a result of security issues, many female judges appointed in different provinces had to stay in Kabul,²¹⁴ and a large number of girls schools were closed in provinces such as Ghazni and north Faryab.²¹⁵ Around 2.2 million girls are out of school.²¹⁶
125. Second, there was “a persistence of traditional norms across the country” including “child marriage and virginity tests; and sex outside marriage being a sin for women”.²¹⁷ Female politicians’ participation was restricted by “male domination and patriarchal ideology”, and “the misuse” of culture, tradition and religion.²¹⁸
126. Third, there was a high drop-out rate of girls from schools; the average length of time for those attending was 5.6 years.²¹⁹ Factors included a lack of facilities,²²⁰ a lack of female teachers,²²¹ resulting from corruption,²²² and the “patriarchal, male-dominated mentality in areas under the control of the Taliban”.²²³
127. Fourth, there were issues with the institutional framework to protect women’s rights. Dr Ashley Jackson, Co-Director, Centre for the Study of Armed Groups, ODI, said that while the Afghan constitution was often cited as upholding women’s rights, it contained contradictions.²²⁴ Dr Samar said the “elimination of violence against women law”, introduced by President Karzai by decree in 2009, had still not been approved by Parliament. It was

206 [Q 92](#)

207 [Q 97](#)

208 [Q 92](#)

209 [Q 92](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

210 [Q 92](#) (Baroness Hodgson and Dr Sima Samar)

211 [Q 92](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

212 [Q 93](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

213 [Q 92](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

214 [Q 92](#) (Dr Sima Samar)

215 [Q 93](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

216 [Q 95](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

217 [Q 92](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

218 [Q 97](#) (Dr Sima Samar)

219 [Q 95](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

220 [Q 95](#) (Dr Sima Samar)

221 [Q 95](#) (Dr Sima Samar) and written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

222 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

223 [Q 95](#) (Dr Sima Samar)

224 [Q 70](#)

“enforced in some parts of the country, but wherever a judge does not believe in it ... he does not apply the law of the country”.

128. Fifth, many women did not know their rights,²²⁵ which meant “local justice is able to prevail.” There were “still reports of women being stoned to death for adultery or being made to marry their rapist to maintain family honour”.²²⁶
129. Sixth, women’s dependence on men hampered their ability to seek legal recourse. Dr Samar said:
- “when a woman complains about the violence done to her by a partner, father-in-law, brother-in-law or someone ... he might be jailed for three or six months, but the problem is that she depends economically on that person. She usually takes back her claim ... because who is going to feed her and her children?”²²⁷
130. Finally, witnesses said the situation varied in different regions. Legal freedoms for women were curtailed by the limited reach of the Afghan government.²²⁸ There had been progress on women’s rights and participation in Bamiyan:²²⁹ the Hazara community in this province had “much more of a tradition of encouraging women into society”.²³⁰ However, most of the women facing violence were in rural areas, beyond the reach of the special prosecutor’s office for the elimination of violence against women.²³¹

International work to improve the rights of women and girls

131. Dr Samar said international partners had been “key for the promotion of women’s rights and our achievements”. However, this had “slowly ... fallen from the agenda”. The majority of “ambassadors or ... people dealing with aid to Afghanistan” were men, and their Afghan interlocutor was always a male minister. “Not enough attention, or equal attention, is paid to gender issues in general.”²³²
132. At international conferences on Afghanistan “women’s issues are side events”, and the needs of women were not considered “in designing ... the policy and the projects”.²³³
133. Lord Ahmad outlined the UK’s contribution.²³⁴ First, the UK and Afghanistan had “launched the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan” at the UN.²³⁵ This aimed “to empower and recognise the central role of women in the future of Afghanistan”.²³⁶

225 [Q 94](#) (Dr Sima Samar and Baroness Hodgson)

226 [Q 94](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

227 [Q 94](#)

228 [Q 70](#) (Andrew Watkins)

229 [Q 93](#) (Dr Samar and Baroness Hodgson)

230 [Q 93](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

231 [Q 92](#) (Dr Sima Samar)

232 [Q 99](#)

233 *Ibid.*

234 [Q 115](#) (Lord Ahmad)

235 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

236 Afghanistan Mission to the United Nations, ‘Launch of the Group of Friends of Women in Afghanistan’, (19 November 2019): <https://afghanistan-un.org/2019/11/launch-of-the-group-of-friends-of-women-in-afghanistan/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

134. Second, the UK provided “funding for projects ... focused specifically on women”.²³⁷ For example, the Girls’ Education Challenge fund had “helped over 300,000 girls to attend primary school since 2013”, and in 2019 the UK “supported over 70,000 marginalised girls in accessing primary and secondary education, skills and training”.²³⁸
135. Some witnesses were sceptical about the impact of work by the UK and its partners in this area.²³⁹ Dr Jackson said that “time and time again, from the number of maternal deaths in childbirth to the number of girls’ schools built, the advances have been inflated, fabricated and revealed to be false”.²⁴⁰
136. Voices for Creative Nonviolence said the “classic example” was the claim that “some 4 million Afghan girls” had been educated. It said that the rate of women’s illiteracy in Afghanistan was “84% which, after 18 years of foreign support and millions of dollars, is still the worst in the world”. The enrolment numbers of female pupils “vary considerably” between the Afghan government and the US Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), which “in 2015 estimated that \$769 million had gone to ‘Ghost Schools’, wherein administrators collect salaries for absent student bodies.”²⁴¹
137. Investments for Afghan women had “been driven by donor political prerogatives, flawed ideas, and lack of consultation with Afghan women as to what they need or want or what will work for them”.²⁴² Insufficient work had been done by the UK to understanding local norms or listen to women.²⁴³
138. Witnesses suggested areas where donors including the UK should focus. A first priority was community midwives and maternal health: Dr Jackson said the “number of maternal deaths” was “shocking”, particularly after “so much investment”. She said the UK should focus this provision on Taliban-controlled areas.²⁴⁴
139. A second area was girls’ education, “particularly community-based education programmes”.²⁴⁵ Dr Jackson said that Taliban-controlled areas should be the focus: “we know that it will accept community-based education where women from the community teach in a discrete setting, usually someone’s home”. Dr Jackson questioned why there was not “massive British investment” in this “to ensure that every girl ... learns to read and have some level of numeracy”.²⁴⁶
140. Lord Ahmad acknowledged “a shift in Taliban support for education and health support and provisions for citizens in Taliban-controlled areas” over the past five years.²⁴⁷ In December 2020 an agreement was reached between the UN and the Taliban leadership to establish up to 4,000 informal schools

237 [Q 130](#) (Lord Ahmad)

238 [Q 132](#) (Lord Ahmad)

239 [Q 70](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson) and written evidence from Voices for Creative Nonviolence ([AFG0016](#))

240 [Q 70](#)

241 Written evidence from Voices for Creative Nonviolence ([AFG0016](#))

242 [Q 70](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

243 [Q 99](#) (Baroness Hodgson)

244 [Q 70](#)

245 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

246 [Q 70](#)

247 [Q 132](#)

in Taliban-controlled territory. This will be funded by the UK and US-backed Global Partnership for Education.²⁴⁸

141. Third, Baroness Hodgson of Abinger, Co-Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security, called for UK work to strengthen “institutions for women” including “better resourcing for the Ministry of Women’s Affairs”, and support for the scrutiny of legislation and “building and resourcing [of] women’s networks ... especially at grass-roots level”.²⁴⁹
142. **There has been considerable improvement in the participation of women in Afghan society, politics and the economy since the fall of the Taliban administration in 2001, particularly in urban areas. Progress has been impeded by a range of factors including the security situation, the limited reach of the Afghan government into rural areas, the persistence of misogynist norms, unwillingness to enforce legislation protecting women and a culture of impunity for cases of violence against women.**
143. **We were concerned to hear that the promotion of women’s rights appears to have become less of a priority for international donors to Afghanistan. We were reassured to hear from ministers that this remains a key UK priority.**
144. **The increasing number of girls in education is often cited as a success for the US-led coalition’s engagement in Afghanistan. There has undoubtedly been a large increase in the number of girls enrolled in school, but we are concerned at the disparity between enrolment figures and both the number of girls who complete their schooling and the female literacy rate, which is just 16%.**
145. **We recommend that the Government undertakes greater consultation with Afghan communities over its provision of education for girls and maternal health programmes, to ensure these are driven by grassroots priorities.**
146. **The UK should put particular emphasis on funding women’s health programmes across Afghanistan.**
147. **We would welcome further information on the UK’s work to challenge early and forced marriages across Afghanistan, and their effect on the education and future of Afghan girls and women.**
148. **While providing services in Taliban-controlled areas presents considerable challenges, improving the lives of women and girls in rural areas is critical to achieving development in Afghanistan. We would welcome further information on the UK’s policy on such support.**

248 The agreement covers education for boys and girls and would start with classes for the first three grades of primary school. UNICEF estimates that the number of Afghan children out of school is around 3.7 million. It hopes that the initiative will reach 120,000 children. Ben Farmer and Sami Yusufzai, ‘UN secures deal to set up thousands of schools in Taliban territory’, *The Telegraph* (17 December 2020): <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/12/17/un-strikes-agreement-taliban-leaders-set-thousands-schools-insurgent/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

249 [Q 99](#)

Refugees and internally displaced people

149. Amnesty International UK said that “conflict and persecution in Afghanistan” remained “the cause of one of the world’s largest and longest current forced displacements of people”.²⁵⁰ This was a longstanding phenomenon: following the Soviet invasion in 1979, more than a quarter of the Afghan population had left the country.²⁵¹ The scale of displacement within and beyond Afghanistan’s borders had “risen steadily” in recent years²⁵² (see Table 1).

Table 1: Afghan refugees and internally displaced persons

Year	Refugees and asylum seekers	Internally displaced persons
End 2015	2,925,146	1,174,306
End 2016	2,870,402	1,797,551
End 2017	2,958,269	1,837,079
End 2018	2,991,389	2,106,893
End 2019	2,979,900	2,553,390

Source: Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023)

150. Afghans account for the second largest number of refugees in the world.²⁵³ The “overwhelming majority”—95%—are hosted by Pakistan and Iran.²⁵⁴ The most recent available figures from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) put the number of Afghan refugees in Pakistan as 1,422,588 (August 2020)²⁵⁵ and the number in Iran as 951,142 (February 2015)²⁵⁶. There are also an estimated 100,000 Afghan refugees in European countries, accounting for the second largest refugee group in the region.²⁵⁷
151. The circumstances of many refugees in Pakistan and Iran was “insecure”. Both countries’ governments had “periodically threatened the Afghan government with the prospect of forced mass returns”, and “forcibly returned or pressured Afghans to return”.²⁵⁸
152. The ODI said Afghanistan had “one of the world’s largest internally displaced populations”. There was “little hope of reintegration or return”.²⁵⁹

Returns

153. Dr Orzala Nemat, Director, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, said that, “even though the violence has still not ended”, many Afghan refugees were returning.²⁶⁰

250 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023)

251 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

252 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023)

253 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

254 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023)

255 UNHCR, ‘Registered Refugees from Afghanistan, last updated 31 August 2020’, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]

256 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023). Amnesty International UK said that both figures were a significant underestimate, and both countries hosted “a population of undocumented Afghan people that is either close to or exceeds the size of the documented Afghan refugee population”.

257 Written evidence from Voices for Creative Nonviolence (AFG0016)

258 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023)

259 Written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028)

260 Q 30

154. The concept of “return” was “often a misnomer”, as displacement could “span several generations”.²⁶¹ Amnesty International UK said there were “no immediate prospects of safe and sustainable returns for the vast majority” of Afghan refugees. Afghanistan “remained a place of instability, conflict and persecution”.²⁶²
155. Refugees returned to “impoverished communities with scant resources”;²⁶³ many ended up in internally displaced persons camps “for lack of better alternatives”.²⁶⁴ They faced “stigmatisation and exclusion” and some faced “debts incurred to facilitate migration” and “lack of employment opportunities”, which could leave them “vulnerable to criminal networks and extremist groups”.²⁶⁵

The UK and Afghan refugees

156. The UK is “a modest recipient” of asylum claims from Afghanistan compared with other European nations. Over the last 10 years, the number of UK asylum applications from Afghan nationals “fluctuated between 1,000 (in 2012) and 2,332 (in 2016)”. The UK had “resettled only a very small number of Afghan refugees”.²⁶⁶
157. Over the past decade there had been “a sharp decline” in forced returns from the UK and “a steady decline” in voluntary returns.²⁶⁷ Voices for Creative Nonviolence called for “a moratorium on all deportations to Afghanistan”.²⁶⁸
158. Dr Marissa Quie, Fellow and Director of Studies in Human, Social and Political Science, Lucy Cavendish College, and College Lecturer in Politics and Director of Studies in Human, Social and Political Science, Magdalene College, University of Cambridge, and Mr Hakimi said UK policy should emphasise support for “regional solutions”. Host countries, such as Iran and Pakistan, faced strains on natural resources and basic provision, including education, health and urban infrastructure.²⁶⁹
159. The UK is one of the core group of states supporting the *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries*, developed between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan with UNHCR support.²⁷⁰ The UK should “more closely scrutinise implementation” of this strategy, and “exercise its influence on Pakistan and Iran to ensure that Afghan refugees are subject to the universally binding, customary law rule of non-refoulement”.²⁷¹

261 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

262 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023)

263 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

264 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch (AFG0022)

265 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

266 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023) The UK made 6,109 grants of asylum to Afghans from 2008–19, and 3,460 grants of humanitarian protection/discretionary leave. Home Office, Immigration statistics (August 2020): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936688/outcome-analysis-asylum-applications-datasets-sep-2020.xlsx Tab Data-Asy-D04 [accessed 5 January 2021]

267 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023)

268 Written evidence from Voices for Creative Nonviolence (AFG0016)

269 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

270 UNHCR, *Progress report 2014: Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees* (2014) p 4: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/562a44639.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

271 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024). Non-refoulement is not sending refugees or asylum seekers back to a country in which they are liable to be subjected to persecution.

160. **Depending on the outcome of the Doha talks and the prospects for peace and stability in Afghanistan, the UK Government may need to recognise that the circumstances permitting returning asylum seekers to Afghanistan no longer exist.**
161. **Decades of war and instability have resulted in large Afghan refugee populations in Iran and Pakistan, and one of the largest numbers of internally displaced persons in the world. Ongoing violence and poverty pose a significant challenge to safe and sustainable returns.**
162. **As one of the core group of states supporting the *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries*, the UK should consider what further influence it can bring to bear on Pakistan and Iran on the protection of Afghan refugees' rights. We would be interested to receive further information on what role the UK's significant aid programme to Pakistan might play in facilitating resettlement.**

CHAPTER 4: THE AFGHAN ECONOMY

Structure of the economy

163. Gul Maqsood Sabit, former Deputy Minister of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and Lecturer, Ohlone College, California, said that the Afghan budget was around \$5.5 billion in 2020. Domestic revenue contribution accounted for “roughly 40% or \$2 billion”, with “the remaining \$3.5 billion ... financed with international aid” (discussed further below).²⁷²
164. The government’s capacity to increase Afghanistan’s revenue base was “very low”. Public financial management was “quite good”, but Afghanistan’s revenue base was “likely to get lower”.²⁷³
165. Mr Sabit said Afghanistan’s formal economy had three main sectors:
- Services (60%).²⁷⁴ This comprises community, social and personal services, and wholesale and retail trade.²⁷⁵
 - Agriculture (23%).²⁷⁶
 - Industry including mining (21%).²⁷⁷

Agriculture

166. Mr Sabit said that over half the population “work and live on agriculture-related activities”.²⁷⁸ The sector faced productivity challenges including “outdated farming techniques”, limited access to finance, water shortages, absence of processing and packaging facilities, transportation and access to markets.²⁷⁹
167. Agriculture’s contribution to Afghan GDP is 25%—“75% of the population contributes 25% to GDP”.²⁸⁰
168. The ODI said there had been “poor co-ordination among donors” on ODA for agriculture. It called for “greater emphasis” on “the development of markets and the creation of value chains”.²⁸¹ Charles Davy, Managing Director, Afghanaid, said funding for “natural resource management” was needed, which would also reduce disaster risk and create “the conditions for climate resistant crops”.²⁸²

Minerals and mining

169. Afghanistan has “an abundance of natural resources, including vast mineral deposits estimated to be worth over \$1 trillion dollars”. However, “much of

272 Written evidence from Gul Maqsood Sabit (AFG0025) These numbers are estimates, and can change due to exchange rate fluctuations and changes in domestic revenues.

273 Q 36 (Mark Bowden)

274 Written evidence from Gul Maqsood Sabit (AFG0025)

275 Lloyds Bank, ‘Afghanistan: economic and political overview’, (October 2020): <https://www.lloydsbanktrade.com/en/market-potential/afghanistan/economical-context> [accessed 5 January 2021]

276 Written evidence from Gul Maqsood Sabit (AFG0025)

277 *Ibid.*

278 *Ibid.*

279 *Ibid.*

280 *Ibid.*

281 Written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028)

282 Written evidence from Charles Davy (AFG0018)

this wealth remains inaccessible due to poor security, weak legal frameworks and organisational capacity, and corruption”.²⁸³

170. The extractives sector was “largely informal, illicit and artisanal”.²⁸⁴ Natural resources were “often illegally extracted and smuggled out of the country”.²⁸⁵ Attempts to regulate the sector had “largely failed despite various attempts driven by international donors and initiated by the Afghan government”.²⁸⁶
171. Mr Sabit identified a number of necessary actions: developing a “natural resource extraction policy”; reforming the Ministry of Mining and Petroleum; partnership with the private sector; and developing processing facilities.²⁸⁷ The ODI cautioned that Afghanistan’s national economic plans had “demonstrated overreliance on the development of the extractive industry sector”. A stable security situation was a prerequisite.²⁸⁸ At present, there was “low investor confidence” as a result of “armed conflict and very weak rule of law”, and mining activities brought “high risks of increased corruption and rent seeking”.²⁸⁹
172. **Afghanistan depends on international aid for around 60% of its budget. There are few prospects for domestic revenues to increase. Around 75% of the Afghan population work in agriculture, which accounts for just 25% of GDP. While Afghanistan has significant mineral resources, the poor security situation hampers access, and the sector is largely unregulated and beset by corruption and rent-seeking.**

Trade and connectivity

173. Mr Sabit said that, as a landlocked country, Afghanistan had “few choices in international trade”: it was dependent on Pakistani and Iranian ports.²⁹⁰ Sanctions on Iran, and difficult relations between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, limit Afghan access to ports to India and China.²⁹¹ Trade agreements, such as the Afghanistan–Pakistan Trade Agreement, were “often ignored”.²⁹²
174. Exports account for around 20% of Afghanistan’s GDP. Its main exports are carpets and rugs (45%), dried fruits (31%) and medicinal plants (12%).²⁹³ Afghanistan’s largest export market is Pakistan, which in 2018 accounted for 48% of total exports.²⁹⁴ Afghanistan’s major imports come from Iran.²⁹⁵

283 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group ([AFG0013](#))

284 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#))

285 Written evidence from Gul Maqsood Sabit ([AFG0025](#))

286 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#))

287 Written evidence from Gul Maqsood Sabit ([AFG0025](#))

288 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#)) and the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

289 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#))

290 Written evidence from Gul Maqsood Sabit ([AFG0025](#))

291 *Ibid.*

292 *Ibid.*

293 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#))

294 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#)). India accounted for 19%, Russia 9% and “the bulk of the remainder” went to Turkey, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Tajikistan, Saudi Arabia, and Germany.

295 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group ([AFG0013](#))

175. Afghanistan is “geographically well-placed to benefit as a crossroads connecting West, Central and South Asian markets”. Links with central Asian countries were “a growing priority”, particularly “energy-focused initiatives such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India natural gas pipeline”.²⁹⁶ However, the pipeline has been subject to delays caused by lack of transparency, unclear funding and the insecurity of its 750 kilometre Afghan segment.²⁹⁷
176. The FCDO said “long-term development and regional economic connectivity” was important.²⁹⁸ The UK had allocated £38.5 million (over four years) to the Asia Regional Trade and Connectivity Programme, and was funding £31 million (over seven years) via the Central Asia South Asia power project.²⁹⁹
177. **As a result of poor security and regional tensions, Afghanistan has missed opportunities to benefit from the trade and connectivity potential of its geographical position at the crossroads between the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia. It should be an objective of the Government’s aid and other policies to help Afghanistan to overcome these obstacles.**

The grey economy and the illicit drugs trade

178. Mr Sabit described the trade in illegal drugs and the grey economy as “a significant source of income”, estimated to be “approximately half of the economy”.³⁰⁰ The illicit economy spanned “a huge range of activities”, of which “opium is the biggest”.³⁰¹ Figure 2 shows poppy cultivation across the country.

296 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (AFG0013)

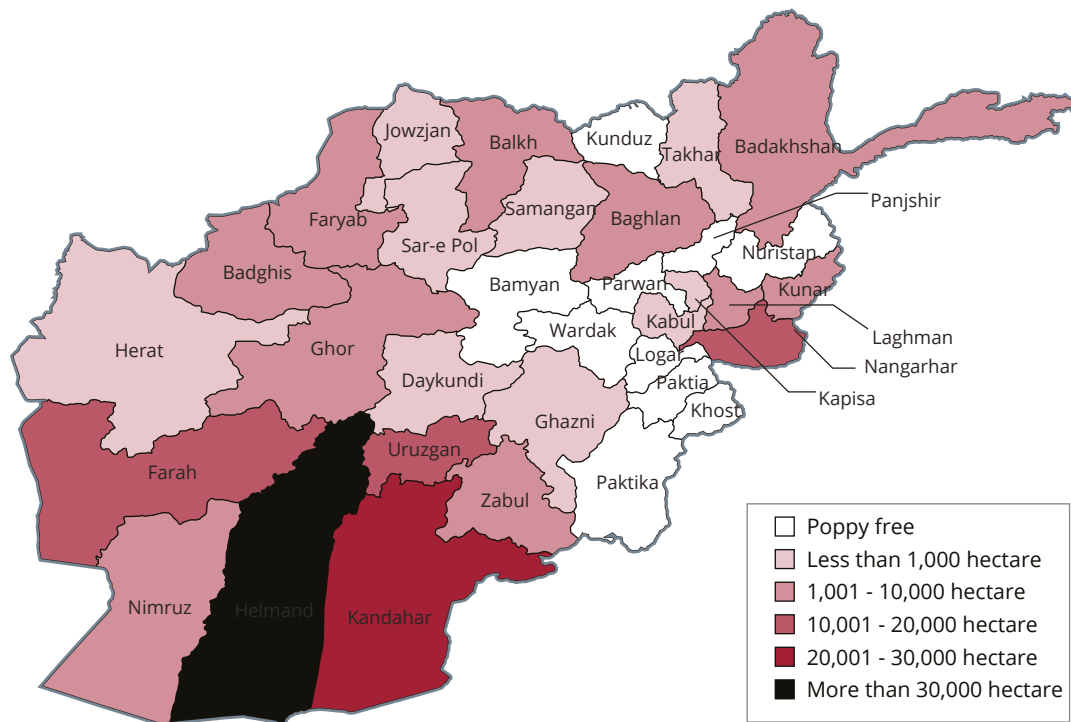
297 University of Glasgow, ‘Turkmenistan and the virtual politics of Eurasian energy: the case of the TAPI pipeline project.’ *Central Asian Survey*, 36(4) p 4: <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/149504/7/149504.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

298 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

299 *Ibid.*

300 Written evidence from Gul Maqsood Sabit (AFG0025)

301 Q 56 (Erica Gaston)

Figure 2: Map of poppy cultivation

Source: UNODC and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 'Afghanistan opium survey 2018' (July 2019): https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_opium_survey_2018_socioeconomic_report.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]

179. Afghanistan is “the largest source of illicit opium in the world, producing between 80 and 90 percent of global supply”.³⁰² It is also a source of hashish, synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines³⁰³ and ephedra.³⁰⁴
180. Dr Parto said “vast swathes of agricultural land” were “increasingly used for poppy cultivation as a high return cash crop”.³⁰⁵ The “gross output of illicit opium was estimated at between US\$4.1 billion and US\$6.6 billion” in 2017, around 6–11% of GDP, and “far greater than the value of licit exports of goods and services”.³⁰⁶
181. The drug economy was part of the dynamics of power in Afghanistan.³⁰⁷ It was “tolerated in most local communities” and involved multiple actors.³⁰⁸ The Taliban “taxes cultivation, processing, and smuggling of drugs” (discussed further in Chapter 5). Police units “tax the drug economy”, while “local commanders and powerbrokers ... tax it and may own or sponsor

302 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (AFG0013)

303 *Ibid.*

304 Written evidence from Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown (AFG0027) Ephedra is a herb which contains the chemical ephedrine, an amphetamine-like compound closely related to adrenaline.

305 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto (AFG0026)

306 Q 56 (Erica Gaston). This had fallen to US\$2.2 billion in 2018 as a result of that year’s drought. Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto (AFG0026)

307 Q 56 (Dr Antonio De Lauri) and written evidence from Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown (AFG0027)

308 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto (AFG0026)

poppy fields as well as rent land to poppy farmers and provide microcredit for cultivation”. Border officials “let trafficking pass for a cut of drug profits”.³⁰⁹

182. Lord Ahmad said that there was a link between the “profits from illegal drugs” and “other forms of criminal operations, including buying illegal firearms and financing terrorism”.³¹⁰
183. Poppies are cultivated in approximately a third of rural villages in Afghanistan. Cultivation is “vital to supporting economic and social systems”, and underpins progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals on “jobs, livelihoods and poverty reduction”.³¹¹ Opium cultivation is labour intensive—five times more so than wheat cultivation—making it a major source of employment.³¹² In 2018 “an estimated 200,000 people in different regions of Afghanistan earned income from opium production by working as farmhands to weed, lance and harvest opium”.³¹³
184. Dr Parto said that “poverty and a lack of alternative licit employment opportunities” were “strong drivers for many who become opiate traffickers”. The lack of rule of law meant there was little to deter “many poor ordinary citizens”.³¹⁴ An estimated “three million Afghans benefit directly or indirectly from the drug economy”.³¹⁵
185. Sir Richard Stagg said most Afghans saw the opium industry “as a demand problem, not a supply problem”; it existed “because people elsewhere want to use the commodity”. The Afghan government considered opium to be a “third-order” issue compared to the civil insurgency.³¹⁶
186. Afghanistan’s drug economies are “a long-term, complex development issue”.³¹⁷ There were “difficult trade-offs” to be made between eradication and “livelihoods/poverty reduction”.³¹⁸ Dr Parto thought “limited or full legalisation of poppy cultivation and state purchase of the opium produced for pharmaceutical and other legitimate purposes need to be explored”.³¹⁹
187. **Afghanistan is the largest source of heroin in the world. It is also a source of hashish, methamphetamines and ephedrine.**
188. **The drug economy is a crucial part of Afghanistan’s power dynamics: warlords, border officials, security forces, the police and the Taliban are engaged in the trade.**
189. **Opium poppies are a high-return cash crop, and many rural jobs and livelihoods depend on their cultivation. It is estimated that three million Afghans benefit directly or indirectly from the drugs**

309 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown (AFG0027)

310 Letter from Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon to Baroness Anelay of St Johns (10 November 2020): <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3589/documents/34670/default/>

311 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (AFG0013)

312 Written evidence Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown (AFG0027)

313 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto (AFG0026)

314 *Ibid.*

315 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (AFG0013)

316 Q 27

317 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (AFG0013)

318 *Ibid.*

319 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto (AFG0026)

economy. Reducing dependence on the drugs economy is a long-term development issue.

