



Defence Committee

Chairman, Rt Hon Dr Julian Lewis MP

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Rt Hon Mark Lancaster TD MP
Minister of State for the Armed Forces
Ministry of Defence
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5th
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Dear Mark,

Locally Employed Civilians in Afghanistan

I write in respect of the recent Written Ministerial Statement on Locally Employed Civilians (LECs) in Afghanistan (HCWS1284). As you know, the Defence Committee has paid close attention to the question of how the UK Government should honour its debt of gratitude to LECs and we will continue to do so.

Despite the Committee's misgivings about the current intimidation scheme, the WMS outlines the Government's continuing support for the scheme. The WMS also states that "it remains the case that the level of intimidation faced has not so far been such that an individual has had to be relocated to the UK". However, I have recently received evidence, supplied by Daily Mail journalists, which suggests a worrying and worsening situation on the ground in Afghanistan and raises serious questions about how effectively the current scheme captures the risk that LECs face.

The threat faced by former LECs is reportedly growing in scale and in sophistication. For example, at least seven LECs, including one still working with UK Government officials, are said to have received multiple threats from IS via social media I understand that these threats were reported to both the UK and Afghan authorities.

I have also been informed of two instances of translators (one serving and one former LEC) being ambushed and attacked – one on the way home in Kabul, and the other as they were travelling to work – as well as of relatives of LECs being targeted, and in one case murdered, by the Taliban, in both cases due to the family member involved refusing to disclose the locations of the former LECs. I have also been told that at least three currently serving LECs in Kabul have received death threats. Unsurprisingly, LECs are particularly fearful of what may happen to them in the event that a peace deal can be reached between the Afghan Government and the Taliban.

In the WMS and in response to the Defence Committee's 2018 report *Lost in Translation? Afghan Interpreters and Other Locally Employed Civilians*, the Government indicated that it

continued to review the security situation in Afghanistan. The evidence I have received raises important questions about the effectiveness not only of the current intimidation scheme, but also the assessments of the security situation which it rests upon. I attach a copy of the the material supplied by the Daily Mail and ask that you examine it closely, assess the cases listed, and authorise a detailed review of the security situation on the ground in Afghanistan. I would also welcome an assurance of the safeguards that ISAF allies are seeking for LECs in Afghanistan in the context of the peace negotiations with the Taliban.

Yours sincerely,

Julian

LEC intimidation – evidence supplied by Daily Mail journalists

As ever, many of the former UK-military translators in Afghanistan who we have been in contact with over recent months have a vastly different view of whether the intimidation scheme is working and speak of areas of concern in a number of cases. They highlight claims of further intimidation and threats to both themselves and their families. There are at least two instances of translators (one current, one former) being ambushed and attacked, one as he returned home in Kabul, the other as he travelled to work.

We have been sent pictures of the father of one former translator badly injured in hospital after an attack allegedly by the Taliban which his son claims happened because the father refused to say where he was.

Another ex-translator claimed that his brother had been killed by the Taliban because he refused to reveal where his brother was.

Since November, two translators have told us they are paying people smugglers to try to come to Britain because their applications to the UK for sanctuary have been rejected and they are fearful of Taliban attack after repeated threats.

They complain that it is difficult to find safe work because of their time with the UK military and that many have to live apart from their families. This is to protect not only themselves, they say, but the families who have been threatened. They claim several threats have been delivered through village elders and via mosques. One said he had a threat letter left in his shoe after prayers at a mosque, another said a letter was given to his child to take home by a man on a motorbike.

At least three of those still working for the UK forces in Kabul (they are employed now through a company tasked by the UK) have received death threats.

Two ex-translators say they are in hiding in Pakistan (where a threat exists still) after death threats to their families. One claims he has been forced to change his appearance while another claims that because of on-going intimidation, he has not seen his family for three years having been forced abroad.

The interpreters point out they believe the threat now is greater than it has ever been because of the increased strength and influence of the Taliban – they are especially fearful of what may happen if a peace deal is reached – and in particular the presence of Islamic State in much of the country.

IS has carried out a series of attacks in and around Kabul as well as in several provinces.

In recent weeks this threat appears to have taken on a new dimension which has greatly alarmed the translators.

At least seven, including one still working with the British, have received threats appearing to be from IS delivered to their personal Facebook accounts through Facebook Messenger.

The first threat in January in Pashto mentioned specifically interpreters as well as those working for the Afghan authorities. It called on them to join IS, taking with them details of the tactics used by the Coalition and others. If this was not done, they would be attacked,

the threat said. These were reported to the UK and Afghan authorities. The translators blocked that particular access to their account.

In February, they say they were threatened through another account, again on Facebook Messenger. The message this time noted they had ignored previous warning and that they could now be attacked. Attached was a photograph of the dead body of an Afghan man, alleged to have worked for the Coalition or government, who had ignored the earlier warning. The man is said to have been killed in Jalalabad, Afghanistan's third city, and dumped on the streets.

