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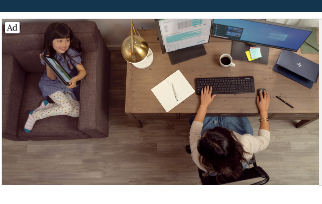
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VIDEO

US kept Britain in dark over deal that led Taliban back to power

The fate of the Afghan people was sealed when relations between western allies fell apart, giving the insurgency the upper hand. A year on, what exactly went so badly wrong?

President Biden, General Sir Nick Carter and Dominic Raab. The fall of Kabul led to a rush of Afghans trying to flee
OMAR HAIDARI/AP; UPI/ALAMY; PAULA BRONSTEIN/GETTY IMAGES

Christina Lamb, Kabul | Harry Yorke, Deputy Political Editor | Caroline Wheeler, Political Editor
Sunday August 14 2022, 12.01am BST, The Sunday Times

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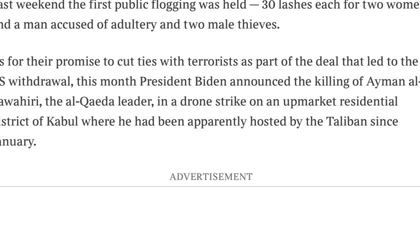
The white flag with its black Arabic lettering flies everywhere in Kabul. The symbol of the Taliban's triumph flutters on the American Humvees in which long-haired fighters cruise around sporting purloined Oakley sunglasses and M16 rifles; above Aimuddin's ice-cream shop in the bazaar; atop Wazir Akbar Khan hill.

One year after the takeover it is hard to absorb the fact that 20 years of international efforts to reinvent Afghanistan, at a cost of a trillion dollars and tens of thousands of western and Afghan lives lost, led only to the Taliban returning to power.

At the airport visitors are greeted by a placard proclaiming: "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan seeks peaceful and positive relations with the world." But early hopes that this is a more enlightened Taliban 2.0, changed from the brutal backwardness of the 1990s, have been exposed as wishful thinking. Afghanistan remains the only place on Earth where girls are banned from high school.


The fall of Kabul

The Ministry of Women's Affairs has been replaced by the Ministry for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Women must wear a hijab and need a male escort to travel beyond 72km (45 miles — no one knows the significance of that distance). Civil society activists live in fear. "It's as if we are in a box that is shrinking," said one. Yesterday a small protest by a few brave women in Kabul was broken up by shots fired overhead after just a few minutes. Last weekend the first public flogging was held — 30 lashes each for two women and a man accused of adultery and two male thieves.

As for their promise to cut ties with terrorists as part of the deal that led to the US withdrawal, this month President Biden announced the killing of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the al-Qaeda leader, in a drone strike on an upmarket residential district of Kabul where he had been apparently hosted by the Taliban since January.

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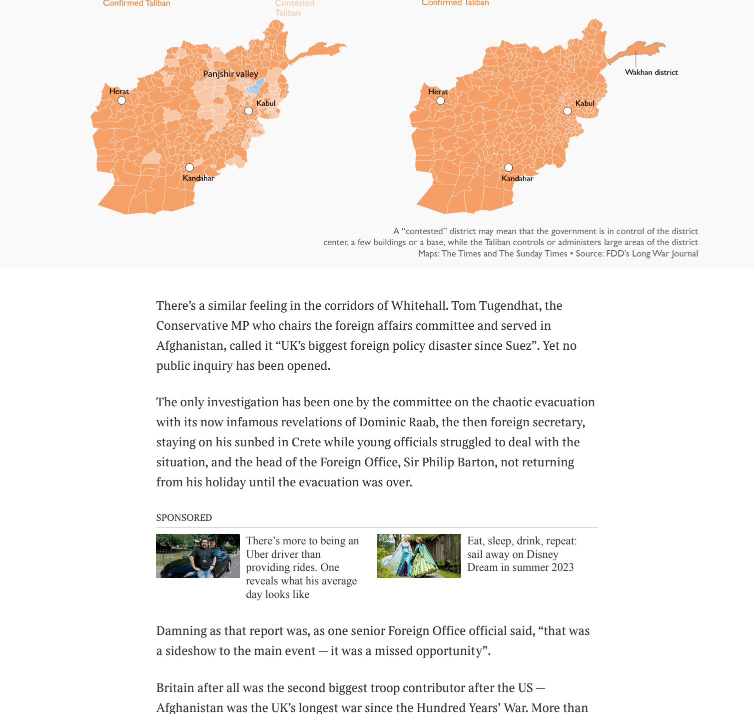
The Taliban will celebrate the anniversary of the biggest humiliation in Nato's history tomorrow with military parades and a big gathering in their heartland of Kandahar. For the West, it has become the war everyone wants to forget.