International and UK efforts to combat the illicit drugs trade

190. Lord Sedwill said the UK had “been the leading nation trying to tackle the drugs problem in Afghanistan over the entire decade”. It had “built capability in the Afghan government”, including “specialist forces” and “task forces ... operating under the Ministry of Interior Affairs”.³²⁰
191. Lord Ahmad said the UK worked “closely with Afghan and international partners to disrupt serious and organised criminality ... linked to the Afghan drugs trade.” The National Crime Agency worked with Afghan authorities “to counter the flow of drugs to the UK and Europe”, with a focus on “tackling illicit finance and serious organised crime and on the dismantling and disruption of supply chains”.³²¹
192. He said this approach achieved “considerable success”, including “developing the intelligence and investigative capability of Afghan authorities”, and “enabling effective targeting and arrest of criminals and malign actors”.³²² Afghan intelligence gathering helped “to disrupt the supply of drugs to the UK”. There had been “a successful range of operations”, including two in 2019 resulting in arrests and the seizure of 1.3 tonnes of heroin.³²³
193. However, Baroness Goldie said ongoing “violence and instability” exacerbated the problem and hindered “efforts ... to eradicate and provide alternatives to poppy production”.³²⁴
194. Other witnesses were more critical of the efficacy of international efforts since 2001.
195. First, while the UK had tried to limit opium production, “the attraction of a relatively quick-earning opium harvest increased, so the fundamentals were moving against what the British Government were trying to achieve”.³²⁵
196. Second, most measures had “been ineffective or outright counterproductive economically, politically, and with respect to counterinsurgency and stabilisation efforts”.³²⁶ Eradication and bans were “often suffered by the poorest and most socially marginalised communities”, and “generated extensive political capital for the Taliban”.³²⁷
197. Third, while the Afghan government and donors had recognised the need for alternative livelihoods programmes, these were “often poorly designed and haphazardly delivered”. A “lack of co-ordination between different donors operating in Afghanistan and an absence of proper long-term monitoring and evaluation” had “undermined” counter-narcotics strategies.³²⁸

320 [Q 86](#)

321 Letter from Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon to Baroness Anelay of St Johns (10 November 2020): <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3589/documents/34670/default/>

322 *Ibid.*

323 [Q 118](#) (Lord Ahmad)

324 [Q 118](#)

325 [Q 27](#) (Sir Richard Stagg)

326 Written evidence Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown ([AFG0027](#))

327 Written evidence Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown ([AFG0027](#))

328 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group ([AFG0013](#))

198. Dr De Lauri said the high figures for opium production in recent years (see above) demonstrated the limited impact of these measures.³²⁹ Lord Sedwill acknowledged “mixed results”: “far too much of the Afghan economy remains dominated by narcotics”.³³⁰
199. This is consistent with the assessment of the House of Commons Defence Committee in 2014: “The counter-narcotics strategy of the UK Government in Afghanistan has failed ... poppy cultivation is soaring to record levels and there is no sign that the Government of Afghanistan has the will or the means to tackle the problem.”³³¹
200. Considering the future, Dr. Felbab-Brown anticipated that an intensification of fighting would “eviscerate alternative livelihood efforts”, while external pressure on the Afghan government to eradicate drug crops would be “deeply counterproductive” to counterinsurgency efforts.³³² She advised that, “for the foreseeable future”, international counter-narcotics policies should aim “to avoid making a very difficult situation in Afghanistan worse”. The focus should be “interdiction outside of Afghanistan’s borders”.
201. **The UK has devoted significant efforts to combating the Afghan drugs economy. Most recently, this has included work to develop the intelligence and investigative capability of the Afghan authorities.**
202. **UK and international counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan have ultimately failed. The level of cultivation of opium poppies has not fallen, and Afghanistan remains the source of 95% of heroin on UK streets.**
203. **The UK’s presence in and funding for Afghanistan appears to contribute little to the UK’s identified national security interest of countering the narcotics trade. The problem is seemingly intractable, in the context of ongoing conflict and insecurity, the dependence of millions of rural Afghans on opium poppies for their livelihoods and the involvement of multiple powerful actors in the drug economy.**
204. **Nonetheless, addressing the cultivation and trafficking of narcotics must be a priority for the UK’s engagement on Afghanistan’s agricultural, economic and rural development, and UK public safety. Effective action will only be possible once a greater degree of security in the country is achieved. It should be an objective of UK Government policy that any post-Doha Afghan government is committed to reducing and eliminating this trade, to help that government to achieve those aims, and to co-operate with Afghanistan’s neighbours, particularly Pakistan and Iran, in enforcement action against this illicit trade.**

329 [Q 56](#)

330 [Q 86](#)

331 House of Commons Defence Committee, [Afghanistan](#) (Fifteenth Report, Session 2013–14, HC Paper 994)

332 Written evidence Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown ([AFG0027](#))

Aid

205. Mr Bowden said Afghanistan had “the highest levels of aid dependency globally”.³³³ A “10 or 15-year plan” was needed to reduce ODA to Afghanistan “in a measured way, at the same time as we are building capacity”.³³⁴
206. On 24 November 2020 international donors pledged to provide “at least US\$3.3 billion” in 2021, with annual contributions “expected to stay at the same level year-on-year” until 2024.³³⁵ This is a decrease of US\$0.5 billion per year from the previous four-year commitment.
207. The majority of ODA to Afghanistan is channelled through the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (see Box 4). It accounted for 40% of civilian government expenditure in 2018.³³⁶

Box 4: The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund

The ARTF is a multi-donor trust fund supported by 34 donors and administered by the World Bank.³³⁷

It is the main multi-donor mechanism for non-security on-budget assistance.³³⁸ Donors provide funding for service delivery and reconstruction.³³⁹

All funds are channelled through Afghan government systems, with ministries and government agencies responsible for implementing all projects.³⁴⁰

Funding is provided for the priorities in the *Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework*. Thirty-seven percent of funding is allocated to poverty reduction, service delivery and citizen engagement, including health and education programmes. The ARTF also supports economic growth and job creation, governance and state effectiveness, and provides fiscal stability support for civilian expenses of the government, including civil servant salaries.³⁴¹

333 Q 36. Aid dependency is defined as when aid comprises around 10% of GDP and when in the absence of aid the state fails to perform many of its core functions. DFID, ‘Aid Dependency and Political Settlements in Afghanistan’ (14 September 2018): <https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/aid-dependency-and-political-settlements-in-afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]

334 Q 36 (Charles Davy)

335 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, ‘Strong Support for Afghanistan at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference’, (24 November 2020): https://um.fi/afghanistan-conference-2020-news/-/asset_publisher/FZD0VyzqdZXC/content/vahva-tuki-afganistanille-vuoden-2020-apukonferenssissa [accessed 5 January 2021]

336 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

337 The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, ‘Who we are’: <http://www.artf.af/who-we-are> [accessed 5 January 2021]

338 OECD guidance defines assistance as on-budget/direct budget support when the fund disbursed is managed according to the national budget/treasury procedures of the partner country. This includes both general budget support (discretionary) and earmarked assistance. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Finance, Budget Hearing: <http://www.budgetmof.gov.af/index.php/en/2012-12-10-12-13-57/faq/194-what-is-on-budget> [accessed 5 January 2021]

339 The Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, ‘Who we are’: <http://www.artf.af/who-we-are/frequentlyaskedquestions> [accessed 5 January 2021]

340 *Ibid.*

341 The World Bank, ‘ARTF Steering Committee Approves Three-Year Partnership Framework and Financing Programme’, (25 June 2018): <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/06/25/artf-steering-committee-approves-three-year-partnership-framework-and-financing-program> [accessed 5 January 2021]

The UK is a member of the ARTF Strategy Group, which meets monthly. It includes representatives of the Afghan Ministry of Finance, the World Bank and ARTF donor countries.³⁴² The Government’s annual review of the ARTF, published in January 2020, stated:

“The ARTF is not a perfect mechanism but achieves very strong results in terms of service delivery. It is potentially the best funding and stabilising resource and is essential for filling the large financing gap in [the Afghan government’s] operating budget and delivering government aligned development priorities.”³⁴³

209. The ODI said the ARFT was “essential in maintaining and developing basic services as well as supporting extensive community development activities”. It had “advantages in terms of low aid transaction costs and the management of risk through being part of a pooled development fund”.³⁴⁴
210. Most humanitarian assistance is channelled through the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (see Box 5).

Box 5: The Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund

The Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF) is one of the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ country-based pooled funds. It was established in 2014 for swift and strategic humanitarian action in Afghanistan.³⁴⁵

211. **Afghanistan is the most aid-dependent country in the world. Sixty percent of its budget is provided by international donors. Without this funding, the state cannot provide basic services.**
212. **Reducing Afghanistan’s aid dependence in a sustainable way, which does not damage an already fragile state or increase deprivation, will be a long-term process.**

UK development assistance

213. The UK is one of the top five aid donors to Afghanistan.³⁴⁶ Ms Lyons said the UK had worked “very closely” with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.³⁴⁷ It was “part of the core group of major development donors that ensures aid delivers reforms and accountability, and tackles corruption”.³⁴⁸
214. The UK’s ODA budget for Afghanistan increased in both 2018–19 and 2019–20, but dropped to £167 million in 2020–21, a decrease of around 43% on the previous year.³⁴⁹ In November 2020 the UK pledged up to £155 million for

342 FCDO, Support to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund Annual Review-Post April 2018, http://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/52998067.odt [accessed 5 January 2021]

343 *Ibid.*

344 Written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028)

345 OCHA, ‘The Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund’: <https://www.unocha.org/afghanistan/about-ahf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

346 Q 115 (Lord Ahmad)

347 Q 16

348 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

349 FCDO, ‘Development Tracker Afghanistan’: <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/countries/AF> [accessed 5 January 2021]. UK bilateral ODA to Afghanistan increased by £43m in 2019 compared to 2018, “partly driven by frontline diplomacy and humanitarian aid”. FCDO, *Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2019* (September 2020): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/927135/Statistics_on_International_Development_Final_UK_Aid_Spend_2019.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]

2021, a further reduction. It had given “an indication of continued support to 2024, depending on progress towards a fully inclusive peace settlement” (see Chapter 8).³⁵⁰ There are three elements to the UK’s ODA allocation. First, “approximately half” the UK’s annual ODA for Afghanistan—£214.4 million in 2019—was allocated to the ARTF (see Box 4).³⁵¹

215. Second, “the majority of the remaining amount”—£63 million in 2019—was spent on humanitarian support, via the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (see Box 5).³⁵²
216. Third, the UK allocated the remainder—£29 million in 2019—to programmes managed from the UK.³⁵³
217. The main sectors receiving UK ODA in 2020–21 are:
- Government and civil society 45%
 - Disaster relief 16.6%
 - Multisector 13.1%
 - Agricultural 7.8%
 - Education 4.0%
 - Other 13.5%³⁵⁴
218. Witnesses assessed the UK’s role and impact. First, Mr Davy said the (then) Department for International Development (DfID) had “played a leading role in providing financial and technical support”³⁵⁵ to contractors and NGOs.
219. Second, the UK had “been an effective member of the ARTF strategy and accountability framework”, and “critical in terms of supporting NGO functions within the ARTF”.³⁵⁶ Spending ODA through such “co-ordinated financing mechanisms” was “in line with best practice in aid effectiveness”.³⁵⁷
220. Third, the UK was “one of Afghanistan’s main humanitarian donors and a consistent contributor” to the AHF. It had been “one of the few donors to provide multi-annual support to the AHF”, which had “been critical” to address “longstanding humanitarian concerns”, and enable a “more strategic

350 Letter from Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon to Baroness Anelay of St Johns (11 December 2020): <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4157/documents/41135/default/> and FCDO, ‘UK pledges £155 million aid to support peace and stability in Afghanistan’, (24 November 2020): <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-pledges-155-million-aid-to-support-peace-and-stability-in-afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]

351 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

352 *Ibid.*

353 *Ibid.*

354 FCDO, ‘Development Tracker Afghanistan—sectors’: <https://devtracker.fcdo.gov.uk/countries/AF> [accessed 5 January 2021]

355 Written evidence from Charles Davy (AFG0018)

356 Written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028)

357 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

and effective use of funds”.³⁵⁸ Mr Davy said DfID had “consistently shaped [AHF] funding allocations and driven quality programming”.³⁵⁹

221. Fourth, the DfID (now FCDO) team in Kabul was “very well informed, technically skilled and highly supportive”, although “security policies” kept them “largely desk-bound” and staff postings could be “quite short”.³⁶⁰
222. Sir Richard Stagg sounded a note of caution. The UK had “probably underestimated ... certainly for the last decade, the difficulty, if not impossibility, of using our taxpayers’ money really effectively in that environment”. The main recipient—the Afghan government—was “not very strong”, “perceived by many Afghans to be corrupt” and had “limited capacity and limited reach”.³⁶¹ “Pouring money into the top of the Afghan government machine” would “do some good but probably not as much as we would hope”.³⁶² He thought the UK should “think quite carefully about whether we can achieve our ambitions or whether we need to recalibrate them to reflect the realities in Afghanistan”.³⁶³
223. **The UK is a major donor to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which provides on-budget support to the Afghan government. This funding accounts for half of UK official development assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan.**
224. **As the ARTF is provided as on-budget support (directly to the Afghan government), the UK is reliant on the financial management of the Afghan government for the delivery of 50% of its ODA. While the UK participates actively in World Bank oversight mechanisms for the ARTF, this situation nonetheless poses challenges to achieving the UK’s development outcomes, given the weakness of the Afghan government and widespread corruption. Therefore, further consideration should be given to the allocation of ODA directly to NGOs and other recipients, rather than to the Afghan government via the ARTF.**
225. **The UK is also a major humanitarian donor, including through the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF). Ongoing UK funding for the AHF will be required, given the scale of the humanitarian challenges facing Afghanistan, particularly the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.**
226. **We welcome the Government’s decision to maintain the level of aid to Afghanistan in the present financial year (2020–21), and its commitment at the recent Geneva conference to sustaining a substantial aid programme in the future. The Government should explore ways of funding smaller, locally-led programmes, particularly those devoted to health and education.**

358 Written evidence from the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

359 Written evidence from Charles Davy ([AFG0018](#)). The World Food Programme said addressing humanitarian needs, especially for those affected by COVID-19, should be a focus. Written evidence from the World Food Programme ([AFG0010](#))

360 Written evidence from Charles Davy ([AFG0018](#))

361 [Q 24](#)

362 [Q 25](#)

363 [Q 24](#)

227. **Improving agricultural productivity is essential to Afghanistan’s economic development (see paragraphs 166-8). The UK should maintain and improve its provision of official development assistance for agricultural development.**

Remittances

228. Remittances accounted for 4.3% of Afghanistan’s GDP in 2019,³⁶⁴ a “crucial buffer against economic shocks”.³⁶⁵
229. 1.9% of remittances to Afghanistan originated from the UK.³⁶⁶ Dr Quie and Mr Hakimi mentioned the high cost of remitting money from the UK, which we raised in our report *The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa: prosperity, peace and development co-operation*.³⁶⁷ They said that, at 12.7%,³⁶⁸ Afghanistan was the most expensive country to send money to from the UK, “mostly due to high fees associated with cash payments”.³⁶⁹
230. **The cost of remitting money from the UK to Afghanistan, 12.7%, is unacceptably high. The Government should consider what actions it could take to lower the cost of remitting money from the UK to Afghanistan.**

Poverty and COVID-19

231. Witnesses said the pandemic had “hit Afghanistan at its weakest moment”.³⁷⁰ In 2016 it was estimated that 55% of the population lived below the poverty line and nearly 45% were food insecure.³⁷¹ Afghanistan’s annual economic growth fell from 12.7% in 2012 to 2.9% in 2019,³⁷² and it ranked 170 out of 189 countries in the 2019 Human Development Index.³⁷³
232. The pandemic caused “an unprecedented humanitarian crisis”.³⁷⁴ The World Bank has predicted the economy will shrink by 5.5% in 2020.³⁷⁵ Ms Lyons

364 The World Bank, ‘Personal remittances, received (% of GDP)—Afghanistan’: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=AF> [accessed 5 January 2021]

365 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

366 International Organization for Migration, *Afghanistan Remittance Overview and Trends. Annex to Afghanistan Migration Profile*, (2011) p 81: <https://www.merit.unu.edu/publications/uploads/1442240401.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021] In 2011, the latest available data.

367 International Relations and Defence Committee, *The UK and Sub-Saharan Africa: prosperity, peace and development co-operation* (1st Report, Session 2019–21, HL Paper 88)

368 Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, ‘Migrant Remittances to and from the UK’, (11 May 2020): <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrant-remittances-to-and-from-the-uk/> [accessed 5 January 2021]; This is based on the average cost of sending £120 in Q4 2019.

369 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024). Western Union is the only remittance service provider in Afghanistan with high network coverage. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Remittances*, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/5b3101d44.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

370 Written evidence from the World Food Programme (AFG0010)

371 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto (AFG0026)

372 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

373 United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 2019, *Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: inequalities in human development in the 21st century*, (2019) p 302: <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2019.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]. The HDI is a summary measure for assessing long-term progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living. Afghanistan’s value for 2018 was 0.496, placing it in the ‘low human development’ category. Its 2018 HDI was below the average for countries in the low human development category (0.507), and below the average for countries in South Asia (0.642).

374 Written evidence from the World Food Programme (AFG0010)

375 *Ibid.*

said that the “socio-economic impact will endure longer than the first wave of the virus itself”.³⁷⁶

233. The economic deterioration was projected to result in an increase in the poverty rate of up to 72% in 2020, “with direct effects on access to amenities and services, including food, shelter, health care and education”.³⁷⁷ The number of Afghans “in acute humanitarian need” in June 2020 was estimated at 14 million, “a 45% increase on original estimates”.³⁷⁸
234. The World Food Programme said food insecurity was “alarmingly high”. In April–May 2020 “10.9 million people faced ‘crisis’ or above levels of hunger” as a result of “high food prices, reduced employment opportunities and conflict”.³⁷⁹ Ms Lyons said the cost of “fuel and of foodstuffs” had risen by 10 to 25%.³⁸⁰
235. Afghanistan would have difficulty in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly “SDG 1 (Ending Poverty); SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructures), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality)”.³⁸¹
236. The FCDO said that “\$885 million of existing UK and other international aid has been redirected to combat the crisis and new funding has been allocated to the Afghan government’s COVID-19 plan.”³⁸² In November 2020 it committed an additional £15 million in emergency support to “help the most vulnerable cope with the cold winter and COVID-19”.³⁸³
237. **The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded Afghanistan’s serious economic challenges. The country faces a humanitarian crisis, with alarmingly high levels of food insecurity. The poverty rate is expected to rise to 72% of the population, and it will struggle to meet a number of the Sustainable Development Goals.**
238. **Afghanistan will need further humanitarian aid as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We welcome the UK’s recent commitments to increase humanitarian provision in this regard. Rigorous oversight will be needed to ensure that UK resources reach their intended targets, represent value for money, and are not used to sustain warlords.**

376 [Q 15](#)

377 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#))

378 Written evidence from the World Food Programme ([AFG0010](#))

379 *Ibid.*

380 [Q 15](#)

381 Written evidence from Dr Saeed Parto ([AFG0026](#))

382 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

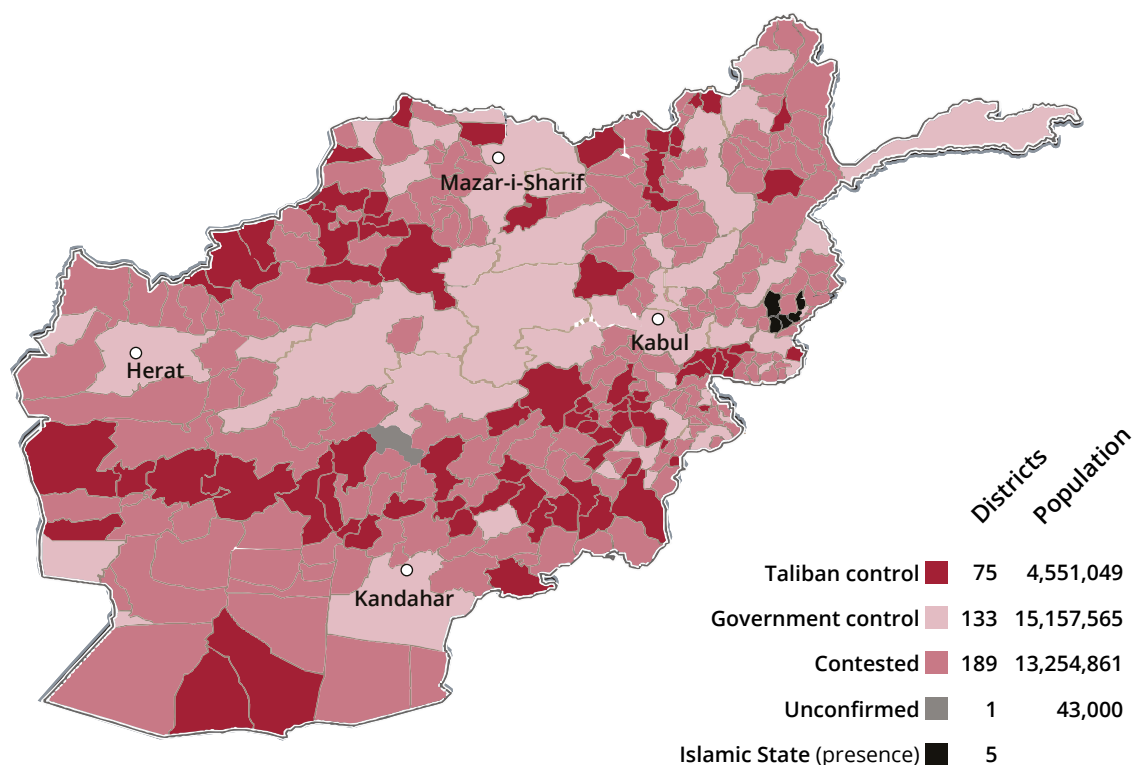
383 FCDO, ‘UK pledges £155 million aid to support peace and stability in Afghanistan’ (24 November 2020): <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-pledges-155-million-aid-to-support-peace-and-stability-in-afghanistan> [accessed 5 January 2021]

CHAPTER 5: THE TALIBAN AND OTHER SECURITY ISSUES

Taliban control of territory

239. We heard different views on the extent of the Taliban’s control of territory (see Figure 3). Mr Hakimi said the Taliban claimed to control 70% of the country but this was “incorrect”: Afghanistan’s geography was “very ragged”, and there was “a nuance between [control of] population centres” and elsewhere.³⁸⁴ Areas under the Taliban’s control were mainly remote and rural;³⁸⁵ they were generally among the poorest areas of the country.³⁸⁶
240. Our witnesses’ assessments ranged from half to 66% of Afghanistan’s territory.³⁸⁷ According to the BBC World Service’s 2017 study, the Taliban had full control of 14 districts and a physical presence in 263. The Taliban had subsequently taken control of several north-western and north-eastern provinces, and the Afghan government claimed to have regained control over 13 districts. These changes did not alter its overall assessment.³⁸⁸

Figure 3: Map of Taliban controlled areas



Source: Frud Bezhan, ‘The Taliban, the government, and Islamic State: Who controls what in Afghanistan?’ Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty (31 May 2020): <https://www.rferl.org/a/taliban-government-islamic-state-who-controls-what-in-afghanistan-/30644646.html> [accessed 5 January 2021]³⁸⁹

241. Falanx Assynt said that the release of almost 5,000 Taliban prisoners by the government in Kabul at the end of February 2020, as a result of the US–

384 Q 2

385 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

386 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch (AFG0022)

387 Written evidence from the BBC World Service (AFG0015); Written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028) and Q 55 (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

388 Written evidence from the BBC World Service (AFG0015)

389 This map is a snapshot as of 31 May 2020. Control of territory changes.

Taliban deal (see Chapter 6), had probably strengthened the group.³⁹⁰ The number of violent incidents was the highest in five years,³⁹¹ and the number of successful attacks and casualties was the highest since collection of such data began in 2010.³⁹²

242. **It is difficult accurately to assess the scale of the territory controlled by the Taliban. Experts differ in their assessments, and ongoing clashes between the Afghan National Security Forces and the Taliban suggest that the situation remains fluid.**

Composition of the Taliban

243. Sir Richard Stagg said the Taliban was a diverse group of “different factions and tendencies”, making it “difficult to be sure that it has a coherent view”.³⁹³ There were “different currents of thought” and differences between members.³⁹⁴ Its political commission had shifted “towards recognising the different environment” since 2001, but this “did not necessarily” reflect “grass-roots attitudes”.³⁹⁵

Generational differences

244. Mr Andrew Watkins, Senior Analyst—Afghanistan, International Crisis Group, said that there were differences between the younger and older generation of Taliban members.³⁹⁶ These stemmed from the fact that the young grew up “in a country and in a context that is markedly different to the one which the old school Taliban came to power in”.³⁹⁷
245. The younger members were not more “progressive and more liberal” in the Western sense but were “fundamentally a different group of people”.³⁹⁸ Veteran Taliban fighters had “been exiled ... travelled ... developed links” and “been educated in various ways”. Their “outlooks have changed”, and they had become “elder statesmen” with “a longer-term vision for the Taliban, a more worldly vision of what they want their political movement to be”.³⁹⁹
246. **There are differences in outlook between the younger members of the Taliban, who do not remember its rule in the late 1990s, and veteran Taliban fighters.**

Ethnicity and ideology

247. Sir Richard Stagg said that the West had made a mistake in seeing the Taliban as a “small collection of fanatics rather than a group that represents one strand of genuine opinion in Afghanistan”.⁴⁰⁰ The Taliban represented a “particularly radical conservative Islamic ideology”, but the majority of

390 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#))

391 [Q 12](#) (Deborah Lyons)

392 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#))

393 [Q 18](#)

394 [Q 4](#) (Kate Clark)

395 [Q 32](#) (Mark Bowden)

396 [Q 65](#)

397 [Q 64](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

398 *Ibid.*

399 *Ibid.*

400 [Q 19](#)

Afghan society had “highly conservative ... cultural norms”.⁴⁰¹ The way the Taliban ruled “seems quite reasonable for some parts of rural Afghanistan”.⁴⁰²

248. Lord Sedwill said that the Taliban was primarily a “Pashtun tribal phenomenon”.⁴⁰³ It represented “one strand of Pashtun opinion”.⁴⁰⁴ As discussed in Chapter 3, Lord Sedwill said there are two tribal federations within the Pashtun ethnic group, the Durrani and the Ghilzai. The Taliban had “managed to restart the civil war in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s because of resentment among the Ghilzai-affiliated tribes that they did not have access to political power, patronage, resources” and “the Western intervention was providing resources to their tribal rivals”.⁴⁰⁵
249. Since 2001 the Taliban’s “networks, ethnicity, tribal alignments and geographic strongholds have ... changed”.⁴⁰⁶ Although it remained a largely Pashtun movement, it had “broadened its outreach and its appeal in many ways”,⁴⁰⁷ and Tajik and Uzbek groups had joined the network.⁴⁰⁸ Fighting against foreign troops’ presence in Afghanistan had become a motivation for the Taliban⁴⁰⁹ (discussed below).
250. **The Taliban reflects the views of a section of largely rural Afghan society on issues including women’s rights and human rights. Although still predominantly Pashtun, it has become more geographically diverse.**

