

Keir Starmer

There has been a major miscalculation of the resilience of the Afghan forces and staggering complacency from our Government about the Taliban threat.

The desperate situation requires leadership and for the Prime Minister to snap out of his complacency.

The Defence Secretary has said that some people who have worked with us will not get back—unconscionable.

We owe an obligation to the people of Afghanistan. There should be a resettlement scheme that meets the scale of the enormous challenge, but what the Government have announced this morning does not do that. It is vague and will support just 5,000 in the first year—a number without rationale.

There must be a UN-backed plan to ensure that our aid budget is used to support humanitarian causes in Afghanistan, not to fund the Taliban. This is a difficult task with no guarantee of success, so it should concern us all that the Prime Minister's judgment on Afghanistan has been appalling.

The very problems we are confronting today have been known problems for the last 18 months, and there has been a failure of preparation. The lack of planning is unforgivable, and the Prime Minister bears a heavy responsibility.

In March this year the Prime Minister published an integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy. It was a huge review. He boasted that the review would 'demonstrate to our allies, in Europe and beyond, that they can always count on the UK when it really matters.' The Afghan Government were an ally, yet the integrated review made just two passing references to Afghanistan. The review did not even mention the Taliban.

In July, Members on both sides of this House warned the Government—read Hansard—that they may be underestimating the threat of the Taliban. That was ignored, and the Government's preparation for withdrawal was based on a miscalculation of the resilience of the Afghan forces and a staggering complacency about the Taliban threat.

The Prime Minister's response to the Taliban arriving at the gates of Kabul was to go on holiday—no sense of the gravity of the situation; no leadership to drive international efforts on the evacuation. The Foreign Secretary shakes his head.

[Interruption.] What would I do differently? I would not stay on holiday while Kabul was falling.

The British and Afghan people will have to live with the consequences of the Prime Minister's failure. We have fought for 20 years to rid Afghanistan of terror—terror that threatens our security here in Britain and liberty in Afghanistan. The Taliban are back in control. The Prime Minister has no plan to handle the situation, just as he had no plan to prevent it. What we won through 20 years of sacrifice could all be lost. That is the cost of careless leadership.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con)

In July of this year, both President Biden and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister indicated that they did not think that the Taliban were ready or able to take over control of the country. Was our intelligence really so poor? Was our understanding of the Afghan Government so weak? Was our knowledge of the position on the ground so inadequate? Did we really believe that, or did we just feel that we had to follow the United States and hope that, on a wing and a prayer, it would be all right on the night?

The Taliban has said that it will not allow Afghanistan to become a haven for terrorists again. Yesterday, in the press conference, it said it would not allow anything to happen in Afghanistan that would lead to attacks elsewhere across the world. However, we must look at its actions, not its words, and, as he has just pointed out, its action has been to release thousands of high-value Taliban, al-Qaeda and Daesh fighters. Its actions are completely different from its words, and it is essential that we recognise the probability that Afghanistan will once again become a breeding ground for the terrorists who seek to destroy our way of life.

What must also be a key concern to us is the message that this decision sends around the world to those who would do the west harm—the message that it sends about our capabilities and, most importantly, about our willingness to defend our values. What does it say about us as a country—what does it say about NATO?—if we are entirely dependent on a unilateral decision taken by the United States?

We boast about global Britain, but where is global Britain on the streets of Kabul?

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP)

There can be little doubt that the chaos and crisis that has been inflicted on the Afghan people is the biggest foreign policy failure of modern times.

Since the most recent conflict began, in 2001, the Home Office has rejected asylum for 32,000 Afghans, including 875 girls. The total number of Afghans in the system stands at 3,117, so if we are to have any confidence that this is a turning point, this UK Government need to rethink radically how they respond to the refugee crisis unfolding before our eyes.

I know that the Foreign Secretary is trying to wind me up. When the rest of us were doing what we could in the past few days, he was lying on a sunbed, so I will not take any lectures from someone like him.

It is clear that Afghanistan did not go from relative stability to chaos overnight. The current situation is an acceleration of an existing state of affairs, of which the UK, the US and the Afghan Governments were seemingly unaware. The exit strategy was not properly planned, so it appears that the only people who were planning were the Taliban.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):

The Home Secretary announced this morning that the UK will take 20,000 refugees from Afghanistan but that only 5,000 will be able to come this year. What are the 15,000 meant to do? Hang around and wait to be executed?

If I am honest, I feel ashamed today—more ashamed than I can remember in any foreign policy debate in my 20 years in this House. We have seen the most sudden and catastrophic collapse of a foreign and military policy objective of this United Kingdom since Suez, and arguably further back than that. We have managed to humiliate ourselves. We have shamed our politics and our way of doing business. We have trailed the British flag and, frankly, our own honour in the dirt and the mud. Global Britain has been exposed as a meaningless slogan—a boast without a strategy behind it.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con)

May I take the right hon. and learned Gentleman back to the statement that the President of the United States made the other day? Does he not agree that that took on the terms of a sort of shameful excuse? Given that the President had

blamed the Afghan armed forces, who have lost nearly 70,000 troops in trying to defend Afghanistan, the American decision to withdraw aircraft cover was almost certainly going to lead us to this situation. Does he not think that that is shameful?