"If the White House could erase the word Afghanistan from the dictionary they would," said Saad Mohseni, owner of Tolo TV, Afghanistan's leading commercial channel.



A "contested" district may mean that the government is in control of the district center, a few buildings or a base, while the Taliban controls or administers large areas of the district
Maps: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: FDD's Long War Journal

There's a similar feeling in the corridors of Whitehall. Tom Tugendhat, the Conservative MP who chairs the foreign affairs committee and served in Afghanistan, called it "UK's biggest foreign policy disaster since Suez". Yet no public inquiry has been opened.

The only investigation has been one by the committee on the chaotic evacuation with its now infamous revelations of Dominic Raab, the then foreign secretary, staying on his sunbed in Crete while young officials struggled to deal with the situation, and the head of the Foreign Office, Sir Philip Barton, not returning from his holiday until the evacuation was over.

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Damning as that report was, as one senior Foreign Office official said, "that was a sideshow to the main event — it was a missed opportunity".

Britain after all was the second biggest troop contributor after the US — Afghanistan was the UK's longest war since the Hundred Years' War. More than £40bn was spent and 453 soldiers killed, thousands more left physically and emotionally scarred — some since taking their own lives.

In recent weeks as The Sunday Times started to ask questions about how it had gone so wrong and whether the UK had made any effort to influence its closest ally to rethink the devastating withdrawal, what emerged was a pattern of disengagement by Downing Street and the Foreign Office until it became clear the Taliban were taking over and a subsequent blame game between different government departments and between generals and politicians.

"Given the UK's long history in Afghanistan and all its investment over the last 20 years of blood and treasure it was strange to me that there wasn't the highest level of engagement on the withdrawal of the Biden administration," said Nader Nadery, who was one of Afghanistan's top negotiators in peace talks with the Taliban. "When President Obama was planning to withdraw in 2016 before leaving office, David Cameron and Angela Merkel both lobbied him and he ended up keeping more troops. This time round the UK didn't contribute at all to the decision-making, it was as if oh, the US is dealing with the Taliban so we can just switch off."

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So little was done to intervene as the precipitous pull-out of US troops saw one province after another fall to the Taliban amid the collapse of Nato's expensively created Afghan army that many Afghans now believe it was a deliberate plan by the West to hand over the country to them.