Ideology

251. Dr Jackson said that the ideology of the Taliban was “not ... more or less conservative than in the past, but simply different”.⁴¹⁰ In the 1990s it aimed to purify Afghanistan after the civil war. It has changed to be a body fighting against foreign occupation, and for the restoration of Islam and rejecting Western immorality.⁴¹¹
252. Falanx Assynt said the Taliban wanted to promote senior religious figures as “key political leaders in society”, replacing tribal elders.⁴¹² Older clerics and former fighters were in the Taliban negotiating team in Doha.⁴¹³
253. It had “co-opted” the use of Western innovations, such as social media.⁴¹⁴ Mr Haqqani, however, said that the Taliban’s ideology had not changed, even if its tactics had.⁴¹⁵
254. **The Taliban has adapted since 2001, but it has not necessarily become less conservative. The extent to which the Taliban has moved away from its previously ideologically hidebound agenda is unclear.**

401 [Q 87](#) (Lord Sedwill)

402 [Q 3](#) (Kate Clark)

403 [Q 87](#)

404 [Q 19](#) (Sir Richard Stagg)

405 [Q 87](#) (Lord Sedwill)

406 [Q 64](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

407 *Ibid.*

408 *Ibid.*

409 *Ibid.*

410 [Q 64](#)

411 [Q 64](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

412 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

413 [Q 64](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

414 *Ibid.*

415 [Q 49](#)

External influences, including relations with Pakistan

255. Mr Watkins said that the Taliban had “very rarely, if ever, bent or caved into international pressure”.⁴¹⁶ No external actor—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar or Iran—had “sufficient influence over the group” to make it change its approach.⁴¹⁷ In the 1990s Pakistan had learned that it was “difficult to dominate the Taliban”, which “would listen but then not listen to Pakistan”.⁴¹⁸
256. Mr Watkins said that in the past Pakistan had been a sanctuary for the Taliban.⁴¹⁹ While “circles of some several dozen of the Taliban’s most senior commanders” still live in Pakistan, “when we talk about those who command and lead the fighting of this movement we mean that they reside and operate in Afghanistan and conduct their business there”.⁴²⁰ This meant that Pakistan’s “influence on a practical level” had “evolved and has certainly trended in the direction of the Taliban’s self-reliance”.⁴²¹
257. Nonetheless, Pakistan retains close links to the Taliban. All the Taliban representatives who attended the talks in Doha had “either flown on Pakistani aircraft or travelled on Pakistani passports”.⁴²² A Taliban negotiator in Doha, Mullah Baradar, was freed from jail in Pakistan following the intervention of Ambassador Khalilzad, the US Special Representative for Afghan Reconciliation.⁴²³ Dr Nemat argued that the Taliban was “not a grass-roots, rural movement”: the resources it used, “the new 4x4s, the weaponry or the explosive material” were not Afghan products and came “through outside support”.⁴²⁴
258. Pakistan’s objectives in engaging with the Taliban are discussed in the next chapter.
259. **The Taliban maintains close links with international partners, particularly Pakistan. However, it has shown itself to be unwilling to bend to external pressure, even from its allies.**

Taliban structure, shadow government and income*Structure*

260. Mr Watkins said the Taliban had “leadership by shura or a council system”. This “consultative system” “increased buy-in from ... different wings”, which reflected the ethnic and geographical diversity of the Taliban.⁴²⁵
261. The council system had “top leadership circles” reminiscent of the Soviet politburo.⁴²⁶ The Taliban had moved from “personality-centric networks” to institution-building, although this was “a continual process and one that is mediated by military demands on the ground”.⁴²⁷ Mr Watkins said that

416 [Q 64](#)

417 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

418 [Q 49](#) (Dr Ayeesha Siddiqi)

419 [Q 67](#)

420 *Ibid.*

421 *Ibid.*

422 [Q 52](#) (Husain Haqqani)

423 [Q 67](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

424 [Q 32](#)

425 [Q 65](#)

426 [Q 65](#) (Andrew Watkins)

427 [Q 65](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

in most cases Taliban governance remained highly militarised; it had little interest in “shifting itself out of the martial law that one justifies during a state of war and into a state of normal governance”.⁴²⁸

262. The Shura council oversaw “nine commissions similar to the ministries that were in place during the Taliban’s prior rule”.⁴²⁹ These focused on areas including economics, health and education. It operated “a shadow government through three administrative organs”, and its “military commission appoints shadow governors and commanders for each province”.⁴³⁰
263. Dr Jackson said that the Taliban was “centralised enough” to initiate offensive military actions across the country and “co-ordinated enough” to be able to execute country-wide ceasefires.⁴³¹ At the same time, it had an internal monitoring system to identify internal divisions and possible disintegration.⁴³²
264. **The Taliban is increasingly institutionalised, with a consultative system that reflects the diversity of the group. It can co-ordinate military actions and ceasefires.**

Shadow government

265. Witnesses discussed the Taliban’s ‘shadow government’ in areas it controls. First, Dr Jackson said it had “co-opted the schools and health clinics funded by the international community and run by the government”, “through parasitic and coercive means”. This had “been quite successful”, and “allowed it to experiment and build its own capacities”.⁴³³
266. The FCDO said the Taliban oversaw “some basic service delivery”, but there was “limited provision for women and minorities”.⁴³⁴ Human Rights Watch said that “access to education for girls varies, but seldom includes secondary or higher education”.⁴³⁵
267. Second, the ODI said that the Taliban offered its own justice system as an answer to the immediate needs of communities and as a response to government corruption.⁴³⁶ It used this court system, “operating at the doorstep of Kabul”,⁴³⁷ “to delegitimise the state and erode state justice provision, and to disempower and replace customary dispute resolution”.⁴³⁸
268. Third, it levied taxes⁴³⁹ (discussed below).
269. Dr Jackson said the Taliban had “positioned itself as a government in waiting.”⁴⁴⁰ By providing services and maintaining “a parallel administration” it aimed to “portray itself as legitimate alternative government”.⁴⁴¹

428 [Q 64](#)

429 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

430 *Ibid.*

431 [Q 65](#)

432 *Ibid.*

433 [Q 64](#)

434 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

435 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

436 Written evidence from the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

437 [Q 64](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

438 Written evidence from ODI ([AFG0028](#))

439 [Q 33](#) (Charles Davy)

440 [Q 64](#)

441 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

270. The Taliban had in some cases adapted in response to pressure from local communities.⁴⁴² Its approach to governance was a mixture of continuity, with “social norms and codes ... strictly enforced”, and “responsiveness”.⁴⁴³ When “local communal demands have been made for increased access to education or a demand for better quality healthcare, or ... the use of social media and modern technologies”, the Taliban had in some cases “changed and accommodated the wishes of the local communities that it requires sanctuary and support from”. The growth and expansion of the Taliban was, in large part, a consequence of this flexible approach.⁴⁴⁴
271. Ms Clark said that “things have changed ... in the areas under Taliban control”. Education for boys was “now seen as quite a normal thing and is expected by parents”, and “primary education for girls is expected by many people”.⁴⁴⁵
272. This flexibility was, however, limited. Human Rights Watch said “‘morality’ officials—known as ‘vice and virtue’ police when the Taliban were in power in the 1990s—continue to operate”. They “patrol communities to monitor residents’ adherence to Taliban-prescribed social codes regarding dress and public deportment, beard length, men’s attendance at Friday prayers, and use of smartphones or other technological devices.”⁴⁴⁶ There was “very little free speech”. The Taliban remained “an authoritarian movement that does not brook protest”, and there were “really key differences, not just for Afghan women but for Afghan society in general.”⁴⁴⁷
273. **The Taliban has developed parallel government structures in the areas it controls, providing basic services to local communities and further undermining the institutions of the government in Kabul.**
274. **The Taliban has demonstrated a degree of flexibility to local needs and demands in the areas it controls, but it remains highly authoritarian and parasitic.**

Sources of income

275. Ms Gaston said that much of what drove the Taliban was “interior to the political economy in Afghanistan”.⁴⁴⁸ According to UN Security Council estimates, the Taliban earns “between hundreds of millions of dollars to \$1.5 billion a year through illicit means—mining, taxation, extortion”⁴⁴⁹ (the illicit economy is discussed in Chapter 4).
276. Dr Felbab-Brown said the Taliban’s income was diversified. Activities taxed by the Taliban included government grants to local areas, and “legal and illegal mining and logging, legal agriculture, cell phone tower operators”.⁴⁵⁰ It also generated income “from protection rackets and capture of local governance resources”.⁴⁵¹

442 [Q 64](#) (Andrew Watkins, Dr Ashley Jackson)

443 [Q 64](#) (Andrew Watkins)

444 *Ibid.*

445 [Q 3](#)

446 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

447 [Q 3](#) (Kate Clark)

448 [Q 57](#)

449 [Q 7](#) (Hameed Hakimi)

450 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown ([AFG0027](#))

451 [Q 57](#) (Erica Gaston)

277. Opium trafficking is the Taliban's biggest source of income, contributing approximately 65% of its income.⁴⁵² The Drugs and (dis)order Research Group said that the estimated value of drug trade was "approximately US\$250–400 million per year".⁴⁵³
278. The Taliban also continued to raise funds in Pakistan and countries in the Middle East,⁴⁵⁴ but "Gulf powers have much less time and resources to devote to Afghanistan than they did several decades ago".⁴⁵⁵ External powers' engagement with the Taliban is considered in the next chapter.
279. **Opium remains the main source of income for the Taliban, accounting for up to 65%. The Taliban also profits from the taxation of economic activities, and other illicit trades, including illegal mining and logging.**

The Taliban's links to terrorist groups and other non-state actors

280. The Taliban retains connections to terrorist groups and other non-state actors.⁴⁵⁶ Witnesses said this included the Pakistani Taliban, Uzbek movements, al-Qaeda⁴⁵⁷ and Chechen fighters.⁴⁵⁸ Dr Jackson said it seemed to think maintaining these relationships was necessary "lest disaffected Talibs join splinter movements".⁴⁵⁹
281. Members of the Taliban had shown "sympathy, if not ... affiliation" to other groups operating in south and central Asia, including "groups from Uzbek or Tajik areas" and "Chinese Uighurs."⁴⁶⁰
282. Mr Watkins said that the Taliban valued its cohesion and unity. While there had been "indications from US negotiators and policymakers that there may be a willingness in the Taliban to work very quietly to assuage counterterrorism concerns", either "open and public denunciation of these groups or the pursuit and targeting of some of these groups" was unlikely.⁴⁶¹
283. The principal groups, and their links to the Taliban, are discussed in turn below.
284. **The Taliban has maintained relationships with a range of terrorist and militant groups. It is likely to prioritise its internal unity over US demands to denounce or target such groups.**

452 Q 56 (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

453 Written evidence from the Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (AFG0013)

454 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown (AFG0027)

455 Q 67 (Andrew Watkins)

456 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019), Q 66 (Dr Ashley Jackson) and written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028)

457 Q 66 (Dr Ashley Jackson)

458 Written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028)

459 Q 66

460 Q 66 (Andrew Watkins). The Uighurs are a Muslim minority group, mostly located in the Xinjiang province in north western China. China has imposed a brutal crackdown on its Uighur population. During the Taliban's rule (1996 to 2001), some Uighur militants were given shelter in Afghanistan, and a number of Uighur militant groups continue to operate from the country. Vanda Felbab-Brown, *A BRI(dge) too far: the unfulfilled promise and limitations of China's involvement in Afghanistan*, The Brookings Institution p 3: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/fp_20200615_china_afghanistan_felbab_brown.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]

461 Q 66

Terrorist groups

285. Dr Jackson said that the information available on terrorist organisations in Afghanistan, including their size, was “flawed and questionable”.⁴⁶² There was a paucity of information “even among national intelligence gathering services and the work of the UN and other international institutions” about links between the groups.⁴⁶³
286. In 2018 the Afghan government identified 21 militant groups operating in the country.⁴⁶⁴ Of these, the Haqqani Network, al-Qaeda, Tehrik-i-Taliban in Pakistan, the Turkistan Islamic Party, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Union and Hezb-e-Islami are considered terrorist organisations by the UK Government.⁴⁶⁵ Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is not on the UK Government’s list of proscribed terrorist organisations,⁴⁶⁶ in contrast to similar US,⁴⁶⁷ Canadian,⁴⁶⁸ Australian⁴⁶⁹ and New Zealand⁴⁷⁰ lists.⁴⁷¹ We raised this issue with Lord Ahmad, who said that terrorist listings were kept under review.⁴⁷²
287. Beyond the Taliban, “the two highest profile non-state actors” were al-Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province.⁴⁷³ The FCDO said they were “responsible for most violence against Afghan civilians and pose the most significant security threats to the UK and our allies”.⁴⁷⁴ These groups and the Haqqani Network are considered below.
288. **Public information on the different terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, their size, and the links between them, is very limited.**
289. **We are surprised that the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is not included in the Home Office’s list of proscribed terrorist organisations. The UK is the only country among the ‘Five Eyes’ group not to proscribe ISKP. We recommend that this matter be reviewed urgently.**

462 Q 66

463 Q 66 (Andrew Watkins)

464 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG005)

465 Home Office, ‘Proscribed Terrorist Organisations’: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/901434/20200717_Proscription.pdf [accessed 5 January 2021]

466 *Ibid.*

467 US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, ‘Foreign Terrorist Organizations’: <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

468 Government of Canada, ‘Currently listed entities’: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrtr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx> [accessed 5 January 2021]

469 Government of Australia, ‘Listed terrorist organisations’: <https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/default.aspx> [accessed 5 January 2021]

470 New Zealand Police, ‘Designated terrorist entities’: <https://www.police.govt.nz/advice/personal-community/counterterrorism/designated-entities> [accessed 5 January 2021]

471 The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is itself listed.

472 Q 126

473 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG005)

474 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

The Haqqani Network

290. Box 6 gives background on the Haqqani Network.

Box 6: The Haqqani Network

The Haqqani Network is a Sunni Islamist militant organisation.

It was founded by Jalaluddin Haqqani, an Afghan warlord and insurgent commander during the anti-Soviet war. Jalaluddin allied with the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s and was a known associate of Osama Bin Laden.

Sirajuddin Haqqani, Jalaluddin's son, currently leads the day-to-day activities of the group, along with several of his closest relatives. Sirajuddin was named as a deputy to Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansur in August 2015.

The Haqqani Network is primarily based in North Waziristan, Pakistan. It conducts cross-border operations into eastern Afghanistan and Kabul.

Source: US National Counterterrorism Center, 'Haqqani Network': https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/haqqani_network.html [accessed 5 January 2021]

291. Dr Jackson said: "at the top of the Taliban is an emir and beneath him two deputies. One of those seats is filled by the leader of the Haqqani network, so it is very involved in Taliban decision-making".⁴⁷⁵ Ms Gaston and Falanx Assynt, however, said the Haqqani Network had a level of autonomy from the Taliban.⁴⁷⁶
292. Falanx Assynt said that the group was not interested in a pragmatic relationship with the US, which made it "less averse to provocative attacks" than the Taliban. It had been responsible for "some of the bloodiest attacks in Afghanistan", including an attack on Kabul's diplomatic quarter in 2017 in which 90 people were killed.⁴⁷⁷
293. The Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda (discussed below) maintain strong links. Haqqani Network members "consulted directly and personally with Ayman al-Zawahiri [the head of al-Qaeda] in February 2020, to ask his views on the Doha Agreement" between the US and the Taliban. The UN Security Council had "named Yahya Haqqani as having been the 'primary Haqqani Network focal point for liaison with Al-Qaida since mid-2009'". The groups have reportedly discussed the formation of a new joint unit of 2,000 fighters.⁴⁷⁸
294. The Haqqani Network maintains links with Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP).⁴⁷⁹ The Afghan government "refers to ISKP as the 'new face' of the Haqqani network and believes that it is ... providing the necessary assistance to enable ISKP to carry out attacks".⁴⁸⁰

475 Q 66

476 Q 55 and written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG005)

477 *Ibid.*

478 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

479 *Ibid.*

480 *Ibid.*

295. The Haqqani Network has “strong transnational ties”,⁴⁸¹ including with the Pakistani security services;⁴⁸² members of the network have “personal investments in property and business” in Pakistan.⁴⁸³
296. **The Taliban remains closely associated with the Haqqani Network, which is designated by the UK Government as a proscribed terrorist organisation.**

Al-Qaeda

297. Box 7 gives background on al-Qaeda.

Box 7: al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda is an international Islamist terrorist organisation.

It was established in 1988 by Osama Bin Laden and Arab fighters who fought against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

It aims at the establishment of a pan-Islamic caliphate, unification of all Muslims in a fight against the West (and the US in particular) and overthrow of all pro-Western regimes in the Muslim world.

It was responsible for the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and the United Kingdom on 7 July 2005.

Al-Qaeda operates in Afghanistan, with affiliates in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Source: US National Counterterrorism Center, ‘al-Qaeda’: https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/al_qaida.html [accessed 5 January 2021]

298. Falanx Assynt said that assessing the size of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan was difficult. The US thought it had 50–100 fighters in 2010 but “this was shown to be significantly conservative after a joint US–Afghan military raid on a base in Kandahar in 2015, during which US officials estimated more than 160 members of the group were killed”.⁴⁸⁴
299. The US military suspects that the emir of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, may be based in eastern Afghanistan.⁴⁸⁵
300. Mr Watkins said al-Qaeda “predates the Taliban in Afghanistan”. It was created from foreign fighters before the Taliban unified into a more coherent organisation. Its “standing and ... reputation ... among certain members of the Taliban is decades old, longer than international intervention in Afghanistan”. These relationships were “ill-defined” and “poorly” understood.⁴⁸⁶
301. There were “strong religious and ideological ties” between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which included “an established relationship” between their leaders.⁴⁸⁷ The Human Security Centre said when Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada had become the leader of the Taliban, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri had

481 Q 58 (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

482 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG005) and written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

483 Q 52 (Dr Ayesha Siddiqi)

484 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG005)

485 *Ibid.*

486 Q 66 (Andrew Watkins)

487 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG005)

“reaffirmed his support for the Taliban and formally swore Bay’ah, a formal Islamic oath of allegiance, to Akhunzada, which he accepted”.⁴⁸⁸

302. The UN Security Council’s Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team in 2020 reported that the groups maintained regular contact throughout the US–Taliban negotiations.⁴⁸⁹
303. Falanx Assynt said al-Qaeda and the Taliban had common interests: the withdrawal of US troops and the return to “political dominance” in Afghanistan by the Taliban. The Human Security Centre said that the US–Taliban agreement was “welcomed by al-Qaeda as a “great victory for the Taliban over America and its allies”.⁴⁹⁰ It hoped the Taliban would allow it “to use the country as a safe haven from which to support the activities of its global affiliates and branches, including the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula”.⁴⁹¹
304. Falanx Assynt said that the Taliban was, however, “no longer fully supportive of al-Qaeda’s global jihadist agenda” and “unlikely to support its use of Afghan territory to co-ordinate attacks in the West”. The Taliban might therefore be “willing to conduct limited operations against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan ... to further its agenda of forcing a US withdrawal and securing its own future as a political group.”⁴⁹²
305. The Human Security Centre, however, thought that the relationship between al-Qaeda and the Taliban was “strengthening”: it was “likely that the situation in Afghanistan will return to the status quo ante prior to 2001, wherein the Taliban will offer shelter to and co-operation with al Qaeda”.⁴⁹³ The Taliban was believed to be sheltering al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent in Afghanistan.⁴⁹⁴
306. The FCDO said al-Qaeda was less active in Afghanistan than before 2001, but it had never “ceased to exist and remains a threat”.⁴⁹⁵ The planned US withdrawal increased the risk that al-Qaeda would rebuild itself in Afghanistan.⁴⁹⁶ Lord Sedwill was “less worried about al-Qaeda reviving” because this group could be “contained by the local tribal leaders, if they are willing to do so”.⁴⁹⁷
307. **Al-Qaeda has retained a presence in Afghanistan, although it appears to be weaker than before 2001. It maintains close ties to the Taliban.**

488 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

489 UN Security Council, Letter from the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1988 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council (19 May 2020): <http://cdn.cnn.com/cnn/2020/images/06/01/n2011060.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

490 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

491 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

492 *Ibid.*

493 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

494 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

495 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

496 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

497 Q 87

*Islamic State Khorasan Province***Box 8: Islamic State Khorasan Province**

Islamic State Khorasan Province is a Sunni Islamist militant organisation. It aims for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Central Asia, countering Western influences and Shia Muslims. It has strongholds in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces (near the Afghan–Pakistan border), with pockets of support throughout Afghanistan.

Source: Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, ‘The Islamic State in the Khorasan Province’: <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state-khorasan-province> [accessed 5 January 2021]

308. Ms Gaston said ISKP rose to prominence in eastern Afghanistan and “at its peak had captured some 8 to 10 different districts in Nangarhar province”.⁴⁹⁸ The Afghan government considered it “a serious threat” because of its ties to ISIS.⁴⁹⁹
309. The FCDO said that ISKP “poses a persistent threat in Afghanistan”; there was “potential” that in the long term it may threaten the UK.⁵⁰⁰ Dr John Manza, Assistant Secretary General for Operations, NATO, said it was “a concern”, especially as increasing numbers of young and educated Afghans were being radicalised and joining ISKP.⁵⁰¹
310. The ODI said that ISKP was a particular concern in Nangarhar, Jalalabad and in Kabul.⁵⁰² Mr Watkins said it had “attracted both membership and the capability to carry out incredibly violent, brutal attacks in Kabul”.⁵⁰³ Falanx Assynt said that it “maintains offensive capabilities” in Kabul and is capable of “periodically launching” attacks against military and civilian targets.⁵⁰⁴
311. ISKP is also a threat to the Taliban. ISKP “was seriously eroding [the Taliban’s] control of a number of districts and territory and messing up a lot of its transit lines”.⁵⁰⁵ Falanx Assynt said that the strategies of the two organisations were at odds: both wanted to “establish direct control over territory”. ISKP sought to recruit more radical members of the Taliban, “and its success doing so has contributed significantly to its capabilities, particularly in Kabul”.⁵⁰⁶ Mr Watkins said that Taliban actions against ISKP were in part in response to the need to protect its own legitimacy.⁵⁰⁷
312. For this reason, “there was a sort of tacit co-operation going on where as long as the Taliban was fighting only ISK[P], Afghan forces were not going to attack them”.⁵⁰⁸ The Taliban tended to prioritise its fight with ISKP over clashes with foreign troops. It had “spent a countless ... resources and its own fighters” in clashes with ISKP.⁵⁰⁹

498 Q 58

499 *Ibid.*

500 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

501 Q 82 also see Q 71 (Andrew Watkins)

502 Written evidence from the ODI (AFG0028)

503 Q 71 (Andrew Watkins)

504 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

505 Q 58 (Erica Gaston)

506 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG005)

507 Q 66

508 Q 58 (Erica Gaston)

509 Q 66 (Andrew Watkins)

313. Professor William Maley, Professor of Diplomacy, Australian National University, and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim, Lecturer in International Relations, La Trobe University, said that the idea that the Taliban could be a “useful partner” in addressing the threat of ISKP was “a dangerous assumption” which “overlooks the complexity of the relations between militant and radical groups, which can oscillate between competition and co-operation”.⁵¹⁰ The ODI said there were “recent NGO reports of the two working more closely together in Badakhshan”, which might be a consequence of local ties.⁵¹¹
314. Mr Watkins said ISIS had never succeeded in becoming “an organic insurgent movement” in Afghanistan. It was “a foreign-seeded organisation” with “global aims”, which “attempts to solicit and reach out to any global networks possible”.⁵¹² Falanx Assynt said that ISKP maintained links with militant groups operating in western Pakistan and that US military withdrawal could lead to it increasing its capabilities.⁵¹³
315. Falanx Assynt thought the US’s “enduring concerns” about ISIS in Afghanistan meant it was “likely to attempt to secure an arrangement” for a small military contingent to remain in Afghanistan.⁵¹⁴
316. **Islamic State Khorasan Province poses a significant threat to the Afghan government and civilians. Its ability to recruit educated, urban Afghans is a particular concern.**

510 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim ([AFG0004](#))

511 Written evidence from the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

512 [Q 71](#)

513 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#))

514 *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 6: EXTERNAL ACTORS

Relations with the US

317. The US defines its “vital national interests in Afghanistan” as ensuring “that Afghan territory is never again used as a safe haven from which terrorists can attack the United States, our Allies, or our interests abroad”.⁵¹⁵ It supports “a durable political settlement that ends the war and mitigates terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan”.⁵¹⁶
318. Falanx Assynt said the US was also motivated by Afghanistan’s “geostrategic setting” between Iran, China and Russia, and Afghanistan’s “largely untapped mineral resource wealth” (discussed in Chapter 4).⁵¹⁷

Policy of the Trump Administration

319. Ms Miller said that President Trump’s Administration had come “to have grave doubts” about the possibility of finishing the war militarily.⁵¹⁸ US officials had long “realised that winning the war was not feasible at any acceptable cost”.⁵¹⁹
320. The US showed “signs of mounting frustration” with infighting in the Afghan government (see Chapter 3) and had cut US\$1 billion in aid in March 2020 when President Ghani and Dr Abdullah refused to work together. The US–Taliban deal (discussed below) demonstrated that the US was “increasingly willing to sideline Kabul” in its pursuit of withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁵²⁰ The possible approach of President-elect Biden’s Administration is discussed later in this chapter.

US–Taliban agreement

321. On 29 February 2020 the US and the Taliban signed an *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America*.⁵²¹

515 US Department of Defence, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, (June 2020): https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING_SECURITY_AND_STABILITY_IN_AFGHANISTAN.PDF [accessed 5 January 2021]

516 *Ibid.*

517 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005). The United States Geological Survey has concluded that Afghanistan may hold 60 million metric tons of copper, 2.2 billion tons of iron ore, 1.4 million tons of rare earth elements, and veins of aluminium, gold, silver, zinc, mercury, and lithium. Ahmad Shah Katawazai, ‘Afghanistan’s mineral resources are a lost opportunity and a threat’, *The Diplomat* (1 February 2020): <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/afghanistans-mineral-resources-are-a-lost-opportunity-and-a-threat/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

518 Q 37

519 Q 37 (James Dobbins)

520 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

521 On the same day, the US signed a Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan. It specified four elements necessary for a sustainable peace agreement: guarantees to prevent the use of Afghan soil for terrorism, a timeline for the withdrawal of all US and Coalition forces, “a political settlement resulting from intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations between the Taliban and an inclusive negotiating team of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan”, and “a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire”. Joint Declaration between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan (29 February 2020): <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/02.29.20-US-Afghanistan-Joint-Declaration.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

322. The agreement is summarised in Box 9.

Box 9: The US–Taliban agreement

US commitments:

- To withdraw “all military forces of the United States, its allies, and Coalition partners, including all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel” within 14 months of the announcement of the agreement. The first 8,600 people to be withdrawn within 135 days, and complete withdrawal of all other forces within 9.5 months.
- To “work with all relevant sides on a plan” to release up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government.
- On the start of intra-Afghan negotiations, the US to begin “an administrative review” of US sanctions and rewards list against the members of the Taliban, “with the goal of removing these sanctions by August 27, 2020”.
- To start talks with members of the UN Security Council to have Taliban members removed from the sanctions list “with the aim of achieving this objective by May 29, 2020”.

