

Australian Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs & Trade

Topic: Australia's Engagement in Afghanistan

I am an Afghan-Australian who migrated to Australia in the 1990s. I have called Australia home for almost 30 years. While Australia has been my home for most of my life, Afghanistan will always be my homeland and whatever events transpire in my homeland will remain of interest to myself and other Afghan-Australians. The policy decisions of successive Coalition and Labour governments in Afghanistan over the last two decades have triggered many emotions over the years. But what has transpired in the last few months in Afghanistan has triggered many scars, reminiscent of my family's escape from Afghanistan during the Afghanistan Civil War. I would like to take this opportunity to address Australia's engagement in Afghanistan over the last two decades in particular addressing the terms of reference that are the subject of this enquiry.

a) Australia's twenty-year military, diplomatic and development engagement in Afghanistan

i. Our success in achieving the Australian Government's stated objectives

The Howard Government in September 2001 justified military engagement in Afghanistan in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaeda. This justification was supported by the Australian Parliament. The objective in 2001 was to assist the United States (US) to ensure that Afghanistan was not used as a haven by Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations. By December 2001, this objective had been achieved.

Post 2001 saw the mission turn into the development of Afghanistan with the establishment of an inclusive Afghan Government and Afghan National Army that was capable of operating independently, taking control of security and control of its borders.

By mid 2003, the Taliban had regrouped and commenced an armed insurgency against international forces and the Afghan Government. There were other fringe groups who allied with the Taliban to fight against international forces and the Afghan Government. While the original objectives as set out in 2001 and those that developed in the twenty-year conflict were achieved, it all appears to have been temporary. The twenty – year conflict has seen the reemergence of the Taliban, the rise of Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK – affiliate of Islamic State of Iraq & Syria) and continual meddling of foreign powers in Afghanistan. There is no evidence that the Taliban pose a direct threat to Australia or our strategic interests in Central Asia, however the twenty-year conflict will re-invigorate other jihadist groups in the region who are engaging in insurgencies in the region e.g. Uzbekistan, China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran. The Australian Intelligence Community should work with regional intelligence agencies to monitor the situation, to determine the security implications of the Taliban takeover, including the ability of the Taliban regime to ensure that Afghanistan is not used as a haven by other terrorist organisations. The Taliban have publicly stated that they will not allow terrorist organisations operate in Afghanistan. The Australian Government has to treat the words of the Taliban regime with a grain of salt given their ties with organisations listed as "terrorist organisations" under the Criminal Code but also on what is being reported in

journalists within Afghanistan.

ii. ***the collapse of the Afghan Government and Afghan National Army, and the Taliban's resurgence and takeover of Kabul, following the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan***

As stated before, the Taliban resurgence began in mid 2003 and continued until the collapse of the Afghan Government in August 2021. There appears to be a causal link between the United States of America's military intervention in Iraq in the emergence of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Since 2011 there was been a gradual reduction of international military personnel in Afghanistan, with responsibility of security being handed over to the ANA and Afghan National Police (ANP).

Significant errors were made by the International community, primarily led by the United States of America (US) government from the beginning of the military intervention in October 2001. Such errors included the failure of the US to negotiate with the Taliban in October – December 2001 when a political solution for peace could have been discussed.

While there was relative peace in Afghanistan from December 2001 until mid 2003, it was always fragile. There was very little talk between the Afghan Government with regional powers to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table to discuss a political solution. While peace talks commenced between the US government and Taliban in Doha, the Afghan government was left out of the negotiations at that stage. This misstep by the US government created the image of legitimizing the Taliban and delegitimizing the Afghan Government. By the time the negotiations between the Taliban and US government had begun, the Taliban had the military momentum and were gaining control of more provinces in Afghanistan. By the time the Afghan Government and Taliban commenced peace talks in September 2020, the Taliban had gained control of 17 of 34 provinces.

There have been multiple reports by US intelligence that the Afghan police, army and government would collapse due to tribal factionalism and corruption. Since the twenty-year conflict began and the establishment of an internationally recognised government in Afghanistan, the Hamid Karzai government and Ashraf Ghani government have done very little to tackle the issue of corruption in the government. That is one of many factors that lead to local Afghans having a distrust of the central government and giving their support to the Taliban.