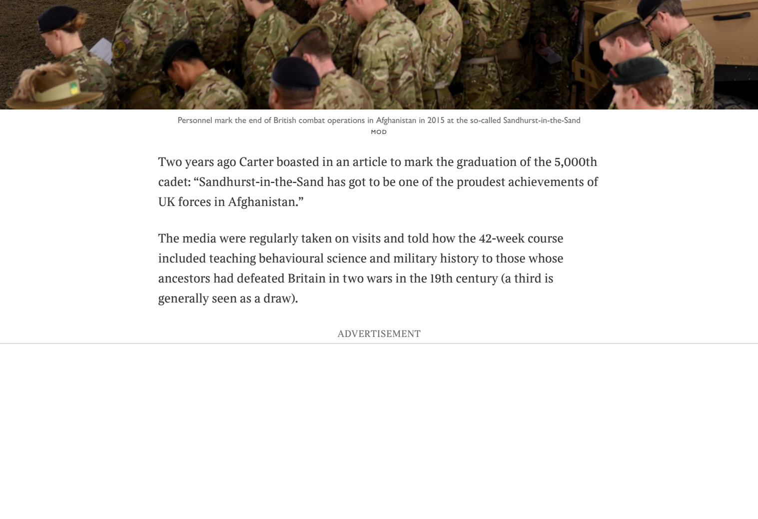
Long malaise

"What actually happened on 14-15 August was the final symptom in a very long malaise," said General Sir Nick Carter, who was Chief of the Defence Staff when Kabul fell and had previously done a number of tours in Afghanistan including as deputy commander of Nato forces from 2012-3.

"The fact there was never any coherent political strategy, never any understanding of local Afghan politics and how that played into the insurgency, the fact so many causes of the insurgency were never resolved - excessive corruption, poor governance, a police force not constructed in a way that would protect its population."

He added: "It would be very tactical to focus on what went wrong in July and August, but actually the reason why was we failed to build an Afghanistan that was sustainable, not least an army."

Among the many places where the Taliban flag now flies is over the UK military's flagship project in Afghanistan — the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, better known as Sandhurst-in-the-Sand, opened in a rocky valley west of Kabul in 2013 at a cost of £75 million.


Personnel mark the end of British combat operations in Afghanistan in 2015 at the so-called Sandhurst-in-the-Sand
MOD

Two years ago Carter boasted in an article to mark the graduation of the 5,000th cadet: "Sandhurst-in-the-Sand has got to be one of the proudest achievements of UK forces in Afghanistan."

The media were regularly taken on visits and told how the 42-week course included teaching behavioural science and military history to those whose ancestors had defeated Britain in two wars in the 19th century (a third is generally seen as a draw).

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Speaking at the first graduation of female cadets in 2017, the then armed forces minister Mark Lancaster, who had served in Afghanistan, said: "You are not alone because Britain will remain by your side. Over the past 16 years, UK forces have fought shona-by-shona [shoulder-to-shoulder] with you. Many of our people have paid the ultimate price."

Yet when it came to the crunch last year, those graduates found the British and other allies were nowhere to be seen. Now locked, the academy seems emblematic of the folly of the last 20 years.

For all that Sandhurst training, as US forces pulled out and the Taliban began moving on provincial capitals, one Afghan commander after another did deals rather than fight.

Taliban regroup

From the start it was never really clear what the international community was trying to achieve in Afghanistan.

When US-led troops entered in October 2001 in response to the 9/11 attack, they toppled the Taliban regime within 60 days. The main objective had been revenge and finding Osama bin Laden, though they missed the opportunity of capturing him in the Tora Bora mountains and by the end of the year he was over the border in Pakistan. No one then ever expected them to still be there 20 years on.

But the Soviet Union's long struggle to extricate itself from an invasion in 1979 stood as a warning. Andrey Avetisyan, the then Russian ambassador to Kabul, warned: "Afghanistan is very easy to get into but hard to get out."

The distraction of the war in Iraq, which began in 2003, allowed the Taliban to regroup across the border in Pakistan, which was supposed to be an ally of the West. Heavier fighting resumed.

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In 2006 Britain sent troops into Helmand for what was supposed to be a reconstruction project. The defence secretary, John Reid, said he hoped "not a single shot" would be fired. By the time they pulled out eight years later, 46 million bullets had been fired.

By 2011, Nato had 140,000 troops in Afghanistan armed with the most sophisticated weapons on Earth. The Taliban were only said to number 20,000.

"Know your enemy" is the saying derived from the ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Nato forces knew so little about the Taliban they often attributed local tribal clashes to them, had only one blurred photo of their leader Mullah Omar and believed he was alive for two years after his death.