Taliban commitments:

- Not to allow any groups “to use Afghan soil” to “threaten the security of the United States and its allies”, not to provide any support for such groups and to “instruct” members of the Taliban “not to co-operate” with such groups or individuals.
- To release 1,000 prisoners.

Both sides expressed willingness to “seek positive relations” with each other and expressed hope that future relations between the US and the future government of Afghanistan, “as determined by the intra-Afghan dialogue”, would be “positive”.

Source: US State Department, *Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America* (29 February 2020): <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

323. Professor Maley and Dr Ibrahim said that the agreement was “an ‘exit agreement’ rather than a ‘peace agreement’.”⁵²² It had significant omissions and problems.

324. First, it imposed no conditionality on the Taliban. Mr Haqqani said that the US “made all the major concessions up front”.⁵²³ The US had conceded to a withdrawal timetable at the beginning of negotiations, which had been the Taliban’s main demand.⁵²⁴ The Taliban understood that the US was “eager to withdraw” and so the Taliban was “negotiating the withdrawal of foreign forces for the restoration of the *status quo ante* when it rules Afghanistan as an Islamic emirate”.⁵²⁵

522 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim (AFG0004)

523 Q 49 (Husain Haqqani)

524 Q 38 (Laurel Miller)

525 Q 49 (Husain Haqqani)

325. There were no conditions linking the withdrawal of US troops to progress in the “intra-Afghan negotiations”.⁵²⁶ Lord Houghton said the withdrawal of troops was “an element of leverage in any peace process” and had to be “harmonised with the progress of that process”.⁵²⁷
326. There was also no explicit obligation on the Taliban to protect democratic processes in Afghanistan, including respect for human rights or the rights of women.⁵²⁸
327. The agreement lacked mechanisms to monitor the Taliban’s compliance;⁵²⁹ Ms Miller said the US had “reserved to itself the right to define the conditions as it goes along and determine whether those conditions have been satisfied”.⁵³⁰
328. A second problem was that the Afghan government and NATO Allies were not parties to the agreement but were within its scope.
329. Professor Maley and Dr Ibrahimi said the US “had no right whatsoever to make a commitment that the Afghan government would release prisoners in its custody, and no reason whatsoever to be surprised when this became a point of contention.”⁵³¹
330. The US had made commitments on the withdrawal of troops which affected NATO Allies and “all non-diplomatic civilian personnel, private security contractors, trainers, advisors, and supporting services personnel”.⁵³² It was not clear whether the UK “or any other Allied government with personnel deployed in Afghanistan” had agreed that the US could make such a commitment on their behalf.⁵³³
331. Ms Miller said the US took “it for granted that NATO will follow whatever the US decides”; it was “presumptuous” to assume that the US spoke for the whole Alliance in its talks with the Taliban.⁵³⁴ However, NATO Allies had “gone along with” the US deal “without loud objections”, which “suggested that they wanted to “find a way out of Afghanistan”.⁵³⁵ Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary-General of NATO, welcomed the announcement *ex post facto* on 21 February 2020;⁵³⁶ he said it was a “step towards peace”.⁵³⁷
332. Mr Dobbins was “disappointed” at the “Trump Administration’s treatment of NATO”, but thought Europeans troops “will leave if the US leaves”.⁵³⁸

526 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi (AFG0004)

527 Q 91

528 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi (AFG0004)

529 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

530 Q 38

531 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi (AFG0004)

532 *Ibid.*

533 *Ibid.*

534 Q 46

535 *Ibid.*

536 NATO, ‘Statement by the NATO Secretary General on Afghanistan’ (21 February 2020) https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_173858.htm?selectedLocale=en [accessed 5 January 2021]

537 NATO, ‘Remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at a ceremony marking the Joint Declaration between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and signature of an agreement between the United States and the Taliban’ (29 February 2020) https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_174024.htm [accessed 5 January 2021]

538 Q 46

333. Third, the agreement lacked provisions for “any kind of ceasefire in Afghanistan”.⁵³⁹ This would “be an item on the agenda of the intra-Afghan dialogue and negotiations”.⁵⁴⁰ The agreement created a “perverse incentive for violent behaviour by the Taliban whose bargaining power at the stage of intra-Afghan negotiations would be enhanced by control of more territory”. Taliban-led violence against the ANSF and local government institutions beyond Afghanistan’s cities had “continued unabated”. There had been “a spike in the number of targeted assassinations of Afghan religious leaders, human rights activists, civil society actors, and women members of the Afghan security forces in Kabul and other urban centres”.⁵⁴¹
334. Fourth, Professor Maley and Dr Ibrahim said the agreement did not confront Pakistan’s support for the Taliban.⁵⁴² Pakistan had supported the US–Taliban negotiations “behind the scenes”.⁵⁴³ The agreement lacked a guarantee that the Taliban would operate independently of Pakistan’s security services. Meanwhile, the perception that the agreement was a victory for Pakistan “would likely be seen as a threat by other countries in the region, mostly notably India”⁵⁴⁴ (discussed later in this chapter).
335. Fifth, the agreement succeeded in enhancing the reputation⁵⁴⁵ and “political influence”⁵⁴⁶ of the Taliban, and weakening the Afghan government.⁵⁴⁷
336. Sixth, the agreement raised “major concerns” over future counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan. The total removal of US and NATO forces would “greatly hamper counter terrorism efforts and may leave Western powers reliant on the Kabul government, the Taliban and regional powers for assistance in this regard”.⁵⁴⁸
337. Ms Miller concluded that “there will be no peace in Afghanistan as a result of implementation of the US–Taliban deal”.⁵⁴⁹
338. Professor Maley and Dr Ibrahim said the Trump Administration appeared to be “firmly set” to exit Afghanistan without regard for “the potential costs to stability in Afghanistan and the wider region”.⁵⁵⁰ On 18 November 2020 the US Department of Defense said the US would reduce troops by a further 2,500 by 15 January 2021. Reacting to this news, Jens Stoltenberg said “the price for leaving too soon or in an uncoordinated way could be very high”.⁵⁵¹
339. There is now uncertainty over this planned withdrawal in January 2021. Section 1215 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, passed by the US Congress in January 2021, overriding a Presidential veto,

539 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim (AFG0004)

540 US State Department, ‘Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America’ (29 February 2020): <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf> [accessed 5 January 2021]

541 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim (AFG0004)

542 *Ibid.*

543 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

544 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim (AFG0004)

545 *Ibid.*

546 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK (AFG0023)

547 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim (AFG0004)

548 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

549 Q 46

550 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim (AFG0004)

551 BBC News, ‘US troops in Afghanistan; Allies and Republicans alarmed at withdrawal plan’, (18 November 2020): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-54980141> [accessed 5 January 2021]

constrains the US Administration's ability to withdraw troops unilaterally. No funds can be used for the withdrawal until the Department of Defense submits additional reports to relevant congressional committees explaining why those reductions are in the US national security interest. These reports would have to include assessments of the impact on the US counterterrorism mission, the NATO mission in the country, and the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces to operate on its own.⁵⁵²

340. **The agreement negotiated between the US and the Taliban was a withdrawal agreement not a peace agreement. The US was driven by its determination to withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan.**
341. **The US appears not to have consulted NATO Allies when negotiating with the Taliban, although the final agreement covered NATO personnel. This has risked undermining NATO unity.**
342. **The commitment by the Taliban in its February 2020 agreement with the US on terrorism is obscure, imprecise and fragile. It will be important that any settlement which emerges from the Doha talks firms up that commitment, and enlists the support of the whole international community and of Afghanistan's neighbours in its enforcement.**
343. **We regret President Trump plans to withdraw a further 2,500 troops from Afghanistan by 15 January 2021. The withdrawal of these troops has the potential to further destabilise the security situation in Afghanistan at a critical moment for the peace talks. We note that the requirements of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 are likely to constrain the Trump Administration's ability to withdraw these troops before the end of his term.**
344. **It will be important for the Government to engage with the incoming Biden Administration from the outset on the definition of its policy towards Afghanistan. One objective should be more collective management of policy on Afghanistan among NATO Allies; another should be to give more emphasis to the conditions-related implementation of commitments entered into by all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan.**

Possible policy of President-elect Biden

345. "Very little" had been said about Afghanistan during the US election campaign,⁵⁵³ but witnesses expected President-elect Biden to continue with the withdrawal of US troops.⁵⁵⁴ Dr McSweeney said he had been "outspoken" about this "during the presidential campaign and during his tenure in the Obama administration".⁵⁵⁵ He had long argued for "a limited military commitment in Afghanistan, focused on counterterrorism not counterinsurgency".⁵⁵⁶

552 'National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021', section 1215, Limitation on use of funds to reduce deployment to Afghanistan, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/116/hr6395/text> [accessed 5 January 2021]

553 Q 39 (Laurel Miller)

554 Q 39 (Laurel Miller), written evidence from Dr Terence McSweeney (AFG0002), Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi (AFG0004) and from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

555 Written evidence from Dr Terence McSweeney (AFG0002)

556 Q 39 (James Dobbins)

346. Witnesses identified some likely differences to President Trump’s approach.
347. First, Ms Miller anticipated President-elect Biden’s Administration to be “somewhat more inclusive, co-operative and engaged with Allies and partners”.⁵⁵⁷
348. Second, President-elect Biden had “spoken about potentially leaving some counterterrorism forces behind”.⁵⁵⁸ Dr McSweeney thought that “special forces will continue to conduct missions on the ground and American drones will continue to fly through Afghan airspace for a long time to come”.⁵⁵⁹
349. Third, Professor Maley and Dr Ibrahim said President-elect Biden “may be amenable to offering ongoing air support”, which might be contrary to the wishes of the Taliban.⁵⁶⁰
350. Fourth, Falanx Assynt thought he was “likely to delay the pull-out beyond the stipulated 14-month timeframe” to analyse its security implications.⁵⁶¹
351. **The incoming Biden Administration is expected to continue with plans to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. There is a possibility, however, that it will give more weight to the conditions on the ground, and the impact of withdrawal on the Afghan peace talks than the Trump Administration. It is likely to consult NATO Allies more closely on the withdrawal.**

Afghanistan’s neighbours

352. Dr Avinash Paliwal, Associate Professor and Deputy Director, South Asia Institute, SOAS, said the role of Afghanistan’s neighbours in its “day-to-day political and security life” was “essential”, “structurally unequal” and “interventionist”.⁵⁶² Figure 4 shows Afghanistan’s neighbourhood.

557 [Q 39](#)

558 [Q 39](#) (Laurel Miller)

559 Written evidence from Dr Terence McSweeney ([AFG0002](#))

560 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim ([AFG0004](#))

561 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

562 [Q 100](#)

Figure 4: Map of Afghanistan's neighbourhood

Source: *The Economist*, 'Afghanistan and its neighbours: The perpetual vortex' (27 September 2001): <https://www.economist.com/taxonomy/term/140?page=5> [accessed 5 January 2021]

Pakistan

353. Dr Quie and Mr Hakimi said that the foreign and security policies of Pakistan were controlled by its “military/political complex”, “particularly in relation to neighbouring countries”. The civilian administration had “marginal capacity” to change this.⁵⁶³
354. Witnesses said Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan was driven by three principles: the perception that India’s relations with Afghanistan are a threat; securing Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan; and maintaining the status quo.
355. First, Pakistan viewed India’s role in Afghanistan as a threat. Pakistan saw “the balance of its own interests in Afghanistan against those of India in zero-sum terms”. Islamabad’s “primary objective” was building a bulwark

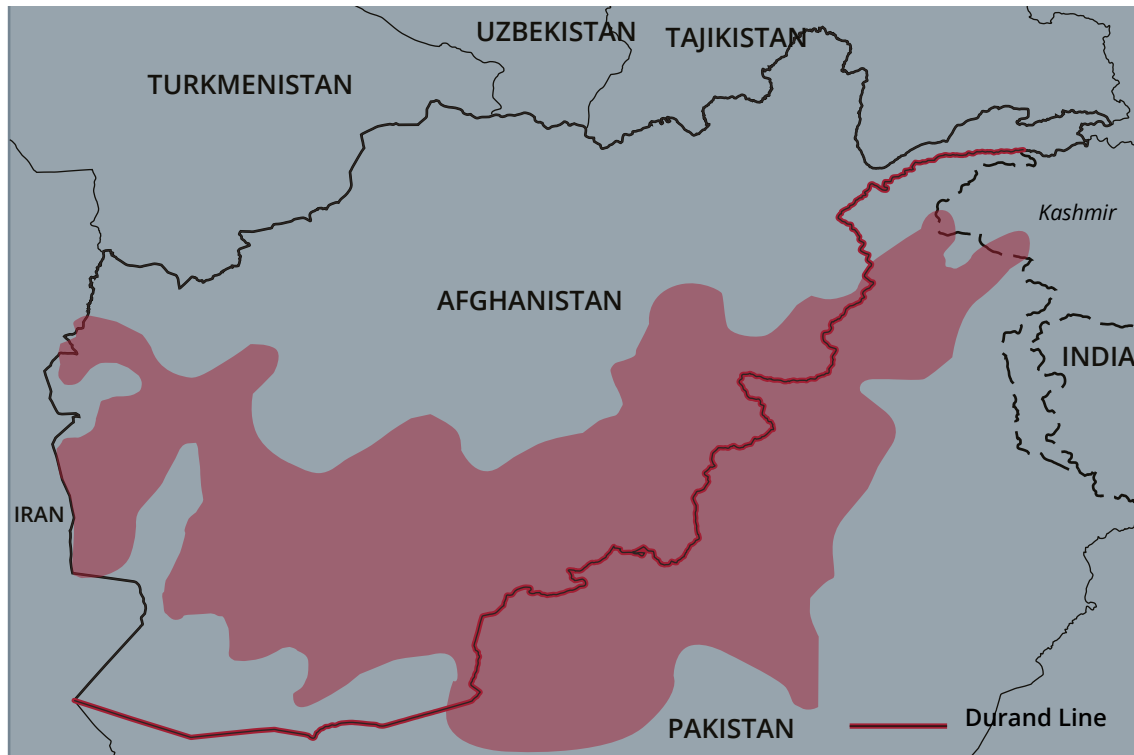
563 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi (AFG0024)

against “Indian encirclement”.⁵⁶⁴ It wanted to prevent a close relationship forming,⁵⁶⁵ and keep India’s presence minimal.⁵⁶⁶

356. Mr Haqqani said this “desire not to have any tolerance of any Indian role in Afghanistan” was “unrealistic”.⁵⁶⁷

357. Second, witnesses discussed contention over the border between two countries, set along the so-called Durand Line (see Figure 5 and Box 10).

Figure 5: Map of the Durand Line showing the area inhabited by the ethnic Pashtun



Source: Abhiruchi Chowdhury, ‘Durand Line and its implication on Pashtuns’ *The Kootneeti* (26 August 2020): <https://thekootneeti.in/2020/08/26/durand-line-and-its-implication-on-pashtuns/> and University of Texas ‘Afghanistan-Pakistan border’: http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/afghan_paki_border_rel88.jpg [accessed 5 January 2021]

564 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

565 Q 20 (Sir Richard Stagg)

566 Q 47 (Husain Haqqani)

567 Q 51

Box 10: The Durand Line

The Durand Line is the boundary established in 1893 to divide Afghanistan and British India. It was named after Sir Mortimer Durand, who convinced the then Emir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan, that the line should run through the tribal areas inhabited by the ethnic Pashtun.⁵⁶⁸

It marks the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵⁶⁹ No Afghan government has recognised the legitimacy of the Durand Line, which runs through mountainous terrain and remains largely unpoliced.⁵⁷⁰

358. Dr Siddiqa said the Durand Line was not recognised in the same way as an “ordinary international boundary”.⁵⁷¹ In Afghanistan’s view, the Durand Line was not a “legitimate indicator” of where the border should be.⁵⁷² Meanwhile, Islamabad feared that Pashtun nationalist movement with links on both sides of the border could “override Pakistani nationalism”.⁵⁷³
359. Third, witnesses suggested that Pakistan wanted to maintain the status quo. Islamabad was interested in upholding a “frozen conflict”, as it helped it to address the challenge of Pashtun independence movements and pursue various economic interests, including securing energy supplies.⁵⁷⁴
360. Dr Quie and Mr Hakimi said that Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan was contradictory: Pakistan hosts the biggest number of Afghan refugees and at the same time foments “the conflict and instability that drives emigration”.⁵⁷⁵
361. Lord Ahmad said that the UK Government recognised the influence of Pakistan in Afghanistan and continues “to work very closely with Pakistan in that respect.”⁵⁷⁶

Links with the Taliban

362. Pakistan recognised the Taliban as Afghanistan’s government in the 1990s and was its key ally. After 11 September 2001, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence covertly supported a proxy war in Afghanistan and maintained links with Taliban factions, “most notably, the Haqqani Network”⁵⁷⁷ (see Chapter 5). The Taliban’s Shura Council, its highest decision-making body, was based in Quetta.⁵⁷⁸
363. Pakistan “effectively provided ‘safe haven’ ... for the Taliban to operate relatively freely, and to return to Pakistan for military, financial, and other support in its battle with the government in Kabul”.⁵⁷⁹ The Taliban took

568 Britannica, ‘Durand Line’ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Durand-Line> [accessed 5 January 2021]

569 *Ibid.*

570 Vinay Kaura, Middle East Institute, ‘The Durand Line: A British Legacy Plaguering Afghan-Pakistani Relations’ (27 June 2017) <https://www.mei.edu/publications/durand-line-british-legacy-plaguering-afghan-pakistani-relations> [accessed 5 January 2021]

571 [Q 47](#)

572 [Q 20](#) (Sir Richard Stagg) Also see [Q 47](#) (Dr Ayesha Siddiqa).

573 [Q 47](#) (Dr Ayesha Siddiqa)

574 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

575 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

576 [Q 117](#)

577 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

578 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

579 [Q 20](#) (Sir Richard Stagg)

advantage of the relationship, as it amplified its “logistical capacities for attacks on Afghan cities”.⁵⁸⁰

364. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Taliban representatives who participated in talks with the US and in the Afghan peace talks travelled from Pakistan. Pakistan’s objectives for the Afghan peace talks are discussed in Chapter 8.
365. Pakistan saw the Taliban’s presence in its country as “a strategic asset”, although it was both “a burden and a cost”.⁵⁸¹ Mr Haqqani said it “has influence with the Taliban but, for fear of losing that influence, it does not exercise it”;⁵⁸² it was “unwilling to threaten the end of the safe haven to ensure Taliban compliance with its directives”.⁵⁸³ Falanx Assynt said that Pakistan feared that any attempt to exercise pressure on the Taliban could “jeopardise” its “strategically advantageous connection”.⁵⁸⁴ This allowed the Taliban to maintain “a degree of autonomy” and to remain “independent of Pakistan”.⁵⁸⁵
366. Without a commitment from Pakistan to stop support for the Taliban, including closure of its sanctuaries, it was “highly likely that the war in Afghanistan will continue”.⁵⁸⁶ Mr Haqqani thought support for the Taliban would “come back to bite” Pakistan.⁵⁸⁷
367. **Pakistan is the most important external actor in Afghanistan. We welcome the Government’s engagement with Pakistan on Afghanistan and hope it will continue to press Pakistan to support a negotiated settlement.**
368. **Pakistan appears to have considerable influence over the Taliban, even if the relationship has changed since 2001. However, it appears to be unwilling to use this influence.**
369. **Pakistan’s policy on Afghanistan is driven by its tense and volatile relationship with India.**

India

370. Dr Paliwal said India was a “relatively peripheral player” in Afghanistan. It wanted “assurances from Western partners that the achievements of the past two decades will not be lost and that the potential challenge of an Islamic republic will be addressed”, and was “invested in supporting the Kabul government”.⁵⁸⁸

India’s priorities

371. We heard that India’s policy on Afghanistan was driven by three principles: balancing Pakistan’s influence, addressing potential security threats and taking advantage of Afghanistan’s geographical position to build economic links with Central Asia.

580 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

581 [Q 20](#) (Sir Richard Stagg)

582 [Q 52](#)

583 *Ibid.*

584 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

585 [Q 52](#) (Husain Haqqani)

586 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

587 [Q 52](#)

588 [Q 106](#)

372. First, Dr Paliwal said the aim of ensuring a “strategic balance” with Pakistan would not change “even in a post-US scenario”.⁵⁸⁹ India was “adamant about having a footprint in Afghanistan”.⁵⁹⁰ It wanted to achieve this balance by strengthening the Kabul government, through a combination of investments in infrastructure and humanitarian aid.⁵⁹¹
373. Dr Paliwal said India had “invested about \$3 billion in aid in Afghanistan over the past two decades”.⁵⁹² It was Afghanistan’s largest regional donor of development assistance (and fifth globally), with over 400 development projects.⁵⁹³ It had invested in the parliament building in Kabul, connecting the Delaram–Zaranj highway to Iran and creating the Salma dam, known as the Afghan–India Friendship Dam.⁵⁹⁴
374. The FCDO said India was “likely to continue to play a crucial role in Afghanistan’s reconstruction”.⁵⁹⁵ It was expected to “step up development support and investment”, especially humanitarian aid and infrastructure.⁵⁹⁶
375. In addition to aid, New Delhi provided scholarships for young people to study in India.⁵⁹⁷ Mr Haqqani said India’s “good English education for a lot of Afghan elites” brought “Afghanistan and India together”.⁵⁹⁸
376. Witnesses said that bilateral trade was relatively small, worth about \$1.5 billion annually.⁵⁹⁹ India was important to Afghanistan as an export market, but Pakistan had often stopped Afghan exporters crossing the Wagah border into India.⁶⁰⁰
377. India’s second interest was addressing potential security threats. It saw Afghanistan as a possible “safe haven for terrorists targeting India”.⁶⁰¹ More explicitly, Dr Paliwal said India thought Pakistan might use Afghanistan to train militant groups to target Kashmir.⁶⁰² India also feared the potential involvement of Afghan-based ISIS militants in Kashmir.⁶⁰³
378. Its third interest was building trade and energy links with Central Asia. India’s policies in this respect have proven unsuccessful. The Afghanistan–Pakistan transit trade agreement, developed with support from the UK, collapsed because of Pakistan’s refusal to let Afghans cross the border and sell their products in India.⁶⁰⁴ Construction work on the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline had not started, due to a lack of security on the ground.⁶⁰⁵

589 [Q 106](#) (Dr Avinash Paliwal)

590 [Q 48](#) (Dr Ayesha Siddiqa)

591 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

592 [Q 102](#)

593 [Q 48](#) (Dr Ayesha Siddiqa)

594 [Q 102](#) (Dr Avinash Paliwal)

595 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

596 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

597 [Q 102](#) (Dr Avinash Paliwal)

598 [Q 51](#)

599 [Q 104](#) (Dr Avinash Paliwal)

600 *Ibid.*

601 [Q 20](#) (Sir Richard Stagg)

602 [Q 102](#)

603 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

604 [Q 104](#) (Dr Avinash Paliwal)

605 *Ibid.*

379. India had invested in Chabahar port in Iran. Falanx Assynt said that India was “partially motivated by a desire to operate trade routes northwards into Afghanistan” in response to a Chinese agreement to co-operate with Pakistan on Gwadar port.⁶⁰⁶

Relations with the Taliban

380. Dr Paliwal described India as “the odd entity ... not talking to the Taliban when the whole world is talking to the Taliban”.⁶⁰⁷ There was an “ongoing debate in India’s power corridors” over whether India should hold direct talks.
381. In this respect, its relations with Iran and Russia were important, as they had had “some degree of linkage and tie with the Taliban over the past two decades”, and their ambitions were similar to India’s: to balance the influence of Pakistan.⁶⁰⁸
382. **India’s involvement in Afghanistan, particularly in respect of trade, is heavily dependent on the goodwill of Pakistan. India is, however, Afghanistan’s largest regional donor of development assistance.**

Iran

383. The Human Security Centre said Iran’s “strategy and interests” in Afghanistan were “ambiguous”,⁶⁰⁹ as Iran could benefit from three different, and contradictory, scenarios. First, by supporting the Taliban it could hope to overthrow the government in Kabul, perceived as a US client.⁶¹⁰ Second, by supporting a political settlement “which leads to a more federal Afghanistan” it could “carve out its own sphere of influence” in Hazarajat, Herat “and other Tajik and Persian speaking communities”.⁶¹¹ Finally, it could support the status quo, which allowed it to “continue to swell the ranks of its volunteer forces, such as the Fatemiyoun Brigade, for which it recruits in Afghanistan and has deployed to fight on its behalf in Syria”.⁶¹²
384. Iranian officials engaged with Afghan parties associated with the Tajik minority⁶¹³ and with Hazara politicians,⁶¹⁴ and had played a role in developing an agreement between President Ghani and Dr Abdullah “to ensure a united national government and to support the start of the talks”.⁶¹⁵ At the same time, Iran cultivated close links with the Taliban (discussed further below).⁶¹⁶

Iran’s priorities

385. Witnesses discussed five priorities influencing Iran’s policy on Afghanistan: historical links with Afghanistan, concerns over the Shia minority, Afghans living in Iran, Tehran’s security concerns and economic interests.

606 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

607 [Q 106](#)

608 *Ibid.*

609 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

610 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

611 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

612 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

613 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

614 [Q 101](#) (Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh)

615 [Q 10](#) (Deborah Lyons)

616 [Q 67](#) (Andrew Watkins)

386. First, three western Afghan provinces—Herat, Nimruz and Farah—were historically part of the Persian empire. Iran had “tended to view” this part of the country as “an area of its backyard over which it has some degree of control”.⁶¹⁷ Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Adjunct Associate Professor, Security Studies Program, Georgetown University, and Institute for Political Studies, Sciences Po, said that this did not mean that Iran had territorial claim, but influenced Iran’s perception that the two countries shared “culture, language and ethnicity”.⁶¹⁸
387. Second, Iran considered itself a protector of Afghanistan’s Shia community, approximately 10–15% of the population.⁶¹⁹
388. Third, there were 1–3½ million Afghans living in Iran.⁶²⁰ Iran “utilises the refugee issue as a mechanism for gaining political leverage within the international community”.⁶²¹ Afghan migrants were used by Iran “in armies” and “for pressure”.⁶²²
389. Fourth, Dr Tadjbakhsh defined Iran’s security concerns relating to Afghanistan as: “extremism, terrorism and separatism for the Sunni minorities, narcotics trafficking and ... water sharing”.⁶²³ She said that Iran had become a transit and consumer of narcotics from Afghanistan (see Chapter 4), and combating this trade was an area of “potential convergence between the UK and Iran”.⁶²⁴
390. Fifth, Iran had economic interests. It needed the Afghan market “especially because of [international] sanctions”.⁶²⁵ Trade between Iran and Afghanistan is around \$2.8 billion.⁶²⁶ Afghanistan was an important part of Iran’s ambitions of establishing trade links with Central Asia.

