

## **Executive summary – Danish authorities’ joint evaluation of the evacuation from Afghanistan**

### *Purpose and organisation of the Danish evaluation*

On 27 August 2021, the Danish government mandated the Danish authorities to initiate a joint and thorough evaluation of the course of events leading up to the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021 as well as the evacuation from Afghanistan. The purpose of the joint evaluation was to describe the sequence of events and assess the planning and execution of the evacuation. Thus, the evaluation aims at identifying lessons learnt and at strengthening the Danish authorities’ readiness to handle future international crises with a possible need for evacuation.

The evaluation is a joint product of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Immigration and Integration. A temporary secretariat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has coordinated the working process. In addition, the evaluation included an external advisory group, consisting of relevant Danish experts and organisations outside of the Danish central administration. The advisory group contributed with external perspectives on the evaluation process to ensure relevant questions were included and thus, the best possible conditions for collecting useful lessons learnt.

The key focus of the Danish evaluation is the operative evacuation effort from Kabul’s airport after the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021 as well as the course of action and level of knowledge of Danish authorities during the preceding months. This includes the authorities’ interaction with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister of Defence, as well as the ministers’ involvement of Danish Parliament.

### *Background about the Danish evacuation from Kabul’s airport in August 2021*

The evacuation from Kabul’s airport was initiated on 15 August 2021. The evacuation was based on a political agreement, which was reached among political parties on 11 August 2021. The agreement provides basis for evacuation of threatened, locally hired staff working at the Danish embassy within the past two years. Subsequently, a political understanding reached on 14 August 2021 provides basis for evacuation of interpreters working for the Danish Defence in Afghanistan, locally hired staff working at the Danish embassy beyond the previous two years, locally hired EU- and NATO-staff as well as particularly vulnerable employees at NGOs and other Danish associates in Afghanistan. The coordination of efforts was embedded in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and involved a temporary stationing of a large number of personnel from Danish authorities in Kabul’s airport and Islamabad’s airport, to support an air-bridge for evacuation. During the 10 days of the evacuation, 16 Danish military evacuation flights were

carried out between Kabul and Islamabad and eight Danish chartered civilian flights were carried out between Islamabad and Copenhagen.

Despite chaotic circumstances, unpredictability, and difficult working conditions, Danish authorities succeeded in evacuating 988 persons during the operative evacuation out of Kabul's airport. In total, the Danish authorities managed to help more than 1,100 people out of Afghanistan in the period 15 August 2021 to 24 November 2021. The evacuated persons were mainly then and former locally hired Afghan employees at the Embassy in Kabul, local interpreters working with the Danish Defence in Afghanistan, locally hired Afghans at the UN, NATO, and the EU, particularly vulnerable employees at NGOs and other Danish associates in Afghanistan, as well as Danish citizens and persons with residence in Denmark. In addition, Denmark evacuated a number of persons from other countries, including the Nordic countries. Denmark completed the evacuation with no loss of life and no serious injury to persons involved.

### *Main findings of the evaluation*

The Taliban's rapid takeover of Kabul came as a surprise to most NATO countries, the Afghan government and even Taliban. The widespread underestimation of Kabul's fall by NATO countries – despite assessments of independent experts indicating that Kabul could fall within a shorter timeframe – might partially have been caused by international “group thinking” characterised as a collective absence of sufficient critical assessment of the knowledge and intelligence available. However, it is outside the scope of the Danish evaluation to analyse the causes of NATO countries' intelligence assessments, including possible “group thinking”. Instead, the evaluation assesses the consequences derived from the underestimation of the Taliban's rapid takeover of Kabul for the Danish decision-making process regarding the contingency planning and execution of the evacuation from Afghanistan during August 2021, with a special focus on lessons learnt.

As part of the evaluation, an independent Danish research company, Realize, has completed an interview survey focusing on the evacuated persons' impressions and assessments of the Danish evacuation. The evaluation's advisory group asked the authorities to include such an interview study. The survey has been based on questions answered by 62 evacuated persons, including locally hired Afghan staff at the Embassy, interpreters working for Danish Defence as well as Danish citizens and persons with residence in Denmark. Overall, the evacuated persons expressed satisfaction with the efforts of the Danish authorities, including the close contact during the evacuation. The survey is available [here](#) (in Danish). Conclusions from the survey study are reflected throughout the evaluation report.

The evaluation report consists of two main elements: *Firstly*, a timeline covering the sequence of events, including extracts from the Danish intelligence services' assessments of the development in Afghanistan. A large part of these assessments are derived from classified material declassified for this evaluation. *Secondly*, an assessment of the course of events with a focus on analysis and lessons learnt in the form of 36 sub-conclusions. A summary of the most essential findings will follow below.

Given that this is a joint evaluation of the Danish authorities, the evaluation will generally not include specific initiatives to follow-up on the lessons learnt. Subsequently, the individual Danish ministries or agencies will have to assess the need for specific follow-up measures based on the essential findings. In some cases, this will require political involvement, for example if additional financing is required. However, several lessons learnt from the Afghanistan evacuation have already been implemented in Danish crisis management. This includes contingency planning for low risk/high impact-scenarios in selected countries.