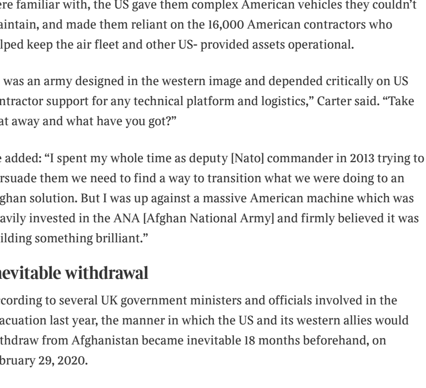
Year after year new Nato commanders would arrive, each planting a tree outside their headquarters in Kabul until the number of trees became an embarrassment, and each acting as if it was a new war and describing it as a "critical year".

Nato forces were fighting to prop up a corrupt government apparatus that most Afghans saw as the main problem in their lives. Across the border Pakistan was receiving billions of dollars from the US for its support while playing a double game, sheltering the Taliban and enabling Bin Laden to live in Abbottabad, next to a military academy.

In the end it was decided the way out was to build an Afghan army that could take on the Taliban and allow the foreigners to leave. It was an expensive exercise — planners settled on a magic number of 300,000 recruits and the US spent $83 billion building it up.

Carter says he recommended a force of just 60,000 and "repeatedly" warned what they were creating was "not sustainable".

Not only was the ethnic mix dangerously skewed away from the majority Pashtun tribe from which the Taliban is mostly drawn, but like a western army it was heavily dependent on "enablers" — particularly airstrikes that were crucial in fighting in remote regions and for emergency medical evacuations.



Military intelligence experts believe this is a conservative estimate and some posit it could be double the total expenditure
Chart: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: Ministry of Defence

Rather than providing the Afghans with refurbished Russian helicopters they were familiar with, the US gave them complex American vehicles they couldn't maintain, and made them reliant on the 16,000 American contractors who helped keep the air fleet and other US- provided assets operational.

"It was an army designed in the western image and depended critically on US contractor support for any technical platform and logistics," Carter said. "Take that away and what have you got?"

He added: "I spent my whole time as deputy [Nato] commander in 2013 trying to persuade them we need to find a way to transition what we were doing to an Afghan solution. But I was up against a massive American machine which was heavily invested in the ANA [Afghan National Army] and firmly believed it was building something brilliant."

Inevitable withdrawal

According to several UK government ministers and officials involved in the evacuation last year, the manner in which the US and its western allies would withdraw from Afghanistan became inevitable 18 months beforehand, on February 29, 2020.

That was the day that Donald Trump, the then US president, agreed to a deal with the Taliban in Doha, the capital of Qatar, where the group's political leaders had been allowed to operate in exile. The agreement brought to an end the 20-year conflict and stipulated fighting restrictions for the US and the Taliban, including the withdrawal of all Nato forces from Afghanistan in return for specific counter-terrorism guarantees.

It was an unusual deal, negotiated without the elected Afghan government at the table, effectively confirming that they were a "puppet regime", as the Taliban called them, yet obliging them to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners.

Trump agreed to initially reduce US forces from 13,000 to 8,600 within 135 days and the closure of its five military bases, before withdrawing fully by May 1, 2021.

The agreement was supported by Pakistan, China and Russia, and unanimously endorsed by the UN security council. In London, however, senior government sources say that Boris Johnson harboured serious reservations about the agreement, as did the defence secretary, Ben Wallace, and home secretary Priti Patel.

"The PM, the defence secretary and the home secretary were all pretty uncomfortable with the decision," a senior government source added. "I don't think anyone was particularly optimistic about the withdrawal. It was a very difficult period."

A senior figure in the Ministry of Defence said: "Fundamentally, I don't see any way that last summer could have turned out differently from the moment Doha was signed. The Taliban were running down the clock. They knew that if the US didn't go, all they needed to do was dial up the violence even marginally and the US would look impotent, because there was no way the US was going to recommit sufficient forces to really engage in combat operations."

At the time Wallace said he welcomed it as a "small but important step towards the chance for Afghans to live in peace". Later he would describe it very differently as "a rotten deal".