I say to the American President—the Government and even the Opposition leadership are perhaps reluctant to say this—that he has no right to use excuses and base them on people who have lost their lives, and done so bravely.

The British Government's job is to bring the Americans back to realise their commitment. All those years ago, John Kennedy said: 'Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.'

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD)

The American decision to withdraw was not just a mistake; it was an avoidable mistake, from President Trump's flawed deal with the Taliban to President Biden's decision to proceed—and to proceed in such a disastrous way.

I cannot hold President Biden to account in this House, but I can hold our own Government to account. Our Prime Minister and his Cabinet cannot escape their culpability for this disaster—for both the mistaken decision to withdraw, and how the withdrawal has turned into such a catastrophe. From the Prime Minister's self-evident lack of influence and clout in Washington, to his negligent inability, yet again, to master his brief and plan properly for the withdrawal, today's occupant of No. 10 has become a national liability.

On Britain's withdrawal planning, will the Prime Minister explain why he so misjudged the situation in Afghanistan that he told the House back on 8 July: 'I do not think that the Taliban are capable of victory by military means.'?

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con)

It is with utter disbelief that I see us make such an operational and strategic blunder by retreating at this time. The decision is already triggering a humanitarian disaster, a migrant crisis not seen since the second world war and a cultural change in the rights of women, and it is once again turning Afghanistan into a breeding ground for terrorism. I am sorry that there will be no vote today because I believe the Government would not have the support of the House.

My fear is that there will be an attack on the lines of 9/11 to bookend what happened 20 years ago, to show the futility of 20 years. We should never have left because after 20 years of effort, this is a humiliating strategic defeat for the west. The Taliban control more territory today than they did before 9/11.

It gives me no joy to criticise the President and say that the decision to withdraw, which he inherited, but then chose to endorse, was absolutely the wrong call.

Last year, the Taliban were finally at the negotiation table in Doha, but in a rush to get a result, Trump struck a deal with the Taliban—by the way, without the inclusion of the Afghan Government—and committed to a timetable for drawdown. All the Taliban had to do was wait.

The Americans are not leaving Afghanistan. This is a complete myth. The CIA will remain there, as will special forces and the drone oversight. Why? Because they will be haunted by another terrorist attack. It is the political inclination and the leadership that is disappearing—because of an American president, or two American presidents—and we could have stepped forward and filled the vacuum, but we did not.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab)

Over the past 12 years, we have taken no real action in Afghanistan. The Obama government dithered over what they wanted to do. The Trump government did not know what they were doing; they tried to do, and did, backdoor deals with the Taliban. The Biden Government have just come in and, without looking at what is happening on the ground, have taken a unilateral decision, throwing us and everybody else to the fire. They have decided to withdraw in a manner that no military person of any rank would perceive as fit for the arena in which they serve.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab)

Many of us who served in Afghanistan have a deep bond of affection for the Afghan people, and I had the honour of serving alongside them in Helmand. We trained together, fought together and, in some cases, died together. They were our brothers in arms. I shudder to think where those men are now. Many will be dead, and I know others now consider themselves to be dead men walking. Where were we in their hour of need? We were nowhere. That is shameful, and it will have a very long-lasting impact on Britain's reputation right around the world.

It was particularly distasteful and dishonouring of President Biden to make reference to the lack of courage and commitment from those Afghan soldiers, who have served with such bravery and distinction.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con)

In his speech of self-justification after the collapse of Kabul, President Biden reduced a complex military issue to only two stark alternatives. It was a gross over-simplification for him to pose a devil's dilemma between either a massive troop surge on a never-ending basis or a ruthless, chaotic and dishonourable departure. It is ruthless because people who trusted NATO will pay a terrible price; chaotic because of a lack of foresight to plan an orderly and properly protected departure; and dishonourable because even if our open-ended, nation-building, micromanagement strategy was wrong, as I think it was, in 20 years we created expectations and obligations which those who relied on us had a right to expect us to fulfil.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)

President Biden said this week that his 'only vital national interest in Afghanistan' was to prevent a terrorist attack. Even if that is the case, both he and President Trump should be deeply ashamed—I say this with great sadness—because their actions have returned Afghanistan to the very Government that harboured the 9/11 bombers.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green)

For all the hand wringing of Government Ministers in the last few days, the reality is that their actions over the past few months have left thousands of ordinary Afghans in terrible danger. Interpreters and contractors who worked side by side with UK forces have been refused resettlement on the grounds that they were technically subcontractors. That is shameful. There is the Afghan journalist, now in hiding with his family, who said: 'There was a lot of promise, a lot of assurance. A lot of talk about values, a lot of talk about progress, about rights, about women's rights, about freedom, about democracy. That all turned out to be hollow.'