Afghan authorities confirm that some former Coalition workers in provincial areas have been 'forced' because of threats to their families and IS is not dominant in their regions to transfer loyalties for their own safety. They suspect that this may be one source of the identities and contact details of the interpreters.

The translators say this represents a significant new threat and one that is only likely to grow.

The hard-won change of policy announced on June 11 last year by the Defence Secretary has so far seen no one come to the UK although we have interviewed one who has been told he and his family have been successful.

Gavin Williamson said specifically that the change would 'deliver for those who were at the greatest risk for the longest periods.' 'They served our nation with dazzling distinction...and we will do what is right to honour their extraordinary service,' he added.

Many of the translators who have contacted us are bitter and say these are 'empty, hollow words.' They believed, because some of them worked for several years at the height of the worst fighting, they would qualify to be considered for sanctuary. Several say they were forced to leave only because of death threats of which the British military was aware. However, they have been told they do not qualify because they were not made redundant.

This, they say, is a major flaw in the policy and denies several of those who took the 'greatest risks' the opportunity to escape what they see as the threat to their life and that of their families.

Several both in Afghanistan and Europe have highlighted what they say is a clear inconsistency in the scheme. They say that last summer a translator, who had never worked on the frontlines and told colleagues he had not been threatened, was resettled with his family in Birmingham. His former supervisor claimed the man cried when originally told he was going to the frontlines and pleaded not to be sent. He worked instead in Kabul. Translators question how he can qualify while those who have served for years on the frontlines and been threatened, do not.

Another translator, who still works with British forces, and claims to have received threats contrasts his own case with the one above. He claims to know 'well' the resettled translator. The interpreter still in Kabul has worked for a decade serving on the frontlines in Helmand Province for eight months - he was one of three during the infamous siege of Musa Qala when a small number of soldiers were trapped for some 50 days - and was removed from the frontlines only because his brother, who was also a translator, was shot dead by a Taliban sniper.

A second contrasting his position with that of the resettled translator, who he also knows, and questioning the workings of the intimidation policy is the UK's longest serving and most senior translator. He has worked for 17-years for the British and has received death threats. Three weeks after Mr Williamson announced the change in policy, he was attacked as he returned to his home in Kabul, bullets hitting his car. He jumped clear, one bullet hitting his seat. He was told the British officials who investigated 'accepted' he was in danger and the details of the attack but told him he did not qualify to come to the UK with his family. He was told to 'be careful' and to move within Kabul. He says he 'constantly fears' another attack.

The translator's case has been taken up by Lord Richards of Herstmonceux, who has said he should be allowed into the UK.

'What is our country becoming when a brave and loyal servant of the Forces is condemned to a life spent in fear, and yet those who seek economic advantage are allowed into our country in their tens of thousands each year,' he said.

The second shooting incident we have been able to confirm involving a former military translator happened in December last year. The translator had worked for the UK military between 2011-2014 although not on the frontlines, mostly at the hospital at Camp Bastion. He claims to have received three threats from the Taliban by text and one by letter all of which were reported to the LSU. His son, he claims, was also threatened. The family lives in Kabul.

After Bastion closed he went to work for the Halo Trust. On December 11, he was in one of their vehicles when it was ambushed by up to three gunmen. The vehicle was sprayed with bullets and the driver injured in the foot. The translator said the Taliban carried out the attack and he believes he was the target. Halo and the Afghan authorities confirm the attack. No other Halo vehicles other than this one carrying the translator have been attacked in this way, he said. The shooting was reported to the UK authorities.

Some translators have raised concerns about how their cases are assessed during the intimidation process. A case described to us by lawyers showed how a former translator had been constantly hounded by the Taliban despite stopping working for the British almost a decade ago. Initially, he is said to have been forced to flee his village and his home was taken over by the Taliban. He moved to a nearby city where he received further threats. His family were also given threatening messages for him. The LSU was informed and he was given security advice. He moved to Kabul where he was again threatened. When his wife died and he wanted to attend the funeral, his mother-in-law is said to have been given a warning he would be killed if he attended. The most recent threat letter to him in Kabul was last year. He says his life is 'ruined'. He can't work properly, he can't travel around the country, he can't visit his family. He has had many interviews with the LSU. His file shows that never once are the threats considered anything but 'credible' yet he says he does not qualify for help.

We have also heard this February from an interpreter who was based for four years at Camp Bastion. He worked for the CI Unit where his role, he said, was to question dozens of civilians and detainees from across Afghanistan each day. He said he had been recognised and threatened many times and is unable to safely leave Kabul. His family comes from Logar Province where he says he is now unable to go and insurgents have threatened his brother there.

He points out that because he is widely recognised, the threat to him is far greater than to many of the patrol interpreters who do qualify simply on the grounds they had been on the frontlines and were made redundant.

Ends