David Petraeus, the former head of the CIA and retired general who commanded US troops both in Iraq and Afghanistan, wrote last week in the Atlantic magazine: "[It] has to rank among the worst diplomatic agreements to which the US has ever been a party."

After Doha it became clear the Afghan security forces were on their own.

John F Sopko, America's Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), said this was key to the collapse. "The United States had created an Afghan Defence Force which it knew couldn't stand on its own without military and contractor support, and the agreement destroyed their morale."

According to a report by his agency, the US military reduced its support to the Afghan security forces "overnight" following the Doha agreement, "leaving them without a critically important force multiplier: US airstrikes."

In 2019 the US conducted 7,423 airstrikes, the most since 2009; in 2020 the number dropped to 1,631 airstrikes, of which almost half were in the two months prior to the US-Taliban agreement.

A former commander of Afghanistan's Joint Special Operations Command told SIGAR that "overnight ... 98 per cent of US airstrikes had ceased".

In Westminster Afghanistan was straining the UK-US special relationship and pitting ministers against military leaders.

Major General Chris Donahue, commander of the US Army 82nd Airborne Division, moments before he became the final American soldier to leave Afghanistan last August
ALAMY

A nadir came when Washington failed to share a series of classified annexes from the Doha agreement with the UK.

The secret documents, read by the Taliban but kept tightly guarded by the US, are said to have contained details on operational procedures and counter-terrorism co-operation.

The UK government is said to have been kept in the dark for months about their contents. With the politicians locked out Carter eventually requested a briefing with his American counterpart, General Mark Milley.

"There was a top-secret annex to the Doha agreement that took us months to be able to be talked through," one senior UK figure recalled. "Nick Carter ended up having to persuade General Milley to talk us through it. It was not the finest hour of the special relationship."

A senior minister added: "The whole thing was absolutely appalling. I'm afraid it also speaks very badly of our team in DC, our team who did not anticipate a Trump presidency, a team who didn't know anybody, who were sat sneering at the sidelines.

"It was military-to-military having to get the information out, which was just so extraordinary. It put massive strain on the operational aspect of the special relationship ... it also put a strain on the confidence and level of trust in the relationship."

No plan B

In Kabul, the government of President Ashraf Ghani hoped that when President Biden succeeded Trump in January last year he would revise the plan for a complete withdrawal. Biden's own top generals were advising against the timetable, pointing out it could have a fatal psychological impact on the Afghan forces.

General Frank McKenzie, then commander of US Central Command, wrote a number of letters over the course of the autumn and into spring last year, warning "if we withdraw our forces precipitously, collapse is likely to occur".

"My belief is we should have stayed," he said in a recent interview after retiring from the military. "My recommendation was that we keep a small presence where we could maintain a level of support for the Afghans. That was not the advice that was taken."

But Biden had been burnt by Afghanistan before. During the Obama administration they had pledged to bring the troops home only to be persuaded by Petraeus to expand their commitment instead. He was also exasperated by the corruption of the Afghan leadership, once storming out of a lunch with then President Karzai.

In London, early in Biden's presidency, the Ministry of Defence and Downing Street had engaged in lengthy discussions about the possibility of a change in stance, concluding eventually that the White House and the US military were not aligned.

In April 2021, Biden announced that the US would miss the May 1 deadline agreed with the Taliban for the full withdrawal of American forces. He committed to a new deadline of September 11, the 20th anniversary of the terror attacks carried out by al-Qaeda on the US. By this point, just 2,500 American troops were left in the country.

Carter and others were dismayed. "It was not the decision we hoped for," he said at the time. He and Wallace tried to rally other Nato allies such as the Italians and Germans but to little effect, not least as there was no appetite in Downing Street for such a move.

According to a senior Foreign Office official: "The defence secretary spoke to non-US allies at the time to see if there was any interest in a non-US coalition of the willing to stay but it went nowhere — the hard reality was that the Afghan military engagement was so US-led not just in troops but ancillary support that once you took that away it would have been incredibly difficult to stay."