Relations with the Taliban

391. Mr Watkins said that in the last 10 years the Taliban had “cultivated stronger, closer ties with Iran”.⁶²⁷ There were reports that Mohammad Ibrahim Taherian, Iran’s special representative to Afghanistan, had regular contact with Taliban leaders.⁶²⁸ Iran had provided “logistical, financial and materiel support to Taliban fighters” to undermine the government in Kabul, to weaken the Islamic State operating in Farah province, bordering Iran, and to challenge the US’s anti-Taliban campaign.⁶²⁹
392. Iran sought influence over the possible outcomes of the Afghan peace talks, especially “over some of the people who would eventually enter a power-sharing government”. It wanted assurances that the Taliban would honour the rights of Shia and Hazara minorities.⁶³⁰

617 [Q 20](#) (Sir Richard Stagg)

618 [Q 100](#)

619 [Q 100](#) (Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh)

620 [Q 100](#) (Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh), written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#)) and written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

621 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

622 [Q 103](#)

623 [Q 100](#)

624 [Q 107](#)

625 [Q 104](#)

626 *Ibid.*

627 [Q 67](#)

628 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

629 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

630 [Q 101](#) (Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh)

393. Falanx Assynt said that this relationship had been “facilitated by the Taliban’s shift away from attacking Afghanistan’s Shia minority in recent years”.⁶³¹
394. **Iran has a highly flexible strategy when it comes to Afghanistan and appears to be willing to work with all actors to secure influence and achieve its aims, particularly stability on its border.**
395. **The Government should engage more systematically with Iran on Afghanistan than has been the case in the past, recognising that on policies encouraging greater stability and security and on interdicting drug trafficking, UK and Iranian interests could coincide.**

Conclusion on Afghanistan’s neighbours

396. **The future security and stability of Afghanistan and the well-being of its citizens will depend crucially on reducing, and if possible eliminating, the intervention in its affairs of its neighbours. An objective of UK policy should therefore be to establish as binding as possible a commitment by its neighbours to non-interference and positive support for a stable Afghanistan, and to encouraging economic co-operation. This objective may be best pursued by discussions at the UN.**

The Gulf states

397. Dr Jackson said the Taliban was “a hostage to regional dynamics” in the Gulf, especially the relationship between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar.⁶³²

Saudi Arabia

398. Mr Haqqani said that “until very recently” Saudi Arabia and the UAE “tied their policy” on the Taliban “with that of Pakistan”.⁶³³ A change of Saudi policy started in 2001, and accelerated with the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as Crown Prince in 2017. This policy was “primarily intended to undermine Tehran and Doha and to strengthen Saudi ties to the US”.⁶³⁴ It had “increased its criticism of countries that continue to provide a level of support for the [Taliban]—chiefly Iran, Qatar and Pakistan”.⁶³⁵

Qatar

399. Falanx Assynt said that Qatar maintained “the strongest influence in Afghan affairs” of the Gulf states.⁶³⁶ Described by Mr Haqqani as a “major player”⁶³⁷ in Afghanistan, it allowed the Taliban to open a political office in Doha in 2013.⁶³⁸ Many Taliban leaders had moved their families from Pakistan to Qatar. He said Qatar would continue to have an influential role as “the facilitator of the end-of-conflict settlement”⁶³⁹ (see Chapter 8).

631 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

632 Q 67

633 Q 48

634 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

635 *Ibid.*

636 *Ibid.*

637 Q 48

638 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

639 Q 48

400. Falanx Assynt said Qatari efforts were partially aimed at maintaining US support given the “economic and diplomatic blockade by other Gulf countries”. Qatar’s position had increased in spite of Saudi Arabia’s efforts to undermine it. It had “facilitated backchannel—and later open—discussions between Kabul, Washington and the Taliban since 2016”, and proved to be “a credible mediator, which the Taliban considers more neutral than other regional actors”.⁶⁴⁰

401. **The role and influence of the Gulf states in Afghanistan has changed. Saudi Arabia’s influence has waned, while Qatar’s has increased significantly.**

China

402. We heard different views on China’s influence in Afghanistan. Lord Sedwill said that in the past five years Chinese influence in Afghanistan had increased,⁶⁴¹ while Falanx Assynt said it had “remained cautious not to involve itself substantially in Afghan affairs, having seen successive interventions by foreign powers lead to protracted, unpopular and resource-heavy engagements”.⁶⁴²

403. Witnesses identified two priorities: economics and national security.

404. Lord Sedwill said that China was driven by “its interests in Afghanistan’s raw materials”⁶⁴³ (see Chapter 4). China had become the largest foreign investor in Afghanistan, focused on energy and infrastructure projects.⁶⁴⁴ Shabnam Nasimi, British Afghan social and political activist, said that China was interested in oil and gas transiting from Central Asia through Afghanistan.⁶⁴⁵ China planned to expand the China–Pakistan economic corridor “to Afghanistan and beyond into central Asia, especially Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan”.⁶⁴⁶

405. This would ensure “China and Pakistan controlled the connectivity of Afghanistan and its central Asian neighbours to the rest of the world”.⁶⁴⁷ Pakistani ports in Karachi and Gwadar were “expected to be pivotal in that strategy of being the dominant nation in central and south-west Asia”.⁶⁴⁸

406. On the other hand, Sir Richard Stagg said China had “abandoned its [earlier] interest in big commercial gains”, including investments in oil, gas and copper mines.⁶⁴⁹ Now “its main goal” was “to have a neighbour that does not cause it problems”⁶⁵⁰ and “does not represent a threat to China’s interests”.⁶⁵¹

407. Chinese security concerns in Afghanistan focused on militant Uighur groups.⁶⁵² Afghan security forces had “identified Chinese Uighur Muslims

640 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

641 [Q 87](#)

642 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

643 [Q 87](#)

644 Written evidence from Shabnam Nasimi ([AFG0029](#))

645 *Ibid.*

646 [Q 48](#) (Husain Haqqani)

647 *Ibid.*

648 *Ibid.*

649 [Q 20](#)

650 *Ibid.*

651 *Ibid.*

652 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

as suspected militants in the eastern border province of Badakhshan—and ... China has reportedly established a military outpost there”.⁶⁵³

408. **The stability of Afghanistan appears to be China’s main priority. Possible threats from Uighur militant groups based in Afghanistan are a concern to China. It is interested in exploring Afghanistan’s raw materials; however, this appears to have become secondary to its security concerns.**
409. **Pakistan is an important regional ally for China. Beijing’s policy on Afghanistan is, to a large extent, a by-product of its relationship with Islamabad.**

Russia

410. Russia has historically seen Afghanistan as its “southern flank”, an area of its influence and “a theatre in which to compete against the West”,⁶⁵⁴ although it no longer has a direct border with Afghanistan.⁶⁵⁵
411. Witnesses had different views about the level of Russia’s involvement in Afghanistan. Sir Richard Stagg said that Russia’s role was smaller than “they would like to suggest”;⁶⁵⁶ all it wanted was to avoid instability on its southern flank.⁶⁵⁷ Russia no longer had “meaningful influence”⁶⁵⁸ in Afghanistan, particularly since the fall of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul in 1992.⁶⁵⁹
412. Mr Haqqani said Russia would like to have a role, and “nothing would be better than giving the Americans a bloody nose just like the Russians got in the 1980s.”⁶⁶⁰
413. In contrast, the Human Security Centre said Russia played a “sophisticated hybrid warfare strategy” in Afghanistan that aimed at the erosion of “Western credibility and reputation in Afghanistan”. Russia wanted to undermine the West’s objectives. Russia also sought to prevent links between terrorists based in Afghanistan and Islamic terror groups in the Caucasus.⁶⁶¹

Relations with the Taliban

414. Mr Watkins said that Russia had “an open relationship” with the Taliban.⁶⁶² It had increased its diplomatic engagement with the Afghan government in November 2018 and hosted a delegation of the Taliban in 2019.⁶⁶³
415. Russia sought to use the Taliban “as a dampener on terror groups that may threaten Russia” and “as a tool to curb the production and trafficking of drugs, most saliently opium/heroin”.⁶⁶⁴

653 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

654 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

655 Q 26 (Sir Richard Stagg)

656 Q 26

657 *Ibid.*

658 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

659 Q 48 (Husain Haqqani)

660 Q 48

661 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

662 Q 67 (Andrew Watkins)

663 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

664 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre (AFG0019)

416. In June 2020 there were media reports that the Taliban had received bounties from Russia in exchange for targeting US-led coalition troops. The Taliban denied this.⁶⁶⁵
417. **Russia is no longer a major actor in Afghan affairs, but the US's ongoing engagement means it retains an interest, and it has cultivated relations with the Taliban.**

665 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#))

CHAPTER 7: THE AFGHAN NATIONAL SECURITY FORCES AND NATO TRAINING

418. Nicholas Williams OBE, Senior Associate Fellow, European Leadership Network, and former Head of Operations for Afghanistan and Iraq, NATO, said the Afghan army “had virtually ceased to exist in 2001 after years of Taliban rule”.⁶⁶⁶ From 2003 the International Security Assistance Force, led by NATO, worked “to enable the Afghan government to provide effective security across the country and develop new Afghan security forces”.⁶⁶⁷
419. Box 11 describes the composition of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).⁶⁶⁸

Box 11: The Afghan National Security Forces

The ANSF has three parts:

- The Afghan National Army (including the Afghan Border Force, Afghan Air Force, Afghan Territorial Army and Afghan National Civil Order Force). The Afghan National Army operates under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence.
- The Afghan National Police (ANP), including the Afghan Local Police.⁶⁶⁹ The ANP operates under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior and is the primary law enforcement agency in Afghanistan.
- The National Directorate of Security (NDS), including the Afghan Special Force. The NDS is the state intelligence and security service of Afghanistan. The command structure of the NDS is independent and the head of NDS reports directly to the President.

There are approximately 280,000 members of the ANSF.⁶⁷⁰

Source: European Asylum Support Office, *Afghanistan state structure and security forces (August 2020)*: <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1311341/download> [accessed 5 January 2021]

420. Responsibility for security was handed to the ANSF from 2011 until the end of the NATO combat mission in 2014.⁶⁷¹

NATO’s Resolute Support Mission

421. Since January 2015 NATO’s Resolute Support Mission (RSM) has provided “training, advice and assistance to the Afghan security forces and institutions”.⁶⁷² Box 12 gives information on the RSM.

666 Written evidence from Nicholas Williams (AFG0021)

667 NATO, ‘ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan (2001–2014) (Archived)’ (1 September 2015): https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm [accessed 5 January 2021]

668 This is interchangeably referred to by NATO, the UK and the US as the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF).

669 The Afghan Local Police has its origin in an international counter-insurgency programme which raised village-level defence forces to fight the Taliban. Dr De Lauri said that funding for the Afghan Local Police had ceased on 30 September 2020. One-third will be disarmed and retired, one-third transferred to the Afghan National Police and one-third transferred to the Afghan National Army Territorial Force. [Q 59](#)

670 [Q 124](#) (Baroness Goldie)

671 NATO, ‘ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan (2001–2014) (Archived)’ (1 September 2015): https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_69366.htm [accessed 5 January 2021]

672 *Ibid.*

Box 12: NATO's Resolute Support Mission

The Resolute Support Mission (RSM) is a NATO-led, non-combat mission launched on 1 January 2015 at the invitation of the Afghan government and in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2189 (2014). Its purpose is to help the Afghan security forces and institutions develop the capacity to defend Afghanistan and protect its citizens in a sustainable manner.

It consists of around 16,000 troops from 38 NATO Allies and partners (May 2020 figures).

The mission carries out training, advice and assistance activities in support of the Afghan government's 2017 security roadmap, which aims to increase the effectiveness and accountability of the ANSF and institutions. The roadmap focuses on leadership development, fighting capabilities (with an emphasis on the Afghan special operations forces and the air force), unity of command and combating corruption.

The mission also performs supporting functions including: operational planning; budgetary development; the force generation process; management and development of personnel; logistical sustainment; and civilian oversight in order to ensure the Afghan security forces and institutions act in accordance with the rule of law and good governance.

RSM troops primarily work in security-related ministries and with the army, air force, special operations and police forces.

Source: NATO, *NATO-Afghanistan relations* (April 2020): https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/3/pdf/2003-backgrounder-afghanistan-e.pdf [accessed 4 January 2021]

422. Dr Manza said there was “frequently some confusion between the Resolute Support noncombat mission and the American [counter-terrorism] mission”: “When you see the use of force in Afghanistan in particular by the United States, it is important not to conflate it with our non-combat mission.”⁶⁷³
423. Brigadier (Retired) Ian Thomas OBE, former Commander of Operation Toral and Dean of Academic Studies, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, said the “train, advise, assist element” of RSM was “very different” from tactical training being delivered in Iraq. “The main focus was on institutional capacity building”: the “bulk” of the mission was “concentrated in Kabul and ... focused on developing capability in ministries”.⁶⁷⁴

Effectiveness of the Resolute Support Mission

424. Lord Houghton said “multinational training programmes ... delivered by mixed national groupings in a second language to students being taught in a foreign language by instructors of wildly differing competences” were “not the optimum methodology to achieve great training”.⁶⁷⁵ Each of the Allies “largely delivered what they were nationally familiar with: there was no NATO approved syllabus”, though the US “tried to impose common minimum standards”.⁶⁷⁶

673 **Q 78.** The US participates in both RSM and its own mission, USFOR Alpha. The latter is a national counter-terrorism mission, “centred on US forces Afghanistan with the bulk of strike assets in Bagram”. **Q 113** (Brigadier Thomas)

674 **Q 108** (Brigadier Thomas). Mr Williams said that earlier UK training, during the combat mission, had not focused sufficiently on developing the Ministry of Defence and military and police command structures. Written evidence from Nicholas Williams (**AFG0021**)

675 **Q 89**

676 Written evidence from Nicholas Williams (**AFG0021**)

425. Dr Manza said that Afghan troops had “responded quite well”.⁶⁷⁷ The “greatest challenges” faced by the mission, such as the capacity to absorb training, and the distance and terrain, were not unique.⁶⁷⁸ The low level of education made it difficult to train soldiers and officers.⁶⁷⁹

426. Dr Manza said “one of the places where we have had the greatest success has been ... Afghan military schools”⁶⁸⁰ (discussed below).

UK contribution to the Resolute Support Mission

427. Lord Ahmad said the UK was “the third largest contributor”, with around 850 troops currently deployed.⁶⁸¹ The UK’s contribution has three elements:

- leading on the Kabul Security Force,⁶⁸²
- providing “high-level mentorship roles with the Afghan security ministries”;⁶⁸³ and
- training, including being the lead nation for the Afghan National Army Officer Academy (ANAOA) in Qargha (colloquially referred to as ‘Sandhurst in the Sand’).⁶⁸⁴

428. Brigadier Thomas said the first element was “the main British contribution”.⁶⁸⁵ The Kabul Security Force was “a multinational force, predominantly American”, led by the UK.⁶⁸⁶ It provided “adviser force protection ... moving all the advisers around the city to their various ministries and multiple tasks”.⁶⁸⁷ Lord Houghton said this was “very high-profile” and “quite ... risky”.⁶⁸⁸

429. Second, the UK was “developing capacity in the Ministry of Interior Affairs”, where the UK had an embedded major general.⁶⁸⁹

430. Third, the UK provided education and mentoring support. Dr Manza said the UK’s “greatest contribution” had been “in professional military education”.⁶⁹⁰ Lord Houghton said training for leaders to establish “the moral and conceptual ways in which a state should employ lethal force” was “one of the best ways ... to accelerate the national development of effective security forces”.⁶⁹¹ Dr Manza said the “professionalisation of the [Afghan] force, particularly the officer corps” was “very much due to the work of your Government and military forces”.⁶⁹²

677 [Q 73](#)

678 [Q 72](#)

679 [Q 74](#)

680 [Q 72](#)

681 [Q 116](#)

682 [Q 86](#) (Lord Houghton)

683 *Ibid.*

684 [Q 86](#) (Lord Houghton). Brigadier Thomas said the ANAOA had initially fallen outside the direct scope of the RSM.

685 [Q 108](#)

686 *Ibid.*

687 [Q 109](#) (Brigadier Thomas)

688 [Q 86](#) (Lord Houghton)

689 [Q 108](#). The US led on the Ministry of Defence.

690 [Q 75](#)

691 [Q 89](#)

692 [Q 75](#)

431. The development of the ANAOA, which opened in 2012 and was modelled on Sandhurst, had been a “substantial” UK contribution.⁶⁹³ Dr Edward Flint, Head of Department, Defence and International Affairs, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, said that there had been a “request by the Afghans for the Sandhurst model”, which he described as “a year to try to feed in the wider idea of officership, leadership and command”.⁶⁹⁴ UK trainers had “adapted to Afghan needs”, such as a focus on “counter-ambush drills, counter-IED, and working out of forward operating bases”.⁶⁹⁵
432. Lord Sedwill said the ANAOA, had “proved to be a considerable tactical success”: it had “trained and improved the leadership capability of a generation of Afghan national defence and security force officers”.⁶⁹⁶ Mr Williams said UK trainers “had the reputation, correctly, of being among the most effective among the NATO contingents”.⁶⁹⁷
433. Dr Flint said “the 5,000th cadet has gone through the ANAOA ... and 75% of operational junior commanders” were graduates.⁶⁹⁸ ANAOA “programme alumni” occupy senior positions in the Afghan government”, which helped to “build closer ties between the UK and Afghanistan”.⁶⁹⁹
434. While the initial UK–Afghan agreement on the ANAOA had been for 10 years, Dr Flint thought it was “a relationship that we will continue”.⁷⁰⁰
435. **We welcome the valuable part the UK has played in NATO’s Resolute Support Mission since 2015. In particular, we welcome the UK’s long-term investment in training through the establishment of the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, which has been an important contribution.**

Assessment of the Afghan National Security Forces

436. Dr Manza said the ANSF had made “significant progress” since 2015. It was “much more professional” and “capable of leading combat operations throughout Afghanistan”.⁷⁰¹ Ms Miller said its technical capabilities had improved.⁷⁰²
437. The Afghan Special Forces were considered to be particularly capable.⁷⁰³ They could “routinely conduct successful, independent operations against the Taliban and ISKP”.⁷⁰⁴ Dr Manza said that it was “well known” that the Afghan Special Forces are “some of the best”.⁷⁰⁵
438. The Afghan Air Force was now “able to provide close air support for their own troops”,⁷⁰⁶ “conduct deliberate and dynamic targeting”, “train personnel”,

693 The Kabul Security Force provides force protection for the ANAOA’s operations.

694 [Q 109](#)

695 [Q 111](#)

696 [Q 86](#)

697 Written evidence from Nicholas Williams ([AFG0021](#))

698 [Q 111](#)

699 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

700 [Q 110](#)

701 [Q 72](#)

702 [Q 44](#)

703 [Q 44](#) (Laurel Miller), Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#)), [Q 73](#) (Dr John Manza) and [Q 59](#) (Erica Gaston)

704 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

705 [Q 73](#)

706 [Q 73](#) (Dr John Manza)

“maintain their aircraft” and “manage logistics with non-combat NATO support”.⁷⁰⁷

439. Ms Lyons said that the Afghan police’s ability to function as a regular force had been limited because of the security demands placed on it.⁷⁰⁸ The ODI said the police were often at the forefront of the conflict, and regretted that “few resources have gone into police training, support or management”.⁷⁰⁹
440. Dr Manza said that, since 2006, the ANSF had faced “a constant fight that involves pretty intense combat nearly every day”.⁷¹⁰ In January 2019 President Ghani said that 45,000 security personnel had been killed since 2014.⁷¹¹ The “number of casualties and the brunt of the fighting” borne by Afghan forces since 2015 was “incredible”.⁷¹²
441. On the ANSF’s ability to operate alone, Dr Manza said it fights “with very little support from the Americans”.⁷¹³ Lord Sedwill said it did “not need an awful lot of external support in the basic ground operations of counterinsurgency missions”.⁷¹⁴ However, Ms Miller noted that “as the numbers of US and NATO forces have dwindled, the Afghan government have lost territory”.⁷¹⁵ Lord Houghton thought “elements of US capability” were “critical to the avoidance of a potential catastrophic failure of ANSF, not across the board but maybe in a specific engagement or region.”⁷¹⁶

The Afghan National Security Forces and militias and factions

442. Ms Gaston said there was “a persistent problem of militia and factional control and penetration of the security forces”. There had been “a number of efforts to try to regularise that and break ... patronage ties”, but these had “never [been] entirely successful”.⁷¹⁷ Positions were “still accorded on the basis of political allegiance and connections”.⁷¹⁸ In many cases, “security officials answer in the first place to their informal patrons rather than to their official superiors”, undermining legitimacy.⁷¹⁹
443. Lord Sedwill, however, thought the Afghan army “was genuinely pretty national”.⁷²⁰ The Afghan police were more of a challenge: “they were local, and therefore they were inevitably caught up in local tribal tensions”.⁷²¹
444. **The Afghan National Security Forces have become increasingly effective. While they can operate more independently, ongoing US and NATO support is required if the Afghan government is not to lose further territory to the Taliban.**

707 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

708 [Q 12](#)

709 Written evidence from the ODI ([AFG0028](#))

710 [Q 74](#)

711 BBC News, ‘Afghanistan’s Ghani says 45,000 security personnel killed since 2014’ (25 January 2019): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-47005558> [accessed 5 January 2021]

712 [Q 73](#) (Dr John Manza)

713 [Q 73](#)

714 [Q 89](#)

715 [Q 44](#)

716 [Q 91](#)

717 [Q 59](#)

718 *Ibid.*

719 *Ibid.*

720 [Q 87](#)

721 *Ibid.*

445. **Ongoing patronage ties within the Afghan National Security Forces are a concerning reflection of the level of influence of militias and strongmen across Afghan state institutions.**

Funding for the Afghan National Security Forces

446. The US provides about \$4.5 billion annually to the ANSF; other NATO countries provide about \$0.5 billion.⁷²² International donors provide funding bilaterally or through two multilateral channels: the NATO Afghan National Army Trust Fund and the UN Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan⁷²³ (see Box 13).

Box 13: The NATO Afghan National Army Trust Fund and the UN Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan

The NATO Afghan National Army Trust Fund

The NATO Afghan National Army Trust Fund was established in 2007. Its scope has expanded to supporting the Afghan National Army, literacy and professional military education, women's participation in the ANSF and capacity-building activities.⁷²⁴

Since its inception, 36 nations have contributed nearly \$3.1 billion. In 2020, 22 nations have pledged to contribute a total of \$379.9 million. As of 5 May 2020, 10 nations (including two that did not pledge) had donated a total of \$79.9 million.⁷²⁵

The UN Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan

The United Nations Development Programme has managed the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan since its inception in 2002. It pays the salaries of up to 124,626 members of the Afghan National Police.⁷²⁶

447. The current NATO funding package for the ANSF, agreed at the July 2018 NATO Summit in Brussels, runs until 2024.⁷²⁷ Dr Manza said the Allies “recognised the need to continue funding these security forces”.⁷²⁸ The UK’s annual contribution is £70 million;⁷²⁹ it has confirmed this amount for 2021.⁷³⁰
448. Dr Manza said the “real challenge” was the length of time funding would be required.⁷³¹ A May 2020 US Department of Defense report, *Advancing security and stability in Afghanistan*, concluded:

“Realistically ... Afghanistan will remain reliant on the international community to fund its forces, even in a post-reconciliation environment ... It will be years before the Afghan economy would fully generate sufficient government revenues to finance a peacetime force, even if

722 Written evidence from Mr Nicholas Williams (AFG0021)

723 US Department of Defence, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, (June 2020) p 95: https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING_SECURITY_AND_STABILITY_IN_AFGHANISTAN.PDF [accessed 5 January 2021]

724 *Ibid.*, p 96

725 *Ibid.*

726 *Ibid.*

727 [Q 72](#)

728 [Q 79](#)

729 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

730 [Q 116](#) (Lord Ahmad)

731 [Q 79](#)

there was no more risk that terrorist groups could use Afghanistan as a safe haven.”⁷³²

449. **Ongoing donor funding through the NATO Afghan National Army Trust Fund and the UN Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan is essential to the viability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). There is no short- or medium-term prospect that the Afghan state can generate additional revenue to replace international funding for the ANSF.**
450. **We welcome the UK’s pledge of a further £70 million of funding for the Afghan National Security Forces for 2021.**

⁷³² US Department of State, *Enhancing Security and stability in Afghanistan* (June 2020) p 97: https://media.defense.gov/2020/Jul/01/2002348001/-1/-1/1/ENHANCING_SECURITY_AND_STABILITY_IN_AFGHANISTAN.PDF [accessed 5 January 2021]

CHAPTER 8: THE PEACE TALKS IN DOHA AND THE FUTURE

451. The FCDO described the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government as “potentially as significant as the Bonn Agreement of December 2001”.⁷³³
452. Discussion until December focused on the procedural rules. There were two contentious issues. The first was the form of Islamic law that would be used in case of disagreements. The Taliban insisted on the Hanafi school of Sunni Islamic jurisprudence, which the Afghan government-aligned delegation⁷³⁴ said would exclude the Shia community.⁷³⁵ The second was the Taliban’s insistence that the talks be based on the deal it signed with the US in February 2020, to which the Afghan government was not a party⁷³⁶ (see Chapter 6).
453. In early December 2020, the two teams came to an agreement on rules and procedures, although it is not clear what decisions were reached. The agenda for talks has not yet been agreed.⁷³⁷
454. Lord Houghton said Afghan society was “exhausted by the war”.⁷³⁸ Ms Akbar said that “for the majority of Afghans”, negotiations were “the most reasonable way forward”,⁷³⁹ a peace process to bring the Taliban “into the system” was accepted “on the whole” by Afghan society.⁷⁴⁰
455. **A negotiated settlement is the only long-term solution to the conflict in Afghanistan.**

Impact of the US–Taliban agreement on the talks

456. Ms Lyons and Baroness Goldie said the US–Taliban agreement (discussed in Chapter 6) had paved the way for the talks.⁷⁴¹ Ms Akbar however said the US having declared “timelines for withdrawal”, before talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, had put “a lot of extra pressure on the talks” and made them “less likely to succeed”.⁷⁴²
457. She said that if the Taliban entered the talks considering itself “the victor”, it would be “very difficult” to “deliver something durable”.⁷⁴³ Mr Watkins said that the “entire process” had been “developed ... on the assumption that the Americans would withdraw or would seek to withdraw as quickly

733 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

734 The Afghan negotiating team includes figures not in the government, hence the term Afghan government-aligned delegation.