In parallel to the joint evaluation of the Danish authorities, a majority of the Danish Parliament agreed on 3 December 2022 to initiate an impartial historical analysis on Denmark's military and civil engagements in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. The Danish Institute for International Studies has been requested to undertake the task, which will be initiated on 1 April 2022. The report is expected to be released in two years. The Danish Institute for International Studies will organise several public seminars on key topics during the working process with the analysis prior to the release of the report.

## **Summary of assessments and lessons learnt of the evaluation**

### *The operative effort of the Danish authorities during the evacuation from Kabul's Airport*

The evaluation concludes that two factors in particular were crucial for the fast and effective initiation of the Danish evacuation operation from Kabul's airport under very difficult working conditions. Firstly, an early effort of the Danish Defence in Denmark and deployment of the Defence's capacities in the neighbouring region. Secondly, the posting of experienced personnel from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and agencies underlying the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Justice to Kabul's airport and Islamabad's airport. Teamwork and flexibility as well as an action-oriented approach characterised the operation. In addition, there was a focus on establishing a high level of preparedness in a situation characterised by unclear and incomplete information.

In addition, the evaluation concludes that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, partly due to the chaotic conditions in Kabul's airport, did not have the opportunity to sufficiently quality assure or validate the personal information of all evacuees ahead of sending the information to the Danish Security and Intelligence Service in preparation for the security screening. This affected

the efficiency and quality of the screening. Thus, the evaluation concludes that the Danish authorities, for future purposes, should establish a clear division of responsibilities in relation to security screening. Furthermore, the authorities should develop guidelines and procedures to ensure faster disclosure by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of valid and relevant information to other relevant Danish ministries and agencies.

### *The basis of knowledge and intelligence*

The evaluation concludes that the Danish Defence Intelligence Service underestimated how quickly the Taliban's takeover of Kabul would take place. Consequently, the Danish Defence Intelligence Service should in future communicate more clearly about uncertainties in the Service's assessments. In addition, the Service should apply strengthened analytical and methodological testing of the premises underlying these assessments. The Danish Defence Intelligence Service also identified a need for an even deeper and earlier insight into the receiver's specific needs for intelligence, including the underlying context, through targeted dialogue with other Danish authorities. Moreover, the dialogue between Danish authorities and the Danish Defence Intelligence Service should include a focus on the risk of international "group thinking".

Furthermore, the evaluation concludes that the Danish Centre for Terror Analysis, which is anchored in the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), will continue to assess the security of locally hired embassy staff as part of their threat assessments. These assessments will apply in cases where it is specifically relevant to assess staff safety in combination with an altogether exceptional country context, where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deems it necessary to consider contingency planning for the evacuation of locally hired embassy staff.

### *Contingency planning*

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs based its contingency planning on the main scenario of the Danish Defence Intelligence Service. However, the Ministry did not challenge the terms of the scenario, including a possible shorter timeframe for a collapse. Thus, the evaluation concludes that in future, contingency planning for evacuation should also include low risk/high impact-scenarios in selected countries.

Furthermore, the evaluation concludes that it would have been beneficial if the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in June 2021 – in parallel with testing in practice, the adequacy of the Interpreters' Agreement from 2013, which contains security measures for interpreters and locally hired embassy staff working for Denmark who are directly imperilled as a result of having assisted the Danish effort in Afghanistan, in the new security setting – had recommended that the Minister for Foreign Affairs extraordinarily initiate specific contingency planning for the evacuation of locally hired embassy staff. This applies despite the fact that this particular employee group is not

part of the procedure for contingency planning for evacuation according to the Ministry's regular global practice and despite the Danish Defence Intelligence Service assessment that it was less likely that Kabul would fall within 2021. Contingency planning for evacuation of this employee group would have prepared the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Danish authorities better for the situation that occurred in August 2021, where it became relevant to decide politically to evacuate the locally hired embassy staff as a group with short notice.

In general, the evaluation does not find a need to change the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' conduct to duty of care towards locally hired embassy staff. Consequently, the rapport does not find a need to add this employee group to the contingency planning for evacuation. Nevertheless, the evaluation concludes that there is a need for establishing clear criteria for when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with other Danish authorities should initiate contingency planning for evacuation when extraordinary circumstances apply. This includes scenarios where Danish authorities assess that locally hired embassy staff are under threat due to their work at a Danish Embassy. In such exceptional situations, contingency planning for evacuation would provide a solid basis for a possible subsequent political decision to evacuate locally hired embassy staff to a neighbouring country in the region or – if this is not possible – to Denmark. Equivalently, the Ministry of Defence can initiate contingency planning for the evacuation of, for example, interpreters or other local individuals who have supported the Danish military engagement.

#### *Comparison with other countries*

The evaluation concludes that Denmark – with the Interpreters' Agreement from 2013 – had an instrument to manage cases of intimidation of locally hired embassy staff and interpreters in place during the spring of 2021. The instrument was comparable to or better than instruments available in likeminded countries. Even though some countries initiated early contingency planning for evacuation that included locally hired embassy staff, Denmark was the first country among the Nordic-Plus countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, and Denmark) to complete evacuation of the locally hired embassy staff from Afghanistan.

#### *Crises contingency and training exercises*

The evaluation concludes that in future evacuation operations, Denmark should prepare for situations where multilateral management or coordination is absent in the critical early stages of an evacuation. To organise an even stronger collective crisis management and awareness within Danish authorities, regular training exercises of larger crisis scenarios abroad should be implemented. Such training exercises should include non-state actors.

Please see below for a full list of the 36 sub-conclusions.