



Statement: Situation in Afghanistan

The scenes which we have all seen this week following the American decision to withdraw military support for the humanitarian mission in Afghanistan are genuinely shocking and appalling: reports of our allies and translators being tortured and killed, helicopter lifts giving shades of the evacuation from Saigon, and people desperately clinging to moving planes to escape the return of a medieval caliphate that practises the stoning of women and exclusion of girls from education.

After twenty years of sacrifice in protection of a moderate Afghan administration against the Taliban we appear to have thrown away all the gains made.

The gradual winding down of the UK and US military presence on the ground in Afghanistan was never going to be straightforward or easy - but like you I am bemused by the way in which the decision by President Biden to withdraw all US military seems to have been taken and implemented unilaterally - without even the most basic proper minimum arrangements to avoid abandoning our local Afghan allies who have helped our humanitarian coalition on the ground from retribution killings, and to avoid the worst chaos of Taliban retribution.

This whole saga raises a number of big questions - about how this decision was taken, why we and the US weren't better prepared, what "Global Britain" means if we have a nuclear deterrent and two new aircraft carriers but can't protect or rescue our own people from a theatre we have fought in for 20 years, and how UK foreign policy is going to recover its reputation. How do we stand behind UK values and repair our soft power reputation and avoid this Afghan saga playing into the hands of our adversaries in China, Russia and other hostile states and non-state players. These questions all need to be addressed properly.

But right now the urgent priority must be the immediate safety and repatriation of "our people" on the ground: those who have fought and worked alongside us against the Taliban and are now at huge risk of violent retribution. Their safety, and that of our consular and other staff must be our immediate priority.

Like you I am baffled by how this has come about. I well understand and sympathise with the view that we - the Western allies - can't try and create liberal democracy by military intervention around the world and that we can't stay forever in Afghanistan to impose a liberal order by force. I respect the argument that we can't commit indefinitely to trying to maintain law and order and democracy in a country where these are not accepted norms. We cannot commit to impose our version of a liberal democracy by diktat around the world. Countries have to develop themselves. We can help, but we can't force it. But in Afghanistan the power of the Taliban is based on the trade in opium (for the Western heroin market) and funding from Saudi and other countries. We may not be able to police Afghanistan but we are not without influence. Using it well is what our foreign policy is about.

We originally went into Afghanistan to disrupt Al Qaeda and Bin Laden (both aims successfully achieved) and then to try and stabilise the country to handover to a moderate

and democratic Government. But given Afghanistan's history, this was always a very ambitious goal. The "handover" was always going to be a huge moment of danger and instability.

But how it came to the scenes this week is baffling. I'm not a Minister and am genuinely bemused by how this all happened so suddenly without more prior planning. President Biden and other Western Governments have had months to prepare a departure and avoid the chaotic scenes we have seen this week. I'm not a military man but I cannot understand why we couldn't have implemented a more gradual withdrawal with at least continuing air power to reinforce the Afghan army and police.

We may not be able to ensure law and order on every street in Afghanistan but we surely COULD have and SHOULD have made arrangements for properly looking after our allies, translators and supporters. Not abandoning them. Just as in Iraq - the lack of a proper strategy with clear aims for the post-military phase has been fatal.

Let's be clear: our Armed Forces have done the job we asked of them over the last two decades. Our forces families - including those based here in Norfolk - have made huge sacrifices. Al Qaeda is disrupted. Bin Laden is dead. We haven't had a major terrorist attack for several years.

But if we want Western values to be respected around the world, we need to stand beside those who stood with us.

I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement of the Afghan Citizen's Resettlement Scheme which will welcome up to 5,000 vulnerable Afghans to the UK this year, and 20,000 in the long-term, with priority being given to women and girls and other minorities who are most at risk. But, the Government needs to move FAST for this to be meaningful. And we surely need to agree a multi-lateral basis for preventing Afghanistan becoming again a training academy of anti-Western terrorist attacks. This week's events will have done little to help that and much to undermine our authority and credibility in the Middle East.

Serious questions need to be asked about the lessons from our 20 year operation in Afghanistan, the longer term implications for our foreign policy and how we regain a proper voice in our military alliance with the US. Those who gave their lives to disrupt the Al Qaeda and the Taliban axis and defend our shared values of law and order and basic human rights for the majority of Afghan citizens, deserve nothing less.

George Freeman MP