735 NPR, ‘Afghan peace talks stalled over rules to refer to when sides reach a deadlock’ (6 October 2020): <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/06/920859158/afghan-peace-talks-stalled-over-rules-to-refer-to-when-sides-reach-a-deadlock?t=1605282198410> [accessed 5 January 2021]

736 ANI, ‘Intra-Afghan talks: Doha delegates say agreement on rules is near’ (13 October 2020): <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/intra-afghan-talks-doha-delegates-say-agreement-on-rules-is-near20201013044655/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

737 Susanna George, ‘Afghan peace talks show first signs of progress after months of deadlock’, *The Washington Post* (2 December 2020): https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghanistan-taliban-peace-talks/2020/12/02/8638aacc-34a5-11eb-9699-00d311f13d2d_story.html [accessed 5 January 2021]

738 [Q 87](#)

739 [Q 4](#)

740 [Q 53](#) (Dr Ayeesha Siddiqi)

741 [Q 10](#) and [Q 126](#)

742 [Q 2](#)

743 *Ibid.*

as possible”. The negotiations were a way “of bringing the Taliban back into power and giving it at least some of what it wants in exchange for it discontinuing its insurgency”.⁷⁴⁴

458. Notably, the agreement did not include Taliban commitments to cease attacks on Afghan government and military targets. Dr Manza said that since the agreement there had been “extraordinary levels of violence carried out by the Taliban to increase its leverage at the table of the peace talks”.⁷⁴⁵
459. **We regret that the US’s agreement with the Taliban was not conditional on the outcome of the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The US’s unilateral commitment to withdraw troops has undermined the Afghan government’s leverage in the talks.**
460. **The violence perpetrated by the Taliban against the Afghan state and civilians is unacceptable. We regret that this violence has increased since the US–Taliban deal in February 2020.**

The delegations and their objectives

The Afghan government-aligned negotiating team

Delegation

461. The Afghan government-aligned negotiating team comprises 21 people, of whom four are women.⁷⁴⁶
462. Ms Lyons said it was “obvious that there are currently not enough women”;⁷⁴⁷ it was necessary to advocate greater participation.⁷⁴⁸ Lord Ahmad said the UK, “in partnership with Germany, Indonesia and Afghanistan”, had “used its seat at the UN Security Council to promote a greater role for women in the peace process”.⁷⁴⁹
463. Dr Samar said four out of 21 was, nonetheless, “better than nothing”. The participation of women in negotiations was “a very powerful tool” which would “put pressure on the Taliban to accept the reality and the existence of women being part of society”.⁷⁵⁰
464. Mr Bowden said it was “potentially a peace process between urban elites and the Taliban representing the rural countryside”, so “stronger regional and local representation of civil society and women’s groups in the process” was necessary.⁷⁵¹
465. Ms Lyons said the Afghan government negotiating team was “made up [of] people from a wide section of Afghanistan”, although there were concerns that it might not be sufficiently representative. The team had “been reaching out to civil society, and to others, to try to engage people throughout

744 [Q 69](#)

745 [Q 77](#)

746 Al Jazeera, ‘Who are the Afghan women negotiating peace with the Taliban?’ (7 October 2020): <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/7/who-are-the-afghan-women-negotiating-peace-with-taliban> [accessed 5 January 2021]

747 [Q 11](#)

748 [Q 3](#) (Shaharзад Akbar), [Q 11](#) (Deborah Lyons) and [Q 32](#) (Charles Davy)

749 [Q 130](#)

750 [Q 92](#)

751 [Q 31](#)

Afghanistan”.⁷⁵² Ms Akbar said the discussions needed to be open to “voices from the outside to reflect the diversity of Afghanistan and ... social and cultural change”.⁷⁵³

466. **Afghan women should play a significant role in the peace negotiations in Doha. We commend the four women in the Afghan government-aligned delegation for their important work in very challenging circumstances.**
467. **The UK Government should advocate for greater representation of women in the Afghan government-aligned delegation to the peace talks.**
468. **The UK Government should support engagement between the negotiators and civil society groups to increase the representation of the range of Afghan society.**

Objectives and level of consensus

469. Witnesses considered the Afghan government’s objectives. Ms Lyons said it had “made incredible compromises” in order “to build confidence and to get to the peace table”, particularly the release of Taliban prisoners specified in the US–Taliban deal.⁷⁵⁴
470. Sir Richard Stagg, Ms Miller and Mr Dobbins thought the Afghan government had a consolidated position.⁷⁵⁵ Mr Dobbins said that as long as negotiations were ongoing and did “not pose fundamental issues to the interest of the main Afghan parties”, the consensus would hold.⁷⁵⁶
471. Ms Miller, however, thought the Afghan government lacked “cohesion”.⁷⁵⁷ Ms Gaston said that “all the leading politicians and powerbrokers, and anyone who is sitting at the table in Doha could be a spoiler if they do not like the way the negotiations play out”.⁷⁵⁸ Many warlords and power brokers “on a personal level would like to see the end of conflict” but had “a lot to lose in terms of their political and economic interests”.⁷⁵⁹ One of their priorities was avoiding accountability for their past behaviour.⁷⁶⁰
472. Professor Maley and Dr Ibrahim said “some political figures” were “so hostile to the President that they might well seek to undermine the negotiating position of the Afghan government out of spite”.⁷⁶¹ For example, in November 2020 Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (a former Afghan Prime Minister who entered a peace deal with President Ghani’s government in 2016) announced he was opening separate peace talks with the Taliban.⁷⁶²
473. **The Afghan government appears to have developed a consensus for the negotiations. The possibility remains, however, that power brokers**

752 [Q 17](#)

753 [Q 3](#)

754 [Q 10](#)

755 [Q 18](#), [Q 41](#) (Laurel Miller) and [Q 43](#) (James Dobbins)

756 [Q 43](#) (James Dobbins)

757 [Q 43](#)

758 [Q 62](#)

759 [Q 61](#) (Erica Gaston)

760 [Q 61](#) (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

761 Written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim ([AFG0004](#))

762 Asia Times, ‘Afghan peace talks starting to fall apart’ (11 November 2020): <https://asiatimes.com/2020/11/afghan-peace-talks-starting-to-fall-apart/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

within, and associated with, the government may act as spoilers if they regard their economic or political interests to be threatened.

The Taliban

Delegation

474. The 21-strong Taliban delegation is all male.⁷⁶³
475. Abdul Hakim Izhaqzai's is the Taliban's chief negotiator. He is a "hard-line cleric" based in Pakistan, who until recently was the head of the council of Taliban clerics and the Taliban judiciary, and has sought to legitimise the group's acts of violence through religious edicts. Abdul Hakim Izhaqzai "does not have much experience as a political negotiator". His appointment is aimed at "symbolically" reassuring fighters "that, whatever the agreement, Taliban leaders will prioritise ... their idea of Islamic values".⁷⁶⁴
476. **The UK Government and its international partners should advocate for the Taliban delegation to include women.**

Objectives and level of consensus

477. Ms Clark said there were "different currents of thought within the Taliban" about peace talks. There were "figures ... who would like a negotiated settlement ... particularly at the local level".⁷⁶⁵ "Not everyone" was "a warmonger" or thought a military victory "possible or advisable".⁷⁶⁶ Ms Akbar said some Taliban members were "sick and tired of the bloodshed". "At the soldier and fighter level" some Taliban members "see that their leaders are outside the country engaging internationally while they continue to get killed".⁷⁶⁷
478. Sir Richard Stagg agreed that there were "some reasons for believing in the genuineness of the Taliban's interest in talks".⁷⁶⁸ Dr Jackson said there was a "broad consensus" within the group "on sitting down with other Afghans".⁷⁶⁹
479. However, it was not clear that this represented "a fundamental change in strategy".⁷⁷⁰ Sir Richard Stagg said there was "evidence that [the Taliban] continue to feel that they need a military route to success"; it was "unclear whether they will abandon that easily or quickly".⁷⁷¹ While Mr Hakimi and Baroness Goldie thought the Taliban had accepted that it could not win militarily,⁷⁷² Ms Akbar thought its "commanders and leaders" believed "that a military takeover is possible and feasible, especially with the US withdrawal".⁷⁷³

763 'Women concerned over underrepresentation in Afghan talks' Voice of America News (12 October 2020): <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/women-concerned-over-underrepresentation-afghan-talks> [accessed 5 January 2021]

764 [Q 61](#) (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

765 [Q 4](#)

766 *Ibid.*

767 *Ibid.*

768 [Q 19](#)

769 [Q 69](#)

770 [Q 69](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson). Also see written evidence from Professor William Maley and Dr Niamatullah Ibrahim (AFG004) and [Q 4](#) (Shaharзад Akbar).

771 [Q 19](#)

772 [Q 4](#) and [Q 126](#)

773 [Q 4](#)

480. Falanx Assynt said the Taliban would “anticipate talks breaking down”, but “work to secure a full US withdrawal before this point”. This would “increase its already substantial ability to weaken the government’s hold on power by seizing control of new territory”.⁷⁷⁴ Ms Clark was “very sceptical” about the Taliban’s intentions: “plan B is a negotiated end to the war and a political settlement”, and “plan A is military takeover”.⁷⁷⁵
481. The Taliban had rejected “an early ceasefire or a substantial reduction in violence” in order to allow it to participate in negotiations but “not compromise its ability to pursue the military option, if it comes to that”. However, the Taliban leadership understood that a military victory was “a less favourable outcome ... than a negotiated settlement,” because the latter gave an “opportunity for international legitimacy at the same time, which it desires”.⁷⁷⁶
482. **The Taliban has shown itself to be willing to engage in the peace talks, but its commitment to a negotiated settlement and to power-sharing remains unclear. The Taliban’s desired outcome from the talks, beyond the departure of foreign troops, is not known.**

Potential for compromise

483. We heard about the Taliban’s ability and willingness to compromise. It had repeatedly stated two objectives: the withdrawal of US troops and the establishment of an Islamic government.⁷⁷⁷ Beyond this, Ms Miller said the Taliban did not have “a well-defined political vision” for the talks.⁷⁷⁸ It had said “very little about the form of government that it would be open to”.⁷⁷⁹ Mr Bayley said the UK had “yet to discern in face-to-face contact with the Taliban its views on an end state in Afghanistan”.⁷⁸⁰
484. It was “not yet clear what the Taliban would require in exchange for a renunciation of violence”.⁷⁸¹ It would have to develop its “political vision” and a “more detailed set of political demands” during the talks, “while at the same time ... having to bring along its rank and file in a process of consensus”.⁷⁸² Dr Jackson said this would “take time”.⁷⁸³
485. The FCDO said it remained “unclear ... how and whether the movement will maintain cohesion”.⁷⁸⁴ The Taliban seemed “to have pretty good command and control” (as discussed in Chapter 5), but it was “under pressure from the ranks not to make major concessions”.⁷⁸⁵ Ms Akbar said it had “mobilised young Afghans ... with the narrative that the state is completely un-Islamic and that everything it represents is against Islam and the beliefs of the Afghan people.” Concessions to that same state would be “very hard to bear”.⁷⁸⁶ There was “anxiety” within the Taliban that the peace process could lead to

774 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt (AFG0005)

775 Q 4

776 Q 41 (Laurel Miller)

777 Q 49 (Husain Haqqani) and Q 59 (Dr Ashley Jackson)

778 Q 41

779 Q 69 (Dr Ashley Jackson)

780 Q 120

781 Q 46 (Laurel Miller)

782 Q 41 (Laurel Miller)

783 Q 69

784 Written evidence from the FCDO (AFG0011)

785 Q 41 (James Dobbins)

786 Q 4

the defection of some commanders “to other groups who are fighting against the state in Afghanistan”.⁷⁸⁷

486. Mr Haqqani was sceptical about compromise because the Taliban’s worldview was “totalitarian”. It believed “that its emir is the commander of the faithful and represents the will of God”. This made compromise difficult: “With a belief system such as that, will it be content with having two or three ministries in a coalition government? Similarly, will it be possible for it to accept a policy being made by others when its belief system says that this is the only truth?”⁷⁸⁸
487. Dr Jackson concluded that the Taliban was more united than the Afghan government-aligned negotiating team, but it was “far too soon to say” if could hold up its end of a peace deal.⁷⁸⁹
488. **The Taliban leadership appears to have significant control of its forces. However, its negotiators’ ability to compromise is likely to be limited by the group’s ideology, the narrative with which it has inspired its fighters and the risk of defections to other extremist groups.**

Complexity and timeline

489. Mr Hakimi said the talks were “too rushed”.⁷⁹⁰ There had “not been the kind of time that you see in other peace processes, real concerted engagement to try to help the Taliban think through what is feasible and to help the other side of the table think through how to engage with the Taliban”.⁷⁹¹
490. Lord Houghton said “it would be a brave man who suggested that political and ideological reconciliation will be swift, violence-free or relatively smooth and sustainable”.⁷⁹² The level of “distrust” between the parties was “really high”⁷⁹³ and “a lot of friction in the months ahead” was to be expected.⁷⁹⁴
491. Ms Miller put the chances of a final agreement at “well below 50%”. This was because the peace process had “been instigated predominantly through external pressure”: it had not been a case of “the parties themselves ... appreciating that one or the other side is clearly going to lose or that there is an unresolvable stalemate and that therefore they need to come to terms”. Nonetheless, it was “a high enough probability to try”.⁷⁹⁵
492. On the timeline for an agreement, Ms Miller said that “a year would be fast.”⁷⁹⁶ The discussions were not just about the Taliban and the Afghan government, but about the past 40 years.⁷⁹⁷ Ms Lyons cautioned that there were “a lot of weapons in Afghanistan and a lot of potential spoilers”, and

787 [Q 4](#) (Shaharзад Akbar)

788 [Q 52](#)

789 [Q 65](#)

790 [Q 4](#)

791 [Q 69](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

792 [Q 87](#)

793 [Q 4](#) (Hameed Hakimi)

794 [Q 77](#) (Dr John Manza)

795 [Q 40](#)

796 [Q 46](#)

797 [Q 40](#)

time would be needed to ensure that “as many of these interest groups as possible have their wishes satisfied to a reasonable extent.”⁷⁹⁸

493. Mr Bowden said that “high expectations of quick breakthroughs” needed “to be managed far better”.⁷⁹⁹ Ms Miller said it would be important to ensure there was “enough patience, among ... the external powers that are the instigators and catalysts of the peace process”.⁸⁰⁰
494. **Achieving a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan is likely to be a protracted and contentious process. The Government should encourage the parties, and regional and international actors, to remain engaged in the process, even if progress is slow.**

External parties and the talks

The US

495. Dr Siddiqi said that “all regional actors, even Afghan actors” realised that for “withdrawal talks, peace talks or intra-Afghan talks” to succeed, “the presence in the room of ... the United States of America, backed by NATO” was necessary.⁸⁰¹
496. Mr Dobbins said “if the US leaves before negotiations produce a result, they will never produce a result. If the US leaves after they produce a result but before that result is implemented, it will never be implemented.”⁸⁰²
497. As discussed in Chapter 6, there is considerable uncertainty over the US’s role. The policy of President-elect, Joe Biden, is not known, and it is not clear whether the outgoing Trump Administration’s determination to withdraw troops will be completed before the handover.
498. **The ongoing engagement of the US is critical to the success of the Afghan peace talks. We are concerned that the US’s agreement with the Taliban risks critically undermining the Afghan government in the talks.**
499. **The UK Government should make clear to the US that ongoing US military and diplomatic engagement is essential to achieving a successful negotiated settlement, and that further US and NATO troop withdrawals should be paused.**

The UK

500. Ms Lyons said that the UK’s work “with Pakistan and ... the Afghan government”, had been a “significant contributing factor” to the talks being agreed.⁸⁰³ It worked “closely” with the ‘quint’—Germany, Norway, Uzbekistan, Indonesia and Qatar—which had “dedicated significant resources in preparing to support intra-Afghan negotiations”.⁸⁰⁴

798 [Q 9](#)

799 [Q 31](#)

800 [Q 40](#)

801 [Q 49](#)

802 [Q 40](#)

803 [Q 10](#)

804 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

501. Lord Ahmad had “joined the formal start of the peace negotiations”.⁸⁰⁵ The UK was “supporting the Afghan negotiation team directly”,⁸⁰⁶ including the Ministry of Peace through “a targeted Peace and Reconciliation Programme, funded through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund”.⁸⁰⁷
502. He said it was necessary to “recognise the reality on the ground: the Taliban holds both territory and influence”. UK support to the peace talks included UK officials meeting Taliban representatives in Doha.⁸⁰⁸ It was not, however, providing any “specific support” to the Taliban.⁸⁰⁹
503. The UK would “continue to press for a settlement that protects the hard-won gains of the past nineteen years, including the rights of women and minorities”. It was “clear that any political resolution involving the Taliban should protect and build on” this progress.⁸¹⁰ The UK was “candid and direct that any support by the UK Government and our key allies is dependent on the Taliban’s commitment”.⁸¹¹
504. Lord Ahmad said he raised these points at the start of negotiations, and in further discussions including with the Foreign Minister of Afghanistan and “in all our conversations with the Taliban”.⁸¹²
505. The “ideological philosophy” of the Taliban had to be “addressed”.⁸¹³ It was necessary to “challenge” claims “that any religion sanctions discrimination, persecution or the targeting of women and girls”. The UK would engage with the Taliban and faith leaders in this regard.⁸¹⁴
506. Lord Ahmad said that tackling Afghanistan’s drug economy “at its core” had also “been very much part of our discussions”.⁸¹⁵
507. **We welcome the UK’s enduring commitment to human rights, particularly the rights of women and minorities, in Afghanistan. We regret that the UK is unlikely to have sufficient leverage to ensure these rights are protected.**
508. **Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said that the UK was emphasising to the Taliban the importance of “inclusivity”. We are not confident that the Taliban will embrace inclusivity, or develop respect for the rights of women and minorities, or fundamental principles of human rights.**
509. **Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said the Taliban’s “ideological philosophy” needed to be addressed. We were provided with no information by the Government on how it or its partners were seeking to influence the Taliban in this regard, or its assessment of how successful this might be. We request this information.**

805 [Q 117](#)

806 [Q 122](#) (Lord Ahmad)

807 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

808 [Q 120](#)

809 [Q 123](#) (Lord Ahmad)

810 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

811 [Q 123](#) (Lord Ahmad)

812 [Q 123](#)

813 [Q 123](#) (Lord Ahmad)

814 [Q 131](#) (Lord Ahmad) Dr Jackson said that Indonesia saw itself as having “a role in moderating and helping the Taliban to see a different side of Islam”, and had engaged with Taliban members in this regard. [Q 67](#)

815 [Q 119](#)

510. **We welcome the Government’s commitment to promoting freedom of religion and belief. There is an urgent need for moderate Islamic scholarship to become more widely known and celebrated.**
511. **We would especially like to learn more about the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s Declaration of Humanity, referred to by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, and the promotion of freedom of religion or belief (Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), in the FCDO’s strategy.**
512. **The Government should be giving careful consideration to how, in the event of the Doha talks resulting in an agreement, it will handle its future relationship with the Taliban, which will necessarily be part of any power-sharing arrangement, and how it will manage aid programmes in areas under Taliban control or influence. We request that the Government in due course shares its thinking on this issue with Parliament.**

Regional actors

Pakistan

513. Dr Manza said that Pakistan had become “more helpful” in the peace process and had “helped to foment the talks”.⁸¹⁶ Ms Miller said this was “not surprising”, as the US was now doing “exactly” what Pakistan had been telling it to do for 20 years.⁸¹⁷
514. Sir Richard Stagg said Pakistan probably wanted the Taliban to be “able to control at least certain areas of policy” and to “ensure that the government in Kabul did not become a hostile force”.⁸¹⁸ Mr Haqqani said that while Pakistan said in public that it wanted power sharing to result from the talks, in private it wanted the Taliban to control Afghanistan, “as long as it takes place in a context in which Pakistan does not earn the wrath of major powers such as the United States”.⁸¹⁹
515. **The UK should continue to work with Pakistan in support of a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan.**

Other countries

516. Mr Dobbins said that China, Russia and Iran all favoured a negotiated outcome.⁸²⁰ Much of this hinged on their “very conflictual attitude” towards the US military presence. They did “not want the US to leave too quickly ... because they recognise the instability that would ensue”, but did “not want the US to stay for ever”.⁸²¹ The Human Security Centre said that China was “likely have little interest in the specific outcomes of the peace process, provided that the end result is greater political stability and security”.⁸²²

816 [Q 82](#)

817 [Q 42](#)

818 [Q 20](#)

819 [Q 50](#)

820 [Q 42](#)

821 [Q 42](#) (Laurel Miller)

822 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

517. Mr Dobbins said the Gulf states were supportive of the negotiations.⁸²³ Qatar was making a significant contribution as the host.⁸²⁴
518. India was “not favourably disposed to the negotiations”. It particularly opposed “aspects that would remove US troops from Afghanistan” which it thought “might lead to further fragmentation in Afghanistan, further disorder and greater Pakistani influence”.⁸²⁵

Possible outcomes

519. Dr Nemat said a “successful outcome ... would be one that results in an immediate end to violence, or a comprehensive plan for a ceasefire ... reconciliation and the reintegration of armed forces from both sides” and ensuring everyone was included.⁸²⁶ Continuing with the status quo—“further years of violent conflict”⁸²⁷—would be “a failure”.⁸²⁸
520. Ms Akbar said violence could intensify if talks failed.⁸²⁹ Dr Siddiqi said that if the US were to remain but “talks fail or do not take off”, there would be “a level of violence, but it may not increase extensively”. If the Americans had left and talks failed, violence would “definitely increase”;⁸³⁰ Mr Hakimi and Mr Haqqani said that there would be a civil war.⁸³¹
521. **A successful outcome to the Afghan peace talks must include a ceasefire, the reconciliation and reintegration of armed groups, respect for the rights of all Afghan citizens and a commitment not to provide support for terrorist groups. It is likely to include some sort of power sharing with the Taliban.**
522. **If a negotiated settlement is not reached between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the outcome is likely to be more violence and possibly a civil war.**

Possible changes to the constitution

523. Dr Antonio De Lauri said the Taliban describes “the existing Afghan ruling system as illegal and a product of foreign powers”, while “the Afghan government defends the current system as fully Islamic”.⁸³² An agreement would have to “introduce elements that will satisfy the Taliban’s demand for a more Islamic system”, although it had “not articulated what is not Islamic enough about the existing system and what changes it wants”.⁸³³
524. Witnesses expected the Taliban to demand a role for religious authorities,⁸³⁴ such as “a religious council of elders”⁸³⁵ or a “body with the power to oversee

823 [Q 42](#)

824 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG0005](#)) and [Q 10](#) (Deborah Lyons)

825 [Q 42](#) (James Dobbins)

826 [Q 31](#)

827 Written evidence from the FCDO ([AFG0011](#))

828 [Q 31](#) (Dr Orzala Nemat)

829 [Q 1](#)

830 [Q 49](#)

831 [Q 4](#) (Hameed Hakimi) and [Q 49](#) (Husain Haqqani). This would be likely to lead to “very substantial new refugee flows out of Afghanistan”. Written evidence from Professor Maley and Dr Ibrahim ([AFG0004](#))

832 [Q 61](#)

833 [Q 40](#) (Laurel Miller)

834 *Ibid.*

835 [Q 49](#) (Dr Ayesha Siddiqi)

the executive”.⁸³⁶ However, Mr Davy said the expected outcome was an Islamic republic, not an Islamic emirate.⁸³⁷

A share of government and security positions

525. Sir Richard Stagg said the Taliban would “need to be ... able to show its supporters that they had a genuine voice in the government after an agreement”.⁸³⁸ Mr Williams said this would have to include “governorships in the south and east”.⁸³⁹
526. It would also want “a major share of army and police positions”.⁸⁴⁰ Ms Miller foresaw “some amalgamation of the security forces, the existing state forces and the Taliban forces”.⁸⁴¹ It would be a “major loss” of patronage for “key powerbrokers”.⁸⁴² However, Mr Williams thought this was “unlikely to result in renewed conflict in the short term, provided that the generous international funding to the security forces continues”.⁸⁴³
- 527. If the Taliban is brought into the Afghan government, it will expect to be given political and military roles. This may result in competition with existing power brokers.**

Human rights, including the rights of women

528. Ms Akbar said “concerns about women’s rights in the peace process” were “very legitimate”.⁸⁴⁴ There was an attempt “to pit women’s rights and peace against each other”.⁸⁴⁵ Mr Davy was concerned there was “perhaps a readiness to sacrifice some of the gains” made since 2001.⁸⁴⁶ The Taliban had “been trying to be very ambiguous when it speaks about women’s rights and not to give a lot of very specific answers”.⁸⁴⁷
529. Dr Nemat said Afghan women were “trying very hard ... to ensure that there is no compromise that turns a blind eye to the political, economic and social future of half the population”.⁸⁴⁸ The Afghan negotiators should “ask for the voice of experts and activists from outside” to inform deliberations on women’s rights.⁸⁴⁹
530. There are “a range of human rights issues” on which the Taliban had “a very different ... understanding”. How freedom of expression was handled in the peace process was “one of the key areas of concern”, as was “the extent to which the Taliban [is] open to our current understanding of the rights of minorities.”⁸⁵⁰ The Human Security Centre said there was “a strong humanitarian risk” to the Hazaras, “Persian-speaking Shi’a communities in

836 [Q 61](#) (Dr Antonio De Lauri)

837 [Q 31](#) Also see written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#))

838 [Q 19](#)

839 Written evidence from Nicholas Williams ([AFG0021](#))

840 Written evidence from Nicholas Williams ([AFG0021](#))

841 [Q 40](#)

842 [Q 61](#) (Erica Gaston). Ms Gaston and Dr De Lauri said that, to support the talks, international actors should focus on the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of militias with which they were associated. [Q 61](#)

843 Written evidence from Nicholas Williams ([AFG0021](#))

844 [Q 3](#)

845 [Q 32](#) (Dr Orzala Nemat)

846 [Q 32](#)

847 [Q 3](#) (Shaharзад Akbar)

848 [Q 31](#)

849 [Q 3](#) (Shaharзад Akbar)

850 [Q 5](#) (Shaharзад Akbar)

Herat and Farah Provinces”, Turkic peoples such as the Bayat and Ismaili communities in Badakhshan Province.⁸⁵¹

531. Dr Nemat said some “members of the negotiating team” had made comments “that give specific indications of what form of Islamic order both sides are foreseeing for the future”. These raised “quite serious” concerns for women, minority ethnic groups and other religious groups.⁸⁵² Amnesty International UK said there was “no indication that the Taliban’s determination to repress and deny rights including of religious and cultural expression and identity and equal rights of women and girls” had diminished.⁸⁵³

Role of the international community

532. Ms Lyons said the negotiations, would “be critical in demonstrating ... the world’s commitment to women’s rights”.⁸⁵⁴
533. First, the UK and other donors should call for “ample time and space to discuss rights issues”, and “consultations with a broad range of Afghans, including women’s rights advocates, victims’ representatives, and other civil society groups”.⁸⁵⁵ Lord Ahmad said the UK was working with “women’s networks and civil society” to this end.⁸⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch said this should include providing financial support to enable the participation of civil society actors.⁸⁵⁷
534. Second, it would be “essential” for donors to “use their leverage and financial assistance to insist that the parties make no compromises that would undermine” their rights. The UK and other donors “should reinforce with both parties their expectation that a political agreement will protect fundamental rights, including women’s rights”.⁸⁵⁸
535. Ms Miller nonetheless expected “some weakening” of these “rights and freedoms”.⁸⁵⁹
536. Mr Watkins said that the utility of “Western statements” on “what we hope to see from a political settlement” came down to “whether or not such an approach will reach the Taliban and impact it in any way”. It had “demonstrated very clearly over the last two decades that it does not take such statements or such principles, or even the military might of the Western world, and bend to that attempt to ... influence.”⁸⁶⁰
537. **Human rights, particularly the rights of women and minorities, are in danger of being a casualty of the Afghan peace talks. The Taliban has not demonstrated that it has changed, and it is ideologically opposed to the progress made since 2001.**

851 Written evidence from the Human Security Centre ([AFG0019](#))

852 [Q 31](#)

853 Written evidence from Amnesty International UK ([AFG0023](#))

854 [Q 11](#)

855 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

856 [Q 122](#)

857 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#))

858 Written evidence from Human Rights Watch ([AFG0022](#)) Including “education through secondary school and university, freedom of movement and association, the right to employment and to hold public office (including judgeships), and other rights gained since 2002”.