Johnson's judgment was that Biden had been painted into a corner and that attempting to expend political capital in trying to persuade the US president to change course would prove fruitless. In bilateral conversations, he is said to have refrained from telling Biden he was "making a mistake" and instead urged him to use his own political judgment.

"His judgment on that was he didn't see much mileage in Biden rowing back," an ally of Johnson says now.

In Kabul, the Afghan government had no plan B.

Empty promise

By then the Afghan soldiers on the ground had realised they were on their own.

Lieutenant Fawad Kohsar, a British-trained special forces commander, was in the apple orchards of Wardak in March 2021 surrounded on three sides by Taliban forces when he understood what the British government's promise of standing "shoulder-to-shoulder" was worth.

"I called for an airstrike and they didn't come," he said. "I was lucky no one died but my deputy and three men were injured.

"I asked the battalion commander of SMW [special mission wing] 777 why aren't we getting airstrikes and he said one word — America. He said, 'We told them we need laser guided missiles' and they said, 'We can't supply anymore'."

It was not just the US troops that were leaving. So were the contractors who provided all the logistical support and maintenance for the Afghan forces.

"We built that army to run on contractor support," one former US commander told the SIGAR report. "Without it, it can't function. Game over ... when the contractors pulled out, it was like we pulled all the sticks out of the Jenga pile and expected it to stay up."

Carter agrees. "The Afghans didn't have anyone to maintain and operate their equipment once US contractors were removed," he said. "The problem was no one had thought what might happen next [after the withdrawal]. That was not so much a failure of intelligence but of genuinely understanding how fragile the edifice under President Ghani was."

That would soon become horribly clear.

Furious reaction

A new Taliban offensive in late spring and early summer saw the insurgents make significant territorial gains across rural Afghanistan. In three months, the Taliban more than tripled the number of districts under its control, from 73 to 233. By the beginning of August, it had also launched assaults on the provincial capitals, many of which surrendered almost immediately.

Despite the alarming collapse of Afghan forces during this period, Biden continued to insist that a Taliban takeover was not certain and on July 8 told reporters: "The Afghan troops have 300,000 well-equipped — as well-equipped as any army in the world — and an air force against something like 75,000 Taliban. It is not inevitable."

However, just hours beforehand in London, Carter had painted what he described as a "pretty grim" picture for the country and warned that it was now "plausible" that the state would collapse when international forces left.

His pessimism, insiders say now, was based on the fact that by this point a number of the UK's own intelligence assessments pointed to the possibility of the country — and the capital — falling rapidly under the Taliban's control.

"There were assessments in that direction [towards the possibility of the Afghan forces capitulating], yes," a government source confirmed.

This helps to explain why senior British military figures reacted with fury on August 31, following the collapse, when Dominic Raab, the then foreign secretary, claimed that the UK's "best central assessment" had suggested a "slow deterioration" was likely after Biden's September deadline, with Kabul not falling "for several months after that". However, that reading of the intelligence, one highly placed source said, was in fact the Ministry of Defence's own assessment — and why Raab chose to go on holiday on August 6.

Others in government at the time suggest that "optimism bias" among a generation of British military and national security leaders who had spent years working on Afghanistan led them to underestimate the gravity of the situation.

"They had invested so much of their careers into it, so you naturally lean towards the most likely course of action rather than the worst course of action," one senior figure involved in the discussions leading to the withdrawal said. "I think we didn't want to see what the intelligence was telling us."

This view is shared by others in Downing Street at the time, one of whom says now that both the UK and US military overstated the ability of the Afghan army to hold back the Taliban.

This, they said, was based on two key — and flawed — judgments: the first being that while there would be a slow decline of authority in the Afghan army, leading to the Taliban slowly taking over, it was highly unlikely the insurgents would "go straight for Kabul".

The second was that the Afghan army was well motivated, well resourced and well trained. "The one thing that was demonstrably untrue was that they were well motivated," they added.

Evacuation begins

By Friday August 13, the worst case scenario set out in the UK's intelligence assessments had come to pass. The Taliban had taken control of the Afghan city of Lashkar Gah, having already captured Kandahar and Herat, and now presided over two thirds of the country. US intelligence, it was reported, suggested Kabul could fall within 90 days.