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con)

Why, oh why, would anyone choose to remove their troops—even if they had decided to do so—during the fighting season, when the Taliban were at their

greatest strength? The answer is that it was not a decision made for foreign policy or security reasons; it was done to suit a domestic political timetable.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con)

President Biden drew a completely false choice. The choice was not between total immersion of American forces and the loss of American lives, which was going to do damage in the mid-terms, and pulling out. He could have carried on with 4,500 American troops and sophisticated air support. That would have sent a message to every Afghan army unit that if they were in trouble, they could call for American support. When it was announced that they were going, that sent a real message to the Taliban: ‘You’re safe, boys. Take every village and take every town, because the American air force is not coming after you.’

It is frankly shameful that the President of the United States—the leader of the free world—cannot face questions from his own hostile press corps but attacks the Afghan army for cowardice.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op)

What we are dealing with here is a failure of leadership, not of the military that served that leadership—we should never confuse the two. Both western and Afghan forces have served with great courage and are responsible for the successes achieved in the 20 years. It is a failure to understand Afghanistan and how the Taliban capitalised on UK and US forces’ counter-insurgency approaches, and the corruption of tribal leadership.

The Pashtun saying ‘You have all the watches, we have all the time’ reflects the speed with which the Taliban have acted.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con)

What has happened is an appalling and unnecessary self-inflicted wound. We are being presented with a choice: invest more blood and treasure or walk away. No: we had a steady state, give or take, in Afghanistan for the last few years, and the mission was a train, equip and mentor one. It was large, but for between 5,000 and 20,000 troops, contractors, special forces and so on who were there, it was smaller than many NATO/US bases and missions around the world. We have chosen to withdraw politically; we have not been forced to do so on security grounds. I think we will regret that decision for many years.

The collapse happened because a truly dreadful US President, Donald Trump, who was probably in hock to the Russians, dealt with the Taliban behind the Afghan Government's back—a shocking betrayal. Joe Biden, who admires Kennedy—we had some great quotes from Kennedy earlier—could have changed things. He has chosen not to and has opened the United States, Europe, India and many allies throughout the world to considerable terrorist risks from the 2,500 to 4,000 jihadi nut jobs—pardon my French—who are currently being released from Bagram, Kandahar and Kabul. When they have stopped slaughtering our friends and beheading a few key women journalists, they will turn their attention to us. We have walked away from a successful anti-terrorist operation after 20 years. Sooner or later, we will reap the rewards.

Many people have said that the Afghans did not fight. In my experience, many Afghans fought very hard. In many ways, those people were a model of courageous integrity. They were effective and efficient, they loved their country and they knew right from wrong. They are probably dead. If they were not killed a year ago, they will be finished off as we speak, and I find that upsetting.

Russia and China are happier today and Taiwan and Ukraine are considerably more nervous. We are weaker. Europe has been as bad as the United States in not stepping up to the mark. A weak and divided west is not a recipe for a caring future for anybody. It is a recipe for global instability and greater global threat.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op)

The UK will be judged by our actions, not our words—and our actions, I am afraid, are too slow. I just do not understand why we cannot airlift masses of people out, whether that be to Cyprus or to other military bases, and process the paperwork there. Let us get people out and sort out the paperwork and bureaucracy afterwards.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con)

The US surrender of its wardship of a problem child is a monumental failure of statecraft, geopolitical confidence and strategic patience that has been made all the worse by the fact that it spans two Administrations. The US is diminished by this, but so are all of us in the free world. The winners are those who are lined up against us and against our values. The losers, from Taiwan to the Caucasus, are those who will see their champions as having feet of clay.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab)

My first cousin Mark, who served in Afghanistan 18 years ago, has never felt as totally confused as he does now, which concerns me. Some of his colleagues made the ultimate sacrifice, and more so their surviving families back home. His Afghan medals mean nothing to him any more. He does not feel proud; he feels totally repulsed. He cannot think of a worse Government than the present one. He feels they have failed miserably, not just on the Covid-19 pandemic but on how they have let the situation get to where it is. His words: 'My medal is now a memento of a failed mission.'

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con)

Twenty years on, whether we blame President Trump for a bad deal with the Taliban or President Biden, who, remember, on 8 July told the American people, 'There's going to be no circumstances where you see people being lifted off the roof of the embassy of the United States from Afghanistan', the buck stops with him—oh yes, it does.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab)

We are witnessing the absence of leadership. We hold the presidency of the G7, and we are permanent members of the UN Security Council and leading members of NATO, but the Government are behaving as if they have no agency and no power. They were missing in action when it mattered, and have been dragged to the Chamber today to account for the greatest foreign policy crisis of our generation. It should be sobering for the Government that not one single speech has been uncritical of their approach.