859 [Q 40](#)

860 [Q 70](#)

538. **The UK Government should continue to use its diplomatic influence to ensure that sufficient time is devoted to the discussion of human rights issues in Doha, and call for the involvement of a broad range of Afghans in the negotiations. It should provide financial support to enable civil society groups and rights advocates to participate in the talks.**
539. **The UK should continue to make clear that its future financial support for Afghanistan is conditional on respect for human rights, including the rights of women and minorities and freedom of speech.**

Illicit drugs

540. Dr Felbab-Brown said international donors should “resist pressing for aggressive illicit drug eradication to be a condition of a peace settlement”. This would be “likely to produce a backlash amongst the public and potentially undermine support for the peace process”.⁸⁶¹

Foreign and security policy

541. Ms Miller said a final agreement would have to have “some elements ... related ... to the composition of the government and their principles of foreign policy”. This would be needed to reassure first Afghanistan’s neighbours, and second the US and its partners on counter-terrorism.⁸⁶²
542. **Countering the threat from terrorist groups in Afghanistan will remain important to the UK. The Government will need to work with the US and other NATO Allies how best to address this challenge in the circumstances either of a negotiated settlement at Doha, or of a continuation of the current hostilities.**

Possible future role for the US and its partners

Security support during the peace talks

543. Witnesses said that ongoing international commitments to support the Afghan government provided it with important leverage in the peace talks. This included commitments to the Resolute Support Mission and funding for the security forces.⁸⁶³ It was necessary for the Taliban to know “that they cannot take military ascendancy for granted once we step away”.⁸⁶⁴
544. As discussed in Chapter 6, as a result of the US–Taliban deal in February 2020, NATO Allies agreed to “implement conditions-based adjustments, including a reduction to our military presence”.⁸⁶⁵ Troops are due to leave Afghanistan by May 2021.⁸⁶⁶
545. Baroness Goldie said NATO remained “committed to the principle ... of ‘In together, adjust together, out together’”.⁸⁶⁷ Lord Ahmad said the US, the

861 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown ([AFG0027](#))

862 [Q 40](#)

863 [Q 77](#) (Dr John Manza), [Q 89](#) (Lord Sedwill) and [Q 44](#) (James Dobbins)

864 [Q 89](#) (Lord Sedwill) Also see [Q 44](#) (James Dobbins)

865 NATO, ‘Statement by the North Atlantic Council on Afghanistan’ (29 February 2020): https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_173977.htm?selectedLocale=en [accessed 5 January 2021]

866 CNBC, ‘Acting Pentagon chief announces U.S. military reduction in Iraq and Afghanistan’ (17 November 2020) : <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/17/pentagon-announces-us-military-reduction-in-iraq-and-afghanistan.html> [accessed 5 January 2021]

867 [Q 126](#)

Taliban and the Afghan government were “clear that the commitments made by the parties are all interrelated, and if one party does not deliver on its side of the engagement, that calls into question whether others will need to do so as well”.⁸⁶⁸ Any potential NATO withdrawal or reduction of forces would “be taken by NATO Allies and partners ... with consideration being given to conditions in the country and progress towards a political settlement”.⁸⁶⁹

546. **We heard that the ongoing presence of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan is essential to the Afghan government’s military strength and negotiating position. Premature withdrawal by the US, likely to be matched by NATO partners, runs contrary to the UK’s objective of securing a durable negotiated settlement.**
547. **The UK should emphasise to the US and its NATO Allies the importance of their ongoing presence in Afghanistan until a peace deal is reached.**
548. **The ongoing presence of UK troops in Afghanistan depends on the deployment decisions of the US. We were disappointed by the lack of analysis of the implications of the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan provided by ministers in their evidence. We ask the Government to provide to us its assessment of the US’s policy.**

Future security assistance

Troops

549. Ms Miller said that if a negotiated settlement was reached between the Afghan government and the Taliban, it was “questionable ... whether the resultant government would actually accept foreign security assistance if that entailed having foreign military forces—uniformed forces—of any kind on the ground”. There was a “possibility” of training delivered by civilians.⁸⁷⁰
550. Dr Manza said that while the outcome of the negotiations was unknown, NATO Allies were planning for a scenario in which they were invited to continue advising and training. NATO had “a plan agreed by Allies on the shelf”.⁸⁷¹
551. Ms Miller said that after the US withdraws troops, the security situation would be too uncertain for training and support to continue.⁸⁷² Mr Dobbins said Western governments would in any case not be prepared to provide assistance at current levels once their troops had left Afghanistan.⁸⁷³

Funding for the ANSF

552. Witnesses warned that security funding should not immediately be withdrawn if a peace deal was reached.⁸⁷⁴ Lord Ahmad agreed that ongoing investment in Afghanistan’s security institutions would be needed;⁸⁷⁵ the

868 [Q 127](#)

869 [Q 126](#) (Lord Ahmad)

870 [Q 44](#) Also see [Q 78](#) (Dr John Manza)

871 [Q 76](#)

872 [Q 44](#)

873 *Ibid.*

874 [Q 36](#) (Dr Orzala Nemat) and [Q 36](#) (Charles Davy)

875 [Q 128](#)

UK would “certainly continue our commitment to the sustainment of the [ANSF] through to 2024”.⁸⁷⁶

553. The evidence we received demonstrated the challenges facing the Government on future security assistance to Afghanistan:

- **A government with Taliban representation might not accept such assistance, and the UK and NATO Allies would need to consider what sort of assistance to provide to such a regime.**
- **If a peace deal was reached with the Taliban and the UK and international partners withdrew funding for the Afghan National Security Forces, this would critically undermine the viability of the Afghan forces.**
- **The UK and non-US NATO Allies are unlikely to remain in Afghanistan if the US withdraws its troops. The US presence is the largest in NATO; the end of its non-NATO mission is likely to result in the security situation deteriorating.**

We invite the Government to provide us with its assessment of these challenges.

Future official development assistance funding

Declining UK aid budget

554. Mr Bowden said official development assistance (ODA) funding for Afghanistan needed to be “protected ... to ensure the provision of services”.⁸⁷⁷ However, aid was “on, and will continue on, a downward trajectory”.⁸⁷⁸ He was “very worried” about the impact of the economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁷⁹

555. On 25 November 2020 the UK Government announced its intention to cut the UK’s commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income (GNI) on ODA to 0.5% from 2021.⁸⁸⁰ We expressed our opposition to this decision in November 2020.⁸⁸¹ It is not yet clear how this decision will affect Afghanistan: Lord Ahmad said that “detailed spending allocations for 2021 will be subject to the upcoming resource allocation round”.⁸⁸²

Willingness to maintain funding if the Taliban joined the government

556. Dr Quie and Mr Hakimi said that “a putative power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban” would “raise questions about aid”.⁸⁸³ Witnesses considered whether international donors would be willing to provide funding.

557. We heard that development actors already provide services in areas outside government control; for example, Afghanaid delivers projects in Taliban-

876 [Q 116](#) (Baroness Goldie)

877 [Q 36](#)

878 [Q 35](#)

879 [Q 34](#)

880 The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Speech on the Spending Review 2020, 25 November 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/spending-review-2020-speech> [accessed 5 January 2021]

881 Letter from Baroness Anelay of St Johns to Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP (25 November 2020): <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3682/documents/35810/default/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

882 Letter from Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon to Baroness Anelay of St Johns (11 December 2020): <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4157/documents/41135/default/> [accessed 5 January 2021]

883 Written evidence from Dr Marissa Quie and Hameed Hakimi ([AFG0024](#))

controlled areas,⁸⁸⁴ and the Taliban accepts community-based education for women, and midwives (see Chapter 3).⁸⁸⁵

558. Falanx Assynt said if the Taliban was brought into the government, the prospect of “the withdrawal of aid funding” would give the international community some potential leverage.⁸⁸⁶ Lord Ahmad said the UK’s “conditionality” was “very clear”:⁸⁸⁷ it had “prioritised ... the rule of law, the protection of the rights of women and minorities’ rights, and democratic governance” as “conditions that need to be met to secure future funding”.⁸⁸⁸
559. If the Taliban became “the predominant actor in the Afghan government”, Dr Felbab-Brown thought this “would ... result in donors cutting off economic aid to Afghanistan”. US and European donors might “not be willing to stomach funding a Taliban-dominated government if it significantly reduces political freedoms and protections of human rights and women’s rights”.⁸⁸⁹
560. **Afghanistan remains highly dependent on international aid. Cutting funding to the Afghan state would disrupt the provision of basic services. Cuts to humanitarian relief and development projects would have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable.**
561. **We reiterate our opposition to the UK Government’s decision not to meet its statutory target to spend 0.7% of its Gross National Income (GNI) on official development assistance (ODA) from 2021. We accept that the COVID-19 pandemic has put considerable pressure on Government finances and that the UK’s aid budget would have fallen in cash terms as a result of the shrinking of the UK’s GNI. We call on the Government not to renege on the 0.7% commitment from 2021, which would undermine the UK’s standing in the world and negatively affect some of the world’s poorest people, including in Afghanistan. There is not a case for cuts to UK aid to the Afghan people, and Afghanistan’s aid dependence makes it particularly vulnerable to future cuts in ODA provision.**
562. **The UK and international donors face extraordinarily complex and sensitive problems when considering future aid to Afghanistan if the Taliban is brought into the government:**
- **Around 50% of the UK’s ODA is provided to the Afghan government as on-budget contributions, via the ARTF. If the UK were to maintain funding, this would be channelled via a government including Taliban representatives.**
 - **The Government’s position is that any future UK funding to Afghanistan will be conditional on respect for human rights, including women and minorities. We are not convinced that it would be able to enforce this conditionality, beyond threats to withdraw funding entirely. The Taliban shows little sign of being willing to respond to such pressure. The UK would have to choose between its commitment to supporting the Afghan**

884 [Q 33](#) (Charles Davy)

885 [Q 70](#) (Dr Ashley Jackson)

886 Written evidence from Falanx Assynt ([AFG005](#))

887 [Q 129](#)

888 [Q 122](#)

889 Written evidence from Dr Vanda Felbab-Brown ([AFG0027](#))

government's ability to function and provide basic services, and its commitment not to fund a regime which undermines the human rights of Afghan citizens.

- **UK ODA to Afghanistan should be conditional on the recipient not supporting, or maintaining links with, proscribed terrorist organisations. It is not clear that the Taliban would uphold such a commitment.**

563. Insecurity and violence are two of the major obstacles to achieving development outcomes in Afghanistan. If the peace talks break down, the security situation would be likely to worsen. While the UK could continue to support the Afghan government, its ability to provide services, and the ability of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials and NGOs to operate in the country, would be significantly undermined.

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The UK and Afghanistan from 2014

1. In 2001, following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington DC, master-minded by al-Qaeda, which was based in Afghanistan and enjoyed the protection of the Taliban administration, the country became a top UK foreign, defence and development policy priority. From 2010 its relative prioritisation as a national security issue slipped, partly in response to external factors, such as the increasingly disruptive international role played by Russia (including its activity in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine from 2014) and the rise of ISIS. The protracted and intractable nature of the Afghan conflict and a lack of public support for an ongoing combat mission were also factors. (Paragraph 28)
2. While the priority afforded by the UK to Afghanistan has fallen since 2014, the scale of the challenges facing the country, and their potential impact on UK interests, have not diminished significantly. Terrorist groups including al-Qaeda and Islamic State Khorasan Province operate in Afghanistan. The country is the source of 95% of the heroin in the UK. The Afghan state remains very fragile, with limited control of territory, and the Taliban's insurgency continues. (Paragraph 36)
3. The Government wishes to safeguard what it describes as the UK's legacy in Afghanistan since 2001. It wishes to strengthen the gains made in this period, and defines its legacy in terms of improvements in human rights, particularly of women and girls, and the strengthening of the Afghan state since the fall of the Taliban administration. (Paragraph 37)
4. There is a real risk that the principal national security challenges still posed by Afghanistan, namely terrorism, narcotics and regional instability, could worsen, and the gains made since 2001 could be lost. (Paragraph 38)
5. We regret the further delay to the Integrated Review, and the Government's decision to announce commitments on defence spending and official development assistance in advance of the publication of the review. It is essential that the final document demonstrates how Afghanistan fits into the UK's long-term strategic aims for national security and foreign policy. (Paragraph 41)
6. We ask the Government to provide us with a detailed breakdown of how its new commitments on defence spending will be allocated. (Paragraph 42)
7. The UK's interests in Afghanistan are not unique and distinct: they are bound up with those of its allies, led by the US. The UK has had limited opportunities, and has shown little inclination, to exert an independent voice and, along with other NATO Allies, has followed the US's lead. This is regrettable, not least in view of the UK's very substantial commitment to Afghanistan, both financially and militarily. The Government should seek to reinforce the need for a multinational approach, and be precise about its aims, including regional stability, counter-terrorism and countering narcotics production and trafficking. (Paragraph 46)
8. The UK Government should ensure that all Afghan interpreters who worked for the UK military, including those now resident in third countries, are aware of, and able to access the provisions of, the ex-gratia scheme. (Paragraph 49)

The Afghan state and government

9. Power in Afghanistan remains personalised, factionalised and mired in corruption, despite some moderate improvements in recent years. Government appointments are regarded as a source of spoils, and warlords and militia leaders retain roles inside the state. Many are involved in the illicit economy, leveraging their access to state resources. (Paragraph 61)
10. We request that the Government provides us with information on the support it has given to strengthen Afghanistan's democratic processes, particularly its elections. (Paragraph 62)
11. Afghanistan's system of government is highly centralised, but in practice there are regional and ethnic loyalties. Whether amendments to the constitution are required to address this important matter will be a matter for the Afghans themselves to decide, whether in the peace talks in Doha or thereafter. (Paragraph 66)
12. Ethnicity remains a potent political factor in Afghanistan, particularly at a local level, although its significance can be overstated. The Pashtun majority is largely dominant in politics, while the Hazara community and other minorities remain marginalised. (Paragraph 73)
13. Corruption remains endemic in Afghanistan. It has been significantly exacerbated by foreign funding. While the Afghan government under President Ghani has committed to tackling corruption and taken some steps, little progress appears to have been made. (Paragraph 83)
14. The Afghan government's accountability to its citizens is limited by its reliance on international military spending and aid, and very low reliance on taxation. This insulates the elite. (Paragraph 84)
15. We welcome the UK Government's efforts to combat corruption in Afghanistan, including work with the EU in Kabul on this agenda. As a major donor of on-budget support to the Afghan state, the UK should be willing, with its international partners, to call out the corrupt practices of individuals within the government and others in positions of influence. (Paragraph 85)
16. There has been significant improvement in human rights in Afghanistan in the past two decades, particularly in Kabul and other urban areas. Witnesses highlighted improvements in women's rights, freedom of speech, freedom of association and access to information. (Paragraph 99)
17. Our witnesses said the expectations of Afghan citizens about human rights and participation in governance had changed for the better, making any future attempt to roll back these freedoms more difficult. (Paragraph 100)
18. However, significant human rights challenges remain as a result of weakness in the rule of law and a lack of political will to enforce legislation which protects human rights. We are particularly concerned by reports of the lack of accountability, and sometimes impunity, of senior officials, militias and security forces, and ongoing threats to minorities, journalists and human rights defenders. (Paragraph 101)

19. We welcome the UK's support for civil society and human rights institutions in Afghanistan, which have contributed to fostering a more open society and greater media freedom. (Paragraph 111)
20. We welcome the BBC World Service's provision of impartial news and information in three languages in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 112)
21. We regret that UK efforts to improve the rule of law and judicial institutions appear to have had limited impact. We request that the Government provides its assessment of why this is, and how limited progress in Afghanistan compares with the output of similar UK programmes to support the rule of law in other countries. (Paragraph 113)
22. The UK must be willing to speak out on human rights abuses. We are concerned by reports that the UK has turned a blind eye to abuses by the Afghan security forces and militias. (Paragraph 114)
23. The UK should publicly champion the rights of minority communities, such as the Hazaras. (Paragraph 115)
24. There has been considerable improvement in the participation of women in Afghan society, politics and the economy since the fall of the Taliban administration in 2001, particularly in urban areas. Progress has been impeded by a range of factors including the security situation, the limited reach of the Afghan government into rural areas, the persistence of misogynist norms, unwillingness to enforce legislation protecting women and a culture of impunity for cases of violence against women. (Paragraph 142)
25. We were concerned to hear that the promotion of women's rights appears to have become less of a priority for international donors to Afghanistan. We were reassured to hear from ministers that this remains a key UK priority. (Paragraph 143)
26. The increasing number of girls in education is often cited as a success for the US-led coalition's engagement in Afghanistan. There has undoubtedly been a large increase in the number of girls enrolled in school, but we are concerned at the disparity between enrolment figures and both the number of girls who complete their schooling and the female literacy rate, which is just 16%. (Paragraph 144)
27. We recommend that the Government undertakes greater consultation with Afghan communities over its provision of education for girls and maternal health programmes, to ensure these are driven by grassroots priorities. (Paragraph 145)
28. The UK should put particular emphasis on funding women's health programmes across Afghanistan. (Paragraph 146)
29. We would welcome further information on the UK's work to challenge early and forced marriages across Afghanistan, and their effect on the education and future of Afghan girls and women. (Paragraph 147)
30. While providing services in Taliban-controlled areas presents considerable challenges, improving the lives of women and girls in rural areas is critical to achieving development in Afghanistan. We would welcome further information on the UK's policy on such support. (Paragraph 148)

31. Depending on the outcome of the Doha talks and the prospects for peace and stability in Afghanistan, the UK Government may need to recognise that the circumstances permitting returning asylum seekers to Afghanistan no longer exist. (Paragraph 160)
32. Decades of war and instability have resulted in large Afghan refugee populations in Iran and Pakistan, and one of the largest numbers of internally displaced persons in the world. Ongoing violence and poverty pose a significant challenge to safe and sustainable returns. (Paragraph 161)
33. As one of the core group of states supporting the *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees to Support Voluntary Repatriation, Sustainable Reintegration and Assistance to Host Countries*, the UK should consider what further influence it can bring to bear on Pakistan and Iran on the protection of Afghan refugees' rights. We would be interested to receive further information on what role the UK's significant aid programme to Pakistan might play in facilitating resettlement. (Paragraph 162)

The Afghan economy

34. Afghanistan depends on international aid for around 60% of its budget. There are few prospects for domestic revenues to increase. Around 75% of the Afghan population work in agriculture, which accounts for just 25% of GDP. While Afghanistan has significant mineral resources, the poor security situation hampers access, and the sector is largely unregulated and beset by corruption and rent-seeking. (Paragraph 172)
35. As a result of poor security and regional tensions, Afghanistan has missed opportunities to benefit from the trade and connectivity potential of its geographical position at the crossroads between the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia. It should be an objective of the Government's aid and other policies to help Afghanistan to overcome these obstacles. (Paragraph 177)
36. Afghanistan is the largest source of heroin in the world. It is also a source of hashish, methamphetamines and ephedrine. (Paragraph 187)
37. The drug economy is a crucial part of Afghanistan's power dynamics: warlords, border officials, security forces, the police and the Taliban are engaged in the trade. (Paragraph 188)
38. Opium poppies are a high-return cash crop, and many rural jobs and livelihoods depend on their cultivation. It is estimated that three million Afghans benefit directly or indirectly from the drugs economy. Reducing dependence on the drugs economy is a long-term development issue. (Paragraph 189)
39. The UK has devoted significant efforts to combating the Afghan drugs economy. Most recently, this has included work to develop the intelligence and investigative capability of the Afghan authorities. (Paragraph 201)
40. UK and international counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan have ultimately failed. The level of cultivation of opium poppies has not fallen, and Afghanistan remains the source of 95% of heroin on UK streets. (Paragraph 202)
41. The UK's presence in and funding for Afghanistan appears to contribute little to the UK's identified national security interest of countering the

narcotics trade. The problem is seemingly intractable, in the context of ongoing conflict and insecurity, the dependence of millions of rural Afghans on opium poppies for their livelihoods and the involvement of multiple powerful actors in the drug economy. (Paragraph 203)

42. Nonetheless, addressing the cultivation and trafficking of narcotics must be a priority for the UK's engagement on Afghanistan's agricultural, economic and rural development, and UK public safety. Effective action will only be possible once a greater degree of security in the country is achieved. It should be an objective of UK Government policy that any post-Doha Afghan government is committed to reducing and eliminating this trade, to help that government to achieve those aims, and to co-operate with Afghanistan's neighbours, particularly Pakistan and Iran, in enforcement action against this illicit trade. (Paragraph 204)
43. Afghanistan is the most aid-dependent country in the world. Sixty percent of its budget is provided by international donors. Without this funding, the state cannot provide basic services. (Paragraph 210)
44. Reducing Afghanistan's aid dependence in a sustainable way, which does not damage an already fragile state or increase deprivation, will be a long-term process. (Paragraph 211)
45. The UK is a major donor to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), which provides on-budget support to the Afghan government. This funding accounts for half of UK official development assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan. (Paragraph 222)
46. As the ARTF is provided as on-budget support (directly to the Afghan government), the UK is reliant on the financial management of the Afghan government for the delivery of 50% of its ODA. While the UK participates actively in World Bank oversight mechanisms for the ARTF, this situation nonetheless poses challenges to achieving the UK's development outcomes, given the weakness of the Afghan government and widespread corruption. Therefore, further consideration should be given to the allocation of ODA directly to NGOs and other recipients, rather than to the Afghan government via the ARTF. (Paragraph 223)
47. The UK is also a major humanitarian donor, including through the Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund (AHF). Ongoing UK funding for the AHF will be required, given the scale of the humanitarian challenges facing Afghanistan, particularly the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. (Paragraph 224)
48. We welcome the Government's decision to maintain the level of aid to Afghanistan in the present financial year (2020–21), and its commitment at the recent Geneva conference to sustaining a substantial aid programme in the future. The Government should explore ways of funding smaller, locally-led programmes, particularly those devoted to health and education. (Paragraph 225)
49. Improving agricultural productivity is essential to Afghanistan's economic development (see paragraphs 166–8). The UK should maintain and improve its provision of official development assistance for agricultural development. (Paragraph 226)

50. The cost of remitting money from the UK to Afghanistan, 12.7%, is unacceptably high. The Government should consider what actions it could take to lower the cost of remitting money from the UK to Afghanistan. (Paragraph 229)
51. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded Afghanistan's serious economic challenges. The country faces a humanitarian crisis, with alarmingly high levels of food insecurity. The poverty rate is expected to rise to 72% of the population, and it will struggle to meet a number of the Sustainable Development Goals. (Paragraph 236)
52. Afghanistan will need further humanitarian aid as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We welcome the UK's recent commitments to increase humanitarian provision in this regard. Rigorous oversight will be needed to ensure that UK resources reach their intended targets, represent value for money, and are not used to sustain warlords. (Paragraph 237)

The Taliban and other security issues

53. It is difficult accurately to assess the scale of the territory controlled by the Taliban. Experts differ in their assessments, and ongoing clashes between the Afghan National Security Forces and the Taliban suggest that the situation remains fluid. (Paragraph 241)
54. There are differences in outlook between the younger members of the Taliban, who do not remember its rule in the late 1990s, and veteran Taliban fighters. (Paragraph 245)
55. The Taliban reflects the views of a section of largely rural Afghan society on issues including women's rights and human rights. Although still predominantly Pashtun, it has become more geographically diverse. (Paragraph 249)
56. The Taliban has adapted since 2001, but it has not necessarily become less conservative. The extent to which the Taliban has moved away from its previously ideologically hidebound agenda is unclear. (Paragraph 253)
57. The Taliban maintains close links with international partners, particularly Pakistan. However, it has shown itself to be unwilling to bend to external pressure, even from its allies. (Paragraph 258)
58. The Taliban is increasingly institutionalised, with a consultative system that reflects the diversity of the group. It can co-ordinate military actions and ceasefires. (Paragraph 263)
59. The Taliban has developed parallel government structures in the areas it controls, providing basic services to local communities and further undermining the institutions of the government in Kabul. (Paragraph 272)
60. The Taliban has demonstrated a degree of flexibility to local needs and demands in the areas it controls, but it remains highly authoritarian and parasitic. (Paragraph 273)
61. Opium remains the main source of income for the Taliban, accounting for up to 65%. The Taliban also profits from the taxation of economic activities, and other illicit trades, including illegal mining and logging. (Paragraph 278)

62. The Taliban has maintained relationships with a range of terrorist and militant groups. It is likely to prioritise its internal unity over US demands to denounce or target such groups. (Paragraph 283)
63. Public information on the different terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan, their size, and the links between them, is very limited. (Paragraph 287)
64. We are surprised that the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is not included in the Home Office's list of proscribed terrorist organisations. The UK is the only country among the 'Five Eyes' group not to proscribe ISKP. We recommend that this matter be reviewed urgently. (Paragraph 288)
65. The Taliban remains closely associated with the Haqqani Network, which is designated by the UK Government as a proscribed terrorist organisation. (Paragraph 295)
66. Al-Qaeda has retained a presence in Afghanistan, although it appears to be weaker than before 2001. It maintains close ties to the Taliban. (Paragraph 306)
67. Islamic State Khorasan Province poses a significant threat to the Afghan government and civilians. Its ability to recruit educated, urban Afghans is a particular concern. (Paragraph 315)

External actors

68. The agreement negotiated between the US and the Taliban was a withdrawal agreement not a peace agreement. The US was driven by its determination to withdraw its military forces from Afghanistan. (Paragraph 339)
69. The US appears not to have consulted NATO Allies when negotiating with the Taliban, although the final agreement covered NATO personnel. This has risked undermining NATO unity. (Paragraph 340)
70. The commitment by the Taliban in its February 2020 agreement with the US on terrorism is obscure, imprecise and fragile. It will be important that any settlement which emerges from the Doha talks firms up that commitment, and enlists the support of the whole international community and of Afghanistan's neighbours in its enforcement. (Paragraph 341)
71. We regret President Trump plans to withdraw a further 2,500 troops from Afghanistan by 15 January 2021. The withdrawal of these troops has the potential to further destabilise the security situation in Afghanistan at a critical moment for the peace talks. We note that the requirements of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 are likely to constrain the Trump Administration's ability to withdraw these troops before the end of his term. (Paragraph 342)
72. It will be important for the Government to engage with the incoming Biden Administration from the outset on the definition of its policy towards Afghanistan. One objective should be more collective management of policy on Afghanistan among NATO Allies; another should be to give more emphasis to the conditions-related implementation of commitments entered into by all parties to the conflict in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 343)
73. The incoming Biden Administration is expected to continue with plans to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan. There is a possibility, however, that it will give more weight to the conditions on the ground, and the impact

of withdrawal on the Afghan peace talks than the Trump Administration. It is likely to consult NATO Allies more closely on the withdrawal. (Paragraph 350)