What followed, one government political aide says now, was a "clusterf***" that would come to overshadow the entire British evacuation effort.

That morning Johnson decided to call an emergency Cobra meeting. Key ministers were assembled. They included Wallace and Patel, as well as Michael Gove, the then Cabinet Office minister in charge of cross-departmental co-ordination. Dominic Raab, the foreign secretary, dialled in remotely, having chosen to stay on holiday in Crete.

During the meeting ministers and officials are said to have agreed to a number of plans to start the UK evacuation. They included Operation Pitting, the MoD-led operation that had been devised months beforehand to evacuate UK nationals and eligible Afghans.

Operations over the coming days were also moved from the traditional Cobra meeting rooms in the Cabinet Office to a makeshift crisis centre based in the Number 10 cabinet room.

Emerging from the meeting, one insider said it had been clear that the plans as originally devised were no longer compatible with the rapidly deteriorating situation.

This realisation prompted Dan Rosenfield, then Johnson's chief of staff, to call Raab and Stephen Lovegrove, the national security adviser, to urge them to return home from holiday. Raab did not return to the UK until the early hours of Monday, a day after Kabul fell to the Taliban.

Lovegrove, to the frustration of senior figures in Number 10, took even longer, and is said to have arrived in Whitehall on either the Tuesday or Wednesday morning with a "sun tan". He did not appear to have been briefed or brought up to speed with events.

By Saturday morning, the Taliban were closing in on Kabul. It was at this point that officials in the Foreign Office reportedly received a new assessment from the US which suggested the risk to life for embassy staff had risen significantly. This did not align with the Ministry of Defence's own view based on soldiers on the ground — nor Downing Street's. "The reason we weren't overly concerned about that was because we said fine, show us the intelligence or strategic rationale was to suggest the Taliban would attack the airport," an insider said. "Their strategic objective is to get US and western forces out."

However, despite the MoD stating that the airport was "secure", by this point Raab had decided that the risk to the ambassador and the embassy staff was too great and was preparing to give the go-ahead for them to evacuate.

"Raab just wanted to close the British embassy and get his foreign office staff out and leave everybody else to die," a senior government source said. "He was saying I will get the ambassador out and empty the embassy."

This led to a tense stand-off between Raab and Rosenfield, who told the foreign secretary that under no circumstances should the ambassador, Laurie Bristow, be evacuated. Raab is said to have refused to accept his instruction and instead stated that he was only prepared to be overruled by the prime minister himself.

Johnson was then brought into the discussions, along with Wallace, Patel and Carter. The prime minister is said to have told Raab "consider yourself overruled, there is no way the ambassador is leaving".

At some point during this period, three sources have confirmed that Bristow, having seemingly been given the go-ahead to evacuate, boarded a plane in Kabul and was preparing to leave.

"It is certainly the case that Laurie Bristow had to be effectively told to get off the plane by the senior commander. He was actually on the plane leaving," one said.

The president flees

On Sunday August 15 the fate of Afghanistan was sealed when President Ghani, his wife and key advisers jumped into three Mi7 helicopters and fled, flying first to Uzbekistan then onto Abu Dhabi where they have been since.

Around the same time, Raab was observed sunbathing on a beach at the five-star Grecotel Amirandes Boutique hotel between 11.30am and 3.30pm by a British holidaymaker, who told reporters he was "very surprised" to see him "lounging around on the beach on the very day Kabul was falling into Taliban hands".

The individual said Raab was seen playing paddle ball, swimming, "running on the beach and washing the sand off his legs", adding: "There was one point when I saw him using his mobile phone. It looked like he was checking messages or texts as he was sitting on his lounger. But I didn't see him on the telephone talking."

The Foreign Office at the time rejected this characterisation and insisted that Raab had continued to take part in high-level meetings. Raab himself later attracted widespread ridicule when he dismissed the holidaymaker's claims on the grounds that the "sea was closed" on that day.