The Australian Government, while it had good intentions, when assisting the US in the twenty-year conflict, needs to take a more measured approach before making the difficult decisions to send our military personnel into a conflict zone. Australian government officials and the general public must understand that the conflict in Afghanistan is very complex and while terrorism hit our television sets on September 11 2001, the conflict within Afghanistan had begun much earlier than 2001.

As a nation, we needed our government representatives to have discussions with Afghan-Australians to understand the complexities of Afghanistan. While there were benefits in removing the Taliban from power, which empowered girls and women to attend school, universities and participate in the political process, at the same time we did very little to limit the influence of Afghan tribal warlords, who were put in positions of power in the new government. Some of these warlords then worked with the Taliban to delegitimize the Afghan government.

iii. *The cost of Australia's engagement*

It is estimated that the Australian government has spent close to \$9 billion as a result of its engagement in Afghanistan. While this a small amount compared to the US and UK, the Australian amount equates to \$500 million per year or \$1.37 million per day.

Given what has transpired in Afghanistan, the amount spent by the Australian government over the twenty – year conflict, raises questions back home as to what was really achieved in this conflict.

b) *the adequacy of Australia's preparation for withdrawal from Afghanistan*

Australia closed its embassy in Afghanistan in May 2021 (three months before the Taliban takeover) due to the evolving security situation within the nation. Australians in Afghanistan must always be protected by its government. It is inferred from the government's decision to close the Australian Embassy was based on reports of the growing instability in Afghanistan. The Australian Government could have done much more to repatriate Afghan translators and other personnel who assisted the ADF during the twenty-year conflict to be brought into Australia and provided humanitarian visas. It is unclear at this stage how many Australian citizens remain in Afghanistan who face persecution from the Taliban.

c) *how the Australian Government should respond to recent developments in Afghanistan in order to:*

i. *Protect Australia's national security*

Our Intelligence Community should work collaboratively with our allies in the region to monitor and take appropriate action against any group that poses a threat to Australian citizens and our national interest. While the Taliban are not recognised as a terrorist organisation under the Criminal Code, they maintain ties with terrorist organisations in the region. It is not evident at this point in time if ISK poses a significant risk to Australia's national security, but the developments in Afghanistan will continue in the months and years ahead. The Australia Government must be guarded in relation to collaborating with the Taliban regime with respect to monitoring the situation in Afghanistan. The mistake of ignoring Afghanistan like we did between 1992 – 2001 will have long term consequences for

Afghanistan and create regional instability that may harm Australia's national security.

ii. ***prevent or mitigate damage to Australia's international reputation, if necessary***

Reports from within Kabul, Afghanistan currently indicates that Afghans who do not support the Taliban feel abandoned by the international community, which includes Australia. These grievances are based on personal experiences and there is no indication that Australia played a key role in allowing the Taliban to come back into power.

The Australian Government must ensure that we provide as much non-military assistance to the Afghan people to restore some faith in the Afghan people that our nation will not abandon the people of Afghanistan.

The Australian Government has provided humanitarian aid to Afghanistan prior to the takeover by the Taliban regime. We must not abandon the Afghan people who have assisted us during the twenty-year conflict and ensure that we provide humanitarian aid, to mitigate the economic crisis that is likely to emerge from the Taliban takeover. It remains a major concern that the Australian Government has reduced humanitarian aid over the years to Afghanistan. We must work with international humanitarian organisations to provide aid to Afghans who will suffer greatly if we do not assist.

iii. ***extend immediate mental health support to Australian defence force personnel and veterans while the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide remains ongoing***

Over 26,000 ADF personnel served in military operations in Afghanistan between 2001 – 2014. Forty-one (41) ADF personnel were killed during that same time period. The Australian Government must ensure that ADF personnel and veterans have access to the appropriate mental health support to address the potential trauma they may be suffering from.

iv. ***protect Australian citizens, visa holders, and Afghan nationals who supported Australian forces, where they remain in Afghanistan***

The Australian Government must coordinate with regional countries to bring all Australian citizens who wish to leave Afghanistan back to Australia as soon as possible. Afghans who are current temporary visa holders in Australia must have their applications fast tracked and provided permanent visa status holders. Afghan nationals who remain in Afghanistan who are seeking refuge in Australia must have their applications fast tracked and repatriated to Australia as soon as possible. The Australian Government must increase its humanitarian intake from 3500 to at least 20,000. We must follow the examples set by the UK and Canada.