74. Pakistan is the most important external actor in Afghanistan. We welcome the Government's engagement with Pakistan on Afghanistan and hope it will continue to press Pakistan to support a negotiated settlement. (Paragraph 366)
75. Pakistan appears to have considerable influence over the Taliban, even if the relationship has changed since 2001. However, it appears to be unwilling to use this influence. (Paragraph 367)
76. Pakistan's policy on Afghanistan is driven by its tense and volatile relationship with India. (Paragraph 368)
77. India's involvement in Afghanistan, particularly in respect of trade, is heavily dependent on the goodwill of Pakistan. India is, however, Afghanistan's largest regional donor of development assistance. (Paragraph 381)
78. Iran has a highly flexible strategy when it comes to Afghanistan and appears to be willing to work with all actors to secure influence and achieve its aims, particularly stability on its border. (Paragraph 393)
79. The Government should engage more systematically with Iran on Afghanistan than has been the case in the past, recognising that on policies encouraging greater stability and security and on interdicting drug trafficking, UK and Iranian interests could coincide. (Paragraph 394)
80. The future security and stability of Afghanistan and the well-being of its citizens will depend crucially on reducing, and if possible eliminating, the intervention in its affairs of its neighbours. An objective of UK policy should therefore be to establish as binding as possible a commitment by its neighbours to non-interference and positive support for a stable Afghanistan, and to encouraging economic co-operation. This objective may be best pursued by discussions at the UN. (Paragraph 395)
81. The role and influence of the Gulf states in Afghanistan has changed. Saudi Arabia's influence has waned, while Qatar's has increased significantly. (Paragraph 400)
82. The stability of Afghanistan appears to be China's main priority. Possible threats from Uighur militant groups based in Afghanistan are a concern to China. It is interested in exploring Afghanistan's raw materials; however, this appears to have become secondary to its security concerns. (Paragraph 407)
83. Pakistan is an important regional ally for China. Beijing's policy on Afghanistan is, to a large extent, a by-product of its relationship with Islamabad. (Paragraph 408)
84. Russia is no longer a major actor in Afghan affairs, but the US's ongoing engagement means it retains an interest, and it has cultivated relations with the Taliban. (Paragraph 416)

The Afghan National Security Forces and NATO training

85. We welcome the valuable part the UK has played in NATO's Resolute Support Mission since 2015. In particular, we welcome the UK's long-term

investment in training through the establishment of the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, which has been an important contribution. (Paragraph 434)

86. The Afghan National Security Forces have become increasingly effective. While they can operate more independently, ongoing US and NATO support is required if the Afghan government is not to lose further territory to the Taliban. (Paragraph 443)
87. Ongoing patronage ties within the Afghan National Security Forces are a concerning reflection of the level of influence of militias and strongmen across Afghan state institutions. (Paragraph 444)
88. Ongoing donor funding through the NATO Afghan National Army Trust Fund and the UN Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan is essential to the viability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). There is no short- or medium-term prospect that the Afghan state can generate additional revenue to replace international funding for the ANSF. (Paragraph 448)
89. We welcome the UK's pledge of a further £70 million of funding for the Afghan National Security Forces for 2021. (Paragraph 449)

The peace talks in Doha and the future

90. A negotiated settlement is the only long-term solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 454)
91. We regret that the US's agreement with the Taliban was not conditional on the outcome of the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban. The US's unilateral commitment to withdraw troops has undermined the Afghan government's leverage in the talks. (Paragraph 458)
92. The violence perpetrated by the Taliban against the Afghan state and civilians is unacceptable. We regret that this violence has increased since the US–Taliban deal in February 2020. (Paragraph 459)
93. Afghan women should play a significant role in the peace negotiations in Doha. We commend the four women in the Afghan government-aligned delegation for their important work in very challenging circumstances. (Paragraph 465)
94. The UK Government should advocate for greater representation of women in the Afghan government-aligned delegation to the peace talks. (Paragraph 466)
95. The UK Government should support engagement between the negotiators and civil society groups to increase the representation of the range of Afghan society. (Paragraph 467)
96. The Afghan government appears to have developed a consensus for the negotiations. The possibility remains, however, that power brokers within, and associated with, the government may act as spoilers if they regard their economic or political interests to be threatened. (Paragraph 472)
97. The UK Government and its international partners should advocate for the Taliban delegation to include women. (Paragraph 475)

98. The Taliban has shown itself to be willing to engage in the peace talks, but its commitment to a negotiated settlement and to power-sharing remains unclear. The Taliban's desired outcome from the talks, beyond the departure of foreign troops, is not known. (Paragraph 481)
99. The Taliban leadership appears to have significant control of its forces. However, its negotiators' ability to compromise is likely to be limited by the group's ideology, the narrative with which it has inspired its fighters and the risk of defections to other extremist groups. (Paragraph 487)
100. Achieving a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan is likely to be a protracted and contentious process. The Government should encourage the parties, and regional and international actors, to remain engaged in the process, even if progress is slow. (Paragraph 493)
101. The ongoing engagement of the US is critical to the success of the Afghan peace talks. We are concerned that the US's agreement with the Taliban risks critically undermining the Afghan government in the talks. (Paragraph 497)
102. The UK Government should make clear to the US that ongoing US military and diplomatic engagement is essential to achieving a successful negotiated settlement, and that further US and NATO troop withdrawals should be paused. (Paragraph 498)
103. We welcome the UK's enduring commitment to human rights, particularly the rights of women and minorities, in Afghanistan. We regret that the UK is unlikely to have sufficient leverage to ensure these rights are protected. (Paragraph 506)
104. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said that the UK was emphasising to the Taliban the importance of "inclusivity". We are not confident that the Taliban will embrace inclusivity, or develop respect for the rights of women and minorities, or fundamental principles of human rights. (Paragraph 507)
105. Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon said the Taliban's "ideological philosophy" needed to be addressed. We were provided with no information by the Government on how it or its partners were seeking to influence the Taliban in this regard, or its assessment of how successful this might be. We request this information. (Paragraph 508)
106. We welcome the Government's commitment to promoting freedom of religion and belief. There is an urgent need for moderate Islamic scholarship to become more widely known and celebrated. (Paragraph 509)
107. We would especially like to learn more about the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Declaration of Humanity, referred to by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, and the promotion of freedom of religion or belief (Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), in the FCDO's strategy. (Paragraph 510)
108. The Government should be giving careful consideration to how, in the event of the Doha talks resulting in an agreement, it will handle its future relationship with the Taliban, which will necessarily be part of any power-sharing arrangement, and how it will manage aid programmes in areas under Taliban control or influence. We request that the Government in due course shares its thinking on this issue with Parliament. (Paragraph 511)

109. The UK should continue to work with Pakistan in support of a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. (Paragraph 514)
110. A successful outcome to the Afghan peace talks must include a ceasefire, the reconciliation and reintegration of armed groups, respect for the rights of all Afghan citizens and a commitment not to provide support for terrorist groups. It is likely to include some sort of power sharing with the Taliban. (Paragraph 520)
111. If a negotiated settlement is not reached between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the outcome is likely to be more violence and possibly a civil war. (Paragraph 521)
112. If the Taliban is brought into the Afghan government, it will expect to be given political and military roles. This may result in competition with existing power brokers. (Paragraph 526)
113. Human rights, particularly the rights of women and minorities, are in danger of being a casualty of the Afghan peace talks. The Taliban has not demonstrated that it has changed, and it is ideologically opposed to the progress made since 2001. (Paragraph 536)
114. The UK Government should continue to use its diplomatic influence to ensure that sufficient time is devoted to the discussion of human rights issues in Doha, and call for the involvement of a broad range of Afghans in the negotiations. It should provide financial support to enable civil society groups and rights advocates to participate in the talks. (Paragraph 537)
115. The UK should continue to make clear that its future financial support for Afghanistan is conditional on respect for human rights, including the rights of women and minorities and freedom of speech. (Paragraph 538)
116. Countering the threat from terrorist groups in Afghanistan will remain important to the UK. The Government will need to work with the US and other NATO Allies how best to address this challenge in the circumstances either of a negotiated settlement at Doha, or of a continuation of the current hostilities. (Paragraph 541)
117. We heard that the ongoing presence of US and NATO troops in Afghanistan is essential to the Afghan government's military strength and negotiating position. Premature withdrawal by the US, likely to be matched by NATO partners, runs contrary to the UK's objective of securing a durable negotiated settlement. (Paragraph 545)
118. The UK should emphasise to the US and its NATO Allies the importance of their ongoing presence in Afghanistan until a peace deal is reached (Paragraph 546)
119. The ongoing presence of UK troops in Afghanistan depends on the deployment decisions of the US. We were disappointed by the lack of analysis of the implications of the planned US withdrawal from Afghanistan provided by ministers in their evidence. We ask the Government to provide to us its assessment of the US's policy. (Paragraph 547)
120. The evidence we received demonstrated the challenges facing the Government on future security assistance to Afghanistan:

- A government with Taliban representation might not accept such assistance, and the UK and NATO Allies would need to consider what sort of assistance to provide to such a regime.
- If a peace deal was reached with the Taliban and the UK and international partners withdrew funding for the Afghan National Security Forces, this would critically undermine the viability of the Afghan forces.
- The UK and non-US NATO Allies are unlikely to remain in Afghanistan if the US withdraws its troops. The US presence is the largest in NATO; the end of its non-NATO mission is likely to result in the security situation deteriorating.

We invite the Government to provide us with its assessment of these challenges. (Paragraph 552)

121. Afghanistan remains highly dependent on international aid. Cutting funding to the Afghan state would disrupt the provision of basic services. Cuts to humanitarian relief and development projects would have a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable. (Paragraph 559)
122. We reiterate our opposition to the UK Government's decision not to meet its statutory target to spend 0.7% of its Gross National Income (GNI) on official development assistance (ODA) from 2021. We accept that the COVID-19 pandemic has put considerable pressure on Government finances and that the UK's aid budget would have fallen in cash terms as a result of the shrinking of the UK's GNI. We call on the Government not to renege on the 0.7% commitment from 2021, which would undermine the UK's standing in the world and will negatively affect some of the world's poorest people, including in Afghanistan. There is not a case for cuts to UK aid to the Afghan people, and Afghanistan's aid dependence makes it particularly vulnerable to future cuts in ODA provision. (Paragraph 560)
123. The UK and international donors face extraordinarily complex and sensitive problems when considering future aid to Afghanistan if the Taliban is brought into the government:
 - Around 50% of the UK's ODA is provided to the Afghan government as on-budget contributions, via the ARTF. If the UK were to maintain funding, this would be channelled via a government including Taliban representatives.
 - The Government's position is that any future UK funding to Afghanistan will be conditional on respect for human rights, including women and minorities. We are not convinced that it would be able to enforce this conditionality, beyond threats to withdraw funding entirely. The Taliban shows little sign of being willing to respond to such pressure. The UK would have to choose between its commitment to supporting the Afghan government's ability to function and provide basic services, and its commitment not to fund a regime which undermines the human rights of Afghan citizens.

- UK ODA to Afghanistan should be conditional on the recipient not supporting, or maintaining links with, proscribed terrorist organisations. It is not clear that the Taliban would uphold such a commitment. (Paragraph 561)

124. Insecurity and violence are two of the major obstacles to achieving development outcomes in Afghanistan. If the peace talks break down, the security situation would be likely to worsen. While the UK could continue to support the Afghan government, its ability to provide services, and the ability of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials and NGOS to operate in the country, would be significantly undermined. (Paragraph 562)

APPENDIX 1: LIST OF MEMBERS AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members

Lord Alton of Liverpool
 Baroness Anelay of St Johns (Chair)
 Baroness Blackstone
 Baroness Fall
 Lord Grocott
 Lord Hannay of Chiswick
 Baroness Helic
 Lord Mendelsohn
 Lord Purvis of Tweed
 Baroness Rawlings
 Lord Reid of Cardowan
 Baroness Smith of Newnham

Declaration of interests

Lord Alton of Liverpool
No relevant interests declared

Baroness Anelay of St Johns (Chair)
No relevant interests declared

Baroness Blackstone
No relevant interests declared

Baroness Fall
No relevant interests declared

Lord Grocott
No relevant interests declared

Lord Hannay of Chiswick
Joint Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group on the UN
Joint Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group on Global Security and Non-Proliferation

Baroness Helic
Member, UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters

Lord Mendelsohn
No relevant interests declared

Lord Purvis of Tweed
No relevant interests declared

Baroness Rawlings
Patron AMCR Afghan Mother and Child Rescue Clinic, Panjshir Valley

Lord Reid of Cardowan
No relevant interests declared

Baroness Smith of Newnham
House of Lords Defence Spokesperson, Liberal Democrats, House of Lords

A full list of Members interests can be found in the register of Lord's interests: <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/standards-and-interests/register-of-lords-interests>

Specialist Adviser

Dr Weeda Mehran

No relevant interests declared

APPENDIX 2: LIST OF WITNESSES

Evidence is published at <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/360/international-relations-and-defence-committee/publications/> and available for inspection at the Parliamentary Archives (020 7219 3074).

Evidence received by the Committee is listed below in the chronological order of oral evidence session and in alphabetical order. Those witnesses marked with ** gave both oral and written evidence. Those marked with * gave oral evidence and did not submit any written evidence. All other witnesses submitted written evidence only.

Oral evidence in chronological order

- | | | |
|----|---|---------------------------------|
| * | Shaharzad Akbar, Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission | <u>QQ 1–8</u> |
| * | Kate Clark, Co-Director, Afghanistan Analysts Network | <u>QQ 1–8</u> |
| ** | Hameed Hakimi, Research Associate, Chatham House | <u>QQ 1–8</u> |
| * | Deborah Lyons, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan | <u>QQ 9–17</u> |
| * | Sir Richard Stagg, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan | <u>QQ 18–29</u> |
| * | Dr Orzala Nemat, Director, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit | <u>QQ 30–36</u> |
| ** | Charles Davy, Managing Director, Afghanaid | <u>QQ 30–36</u> |
| * | Mark Bowden, Senior Research Associate, Overseas Development Institute (ODI) | <u>QQ 30–36</u> |
| * | Laurel Miller, Director—Asia Programme, International Crisis Group, and former acting US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan | <u>QQ 37–46</u> |
| * | James Dobbins, Senior Fellow and Distinguished Chair in Diplomacy and Security, Rand Corporation, and former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan | <u>QQ 37–46</u> |
| * | Husain Haqqani, Director for South and Central Asia, Hudson Institute; | <u>QQ 47–54</u> |
| * | Dr Ayesha Siddiq, Research Associate, South Asia Institute, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London | <u>QQ 47–54</u> |
| * | Dr Antonio De Lauri, Research Professor, Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen | <u>QQ 55–63</u> |
| * | Erica Gaston, Non-Resident Fellow, Global Public Policy Institute, Berlin | <u>QQ 55–63</u> |
| * | Andrew Watkins, Senior Analyst—Afghanistan, International Crisis Group | <u>QQ 64–71</u> |

- * Dr Ashley Jackson, Co-Director, Centre for the Study of Armed Groups, ODI [QQ 64–71](#)
- * Dr John Manza, Assistant Secretary General for Operations, NATO [QQ 72–84](#)
- * Lord Houghton of Richmond GCB CBE DL, former Chief of the Defence Staff [QQ 85–91](#)
- * Lord Sedwill KCMG FRGS, former Cabinet Secretary and former National Security Advisor [QQ 85–91](#)
- * Baroness Hodgson of Abinger, Co-Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security [QQ 92–99](#)
- * Dr Sima Samar, Special Envoy of the President and State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan [QQ 92–99](#)
- * Dr Avinash Paliwal, Associate Professor and Deputy Director, South Asia Institute, SOAS [QQ 100–107](#)
- * Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Adjunct Associate Professor, Security Studies Program, Georgetown University, Institut for Political Studies, Sciences Po, Paris [QQ 100–107](#)
- * Brigadier (Retired) Ian Thomas OBE, former Commander of Operation Toral, Dean of Academic Studies, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst [QQ 108–114](#)
- * Dr Edward Flint, Head of Department, Defence and International Affairs Department, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst [QQ 108–114](#)
- * Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) [QQ 115–128](#)
- * Baroness Goldie DL, Minister of State, Ministry of Defence [QQ 115–128](#)
- * Gareth Bayley, Director, South Asia and Afghanistan, FCDO [QQ 115–128](#)
- * Peter Vowles, Director, Asia Caribbean and Overseas Territories, FCDO [QQ 115–128](#)

Alphabetical list of all witnesses

- Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) ([QQ 115–128](#))
- Amnesty International UK [AFG0023](#)
- * Shaharзад Akbar, Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission ([QQ 1–8](#))
- Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh, Convenor—Middle East Studies Forum, Deputy Director (International), Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation [AFG0031](#)

- Drugs & (dis)order Research Project, through BAAG
(British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group) [AFG0013](#)
- * Gareth Bayley, Director, South Asia and Afghanistan,
FCDO ([QQ 115-128](#))
- BBC World Service [AFG0015](#)
- * Mark Bowden, Senior Research Associate, ODI
([QQ 30-36](#))
- The British Council [AFG0017](#)
- Stephen Brooking, Special Advisor, United Nations
Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (Confidential) AFG0001
- Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC) [AFG0012](#)
- * Kate Clark, Co-Director, Afghanistan Analysts Network
([QQ 1-8](#))
- * Baroness Coussins, Independent Consultant and former
member of the Locally Employed Civilians Assurance
Committee [AFG0020](#)
- ** Charles Davy, Managing Director, Afghanaid [AFG0018](#)
([QQ 30-36](#))
- * James Dobbins, Senior Fellow and Distinguished Chair
in Diplomacy and Security, Rand Corporation, and
former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and
Pakistan ([QQ 37-46](#))
- * Dr Antonio De Lauri, Research Professor, Chr.
Michelsen Institute, Bergen
([QQ 55-63](#))
- Dr. Vanda Felbab-Brown, Director, the Initiative on
Nonstate Armed Actors, Senior Fellow, the Brookings
Institution [AFG0027](#)
- Falanx Assynt Ltd [AFG0005](#)
- * Dr Edward Flint, Head of Department, Defence and
International Affairs Department, Royal Military
Academy Sandhurst ([QQ 108-114](#))
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office [AFG0011](#)
- Friends of Hazaras (Confidential) AFG0014
- * Erica Gaston, Non-Resident Fellow, Global Public Policy
Institute, Berlin ([QQ 55-63](#))
- * Baroness Goldie DL, Minister of State, Ministry of
Defence ([QQ 115-128](#))
- ** Hameed Hakimi, Research Associate, Asia-Pacific
Programme, Chatham House ([QQ 1-8](#)) [AFG0024](#)
- * Husain Haqqani, Director for South and Central Asia,
Hudson Institute ([QQ 47-54](#))
- The Hazara Research Collective [AFG0008](#)

- The Hazara Organization for Peace and Equality (HOPE) (Confidential) AFG0007
- * Baroness Hodgson of Abinger, Co-Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security (QQ 92–99)
- * Lord Houghton of Richmond GCB CBE DL, former Chief of the Defence Staff (QQ 85–91)
- Human Rights Watch [AFG0022](#)
- Human Security Centre [AFG0019](#)
- Dr Niamatullah Ibrahimi, Lecturer in International Relations, La Trobe University, Melbourne [AFG0004](#)
- * Dr Ashley Jackson, Co-Director, Centre for the Study of Armed Groups, ODI (QQ 64–71)
- Vinay Kaura, Assistant Professor, Department of International Affairs and Security Studies, Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice, Rajasthan [AFG0030](#)
- Kathy Keeley, Project Worker/Director, Creature Comforts [AFG0003](#)
- LION UK [AFG0012](#)
- * Deborah Lyons, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (QQ 9–17)
- Professor William Maley, Professor of Diplomacy, Australian National University [AFG0004](#)
- * Dr John Manza, Assistant Secretary General for Operations, NATO (QQ 72–84)
- Dr Terence McSweeney, Solent University and the London School of Economics and Political Science [AFG0002](#)
- * Laurel Miller, Director—Asia Programme, International Crisis Group, and former acting US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (QQ 37–46)
- Shabnam Nasimi, British Afghan social and political activist [AFG0029](#)
- * Dr Orzala Nemat, Director, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (QQ 30–36)
- ODI [AFG0028](#)
- * Dr Avinash Paliwal, Associate Professor and Deputy Director, SOAS (QQ 100–107)
- Saeed Parto, Director of Research, Afghan Public Policy Research Organization (APPRO) [AFG0026](#)

- Marissa Quie, Fellow and Director of Studies in Human, Social and Political Science, Lucy Cavendish College, and College Lecturer in Politics and Director of Studies in Human, Social and Political Science, Magdalene College, University of Cambridge [AFG0024](#)
- * Dr Sima Samar, Special Envoy of the President and State Minister for Human Rights and International Affairs, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan ([QQ 92–99](#))
- * Lord Sedwill KCMG FRGS, former Cabinet Secretary and former National Security Advisor ([QQ 85–91](#))
- Gul Masqood Sabit, former Deputy Minister of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and Lecturer, Ohlone College, California [AFG0025](#)
- * Dr Ayesha Siddiq, Research Associate, South Asia Institute, SOAS ([QQ 47–54](#))
- * Sir Richard Stagg, former British Ambassador to Afghanistan ([QQ 18–29](#))
- Lord Stirrup, former Chief of Defence Staff, and former member of the Locally Employed Civilians Assurance Committee [AFG0020](#)
- * Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, Adjunct Associate Professor, Center for Security Studies, Georgetown University, Institut for Political Studies at Sciences Po, Paris ([QQ 100–107](#))
- * Brigadier (Retired) Ian Thomas OBE, former Commander of Operation Toral, Dean of Academic Studies, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst ([QQ 108–114](#))
- Voices for Creative Nonviolence [AFG0016](#)
- * Peter Vowles, Director, Asia Caribbean and Overseas Territories, FCDO ([QQ 115–128](#))
- * Andrew Watkins, Senior Analyst—Afghanistan, International Crisis Group ([QQ 64–71](#))
- Nicholas Williams, Senior Associate Fellow, European Leadership Network [AFG0021](#)
- The World Food Programme [AFG0010](#)

APPENDIX 3: CALL FOR EVIDENCE

Between 2001 and 2014, the UK was involved in the conflict in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The UK participated actively in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force from 2002. The last UK combat troops left Afghanistan in October 2014.

Around 1000 UK troops are currently stationed in Afghanistan, as part of the non-combat NATO Resolute Support mission, which provides security and helps to train Afghan security forces.⁸⁹⁰

The UK is a major aid donor to Afghanistan with a country budget of £148,672,080 for 2020–21.⁸⁹¹ The Department for International Development describes Afghanistan as “one of the poorest and most fragile countries in the world”.⁸⁹²

The UK Government describes its engagement in Afghanistan as “supporting the Afghan government to:

- support Afghan-led efforts to make progress towards a sustainable political settlement
- build sustainable and sufficiently capable Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) which can contain the insurgency, deny safe havens to international terrorist groups and protect the civilian population
- build a viable Afghan state, which can increasingly meet its population’s needs from its own resources.”⁸⁹³

The Committee’s inquiry will explore the UK’s diplomatic, military and aid strategy for Afghanistan, including scrutiny of the new Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and the Ministry of Defence (MoD). It will consider the UK’s work with international partners such as the US, NATO, and the Afghan government.

The call for evidence

The Committee is calling for written evidence on the questions below. The Committee will use the written evidence received to further shape its inquiry.

You do not need to answer all the questions to make a submission.

Diversity comes in many forms and hearing a range of different perspectives means that committees are better informed and can more effectively scrutinise public policy and legislation. Committees can undertake their role most effectively when they hear from a wide range of individuals, sectors or groups in society affected by a particular policy or piece of legislation. We encourage anyone with experience or expertise of an issue under investigation by a select committee to share their views with the committee, with the full knowledge that their views have value and are welcome.

890 British Army, ‘The British Army in Afghanistan’: <https://www.army.mod.uk/deployments/afghanistan/>

891 FCDO, ‘Aid by Location’: <https://devtracker.dfid.gov.uk/location/country>

892 *Ibid.*

893 British Embassy Kabul, ‘The British Embassy in Afghanistan maintains and develops relations between the UK and Afghanistan’: <https://www.gov.uk/world/organisations/british-embassy-kabul>

Geopolitical environment

1. Which regional and global powers are playing the most significant role in Afghanistan's political and security environment? What scope is there for that role to be more positive and constructive than it has been in the past? We would particularly welcome responses on:
 - Pakistan;
 - Iran;
 - India;
 - The Gulf states;
 - The US;
 - Russia;
 - China; and
 - European countries
2. What are the prospects for the implementation of the peace agreement between the US and the Taliban signed in February? To what extent have its provisions been implemented, and what are the principal challenges?
3. What might US policy to Afghanistan look like under each of the US presidential candidates? What will be the likely direction of the Trump Administration's policy to Afghanistan up until the election?
4. Which non-state actors are most active in Afghanistan, and how significant a role are they playing? What is their relationship with foreign and domestic political actors?
5. What is your assessment of NATO's Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan?

Domestic context

6. What are Afghanistan's principal economic sectors and trade relationships?
 - (a) How can these be built upon to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and create jobs and livelihoods?
 - (b) To what extent are the illegal drugs trade and the grey economy still an important source of income?
7. What is your assessment of the functioning of Afghanistan's constitutional arrangements?
 - (a) What is the outlook for the May 2020 power sharing deal between President Ashraf Ghani and Dr Abdullah Abdullah?
 - (b) Can Afghanistan successfully operate as a multi-ethnic state?
 - (c) To what extent have international and domestic efforts to build Afghanistan's institutions (such as the judiciary and the rule of law) and measures to promote the rights of women, freedom of religion and belief and freedom of expression, and anti-corruption initiatives been successful? How best can they be sustained and strengthened?
8. What is the current strength and geographic reach of the Taliban? What are its aims and underlying motivation, and how united is it as a group? What are

its links to non-state actors such as al Qaeda and to external powers? What are the social and economic conditions in areas under the Taliban's control?

9. What is the outlook for talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban following the US-Taliban peace agreement? What role can or should the Taliban play in government, and how can this be achieved?
10. What is the state of the Afghan military and civilian forces? What further international support will be needed? How can this be delivered in the future?
11. What are the prospects for the return of the almost 2.5 million registered refugees from Afghanistan (UNHCR figures)? What is the impact of hosting Afghan refugees on its neighbours?

The UK

12. What are the UK's national security and foreign policy interests in Afghanistan? What are the UK's objectives for its engagement?
13. What will be the impact of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on the UK?
14. The UK is a significant aid donor to Afghanistan. What has been the impact of UK aid to Afghanistan since 2001? How effective are its ODA programmes across all issues and sectors (such as education, health, food security and women's rights), and how do they compare to those of other countries?
15. How effective have the UK's military training activities been in Afghanistan?
16. How influential is the UK in Afghanistan, and in international discussions about Afghanistan, including in the UN Security Council, of which the UK is a permanent member?
17. How well co-ordinated are the UK's activities in Afghanistan in terms of aid, defence and diplomacy?
 - (a) How can the Integrated Review improve co-ordination?
 - (b) What impact will the merger of the FCO and DfID have?

Other

18. What impact is the COVID-19 pandemic having on Afghanistan?