Initial reports said that Ghani's party emptied government coffers and left with as much as $169 million. But an investigation by SIGAR, which pointed out the helicopters were already overloaded with 30 people and interviewed more than 30 former Afghan officials, found the amount of cash flown out of Afghanistan with Ghani did not exceed $1 million "and may have been closer in value to $500,000".

The president had apparently panicked, hearing gunfire at the palace gates and perhaps recalling the horrible assassination of a predecessor, Mohammad Najibullah, when the Taliban first took over in 1996. They cut off his testicles, dragged him behind a Land Cruiser and hanged him from a lamppost.

WORLD

A different country

After a 20-year conflict, how did the country change prior to the Taliban takeover?

	2000	2020
Life expectancy	56 years	65 years
Primary school female enrolment	0%	83%
Fertility rate (children per woman)	7.5	4.3*
GDP per capita	$179**	$509
Unemployment	11.6%	11.7%
Opium production (hectares)	82,000	240,000

* Figure refers to 2019, the latest available
** Figure refers to 2002
Table: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: World Bank, United Nations

"We left to save Kabul from bloodshed," claims Hamdullah Mohib, the national security adviser, who fled with them. "If we had stayed there would have been fighting in the streets of Kabul and thousands would have been killed."

There is no evidence for this. It did not happen in other cities and senior Taliban have told The Sunday Times they were not expecting to take over so fast and had planned to stay outside the capital and negotiate. The former president Hamid Karzai was in touch with the Taliban and said they had asked him to mediate.

In Doha, where Nader Nadery had been trying to negotiate, he was devastated when he heard that Ghani had fled. "I knew that moment had set my country back at least 50 years," he said. "I knew because of our very centralised system things would crumble immediately and the Taliban take over. We had failed and failed miserably. The pain was excruciating."

"I blame both sides 50-50," he added. "Yes, the international community made mistakes but this was our country. The US had been talking about leaving for years yet there was a total lack of leadership to see what was coming and prepare."

He watches how interest has moved onto Ukraine and like many believes that Putin was emboldened to attack by the collapse of Nato in Afghanistan.

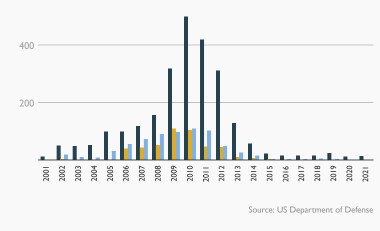
Mohib, the former national security adviser, believes that Afghanistan could have been saved if the international community had provided the Afghan airforce with laser-guided missiles enabling them to carry out airstrikes. But trust was so low US officials feared these might end up on sale across the border in Peshawar.

"I begged for more but they wouldn't even give us a few laser-guided missiles. They pulled the rug from under us for the sake of a few hundred million dollars," he said. "I blame the Americans 100 per cent for what happened. And when I see them spending billions giving weapons to Ukraine, I feel very angry."

WORLD

Fatalities

There have been 3,616 fatalities among western coalition soldiers in Afghanistan since 2001. 455 of these fatalities are of UK soldiers



Source: US Department of Defense

Carter says he too feels profoundly uneasy and sad at what happened. He has shed tears. "Not a day goes by when I don't remember putting body bags [of British soldiers] on the back of a plane in Afghanistan," he said. "I think there are some really profound lessons here to be learnt of the overall conduct of the campaign in Afghanistan from 2001 onwards — big mistakes were made and it's fundamental we learn from them."

To the Taliban the explanation is simple. "We have a Pashto saying what matters is not the weapon but the man behind," said Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanakzai, chief negotiator at Doha and now deputy foreign minister. "Afghans will always rally to drive out foreigners. And we had Allah on our side."

Christina Lamb is the author of Farewell Kabul: From Afghanistan to a More Dangerous World

Global politics United States Taliban

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Megan Agnew

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August 14 2022, 12.01am
Harry Yorke, Nicholas Hellen and Louise Eccles

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