

OPINION

Harjit Sajjan had the wrong priorities in Afghanistan

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Harjit Sajjan, Canada's Minister of Emergency Preparedness, speaks during the Centennial Gala hosted by the Sikh Foundation of Canada at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, on May 4.

COLE BURSTON/REUTERS

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The Sikhs in Afghanistan were proud of their resilience. Adhering to a strict code of conduct and a distinct identity within the Sikh community, their role had historically been that of protectors of the Sikh faith and community in a country that didn't always welcome them.

A 200,000-strong presence in Afghanistan in the 1980s, by August 2021, the last remaining 300 followers had reason to be fearful, with the Taliban rapidly regaining territory and only days away from claiming the capital, Kabul, where their only place of worship or gurdwara, remained. Yet they were reportedly refusing offers of asylum.

The widely read and respected [Economic Times of India](#) reported during that chaotic time that the president of The Indian Forum, Puneet Singh Chandhok, was frustrated by the Afghan Sikhs because "India is facilitating these people at the highest level, yet they have missed flights twice in order to travel to the

U.S. or Canada.” The article said they believed there were fewer job opportunities in India, so they were holding out for Canada.

I had a unique understanding at that time of how rare offers of asylum were. Having retired from a career in journalism, I was volunteering with a group of desperate veterans and refugee advocates in Canada, trying to locate and move Afghans who had served as interpreters for the Canadian Armed Forces during the long war against the Taliban. Under public pressure and about to launch its re-election campaign, the Trudeau government created an immigration pathway for the translators and eventually others, but the Afghans had to navigate an onerous and deeply bureaucratic process along with dangerous escape routes on their own to be eligible to come to Canada. Our ad hoc group of volunteers helped raise money in Canada to establish safe houses in Kabul, feed the desperate masses, help with their immigration paperwork, and pay locals to smuggle the most threatened families to Pakistan. I was in charge of keeping their plight in the Canadian media, which had no reporters in Afghanistan at the time. Creating a network of local Afghans with iPhones and WhatsApp, I would forward what they were experiencing and filming to former colleagues at all of the Canadian television networks and national newspapers to decide what to report.

We had heard from various sources that the Canadian military mission to assist in the evacuation of Canadians and interpreters had already lost precious time when the giant and ageing Hercules and C-17 Globemaster aircraft they were using had mechanical problems. Once on the ground at Karzai International Airport, little improved. Canada, uniquely among its allies, had abandoned its embassy in Kabul, so there were no vehicles arranged, no negotiations under way for access to the airport, and no local support for the soldiers. They had a lot to establish and little time. But to our frustration, repeated attempts to connect with the Canadian military operations in Kabul to offer logistic support and share the status of our approved Afghan asylum-seekers were rebuffed. We were provided a liaison officer in Ottawa who would take our information, but offered little in return.

Now we know more. According to new reporting by The Globe and Mail, once the special forces operators had finally figured out ways of moving through Kabul and negotiated passage onto the airfield, there were only a precious few days to locate and rescue Canadians and Afghans who had worked for their benefit. And within hours, according to The Globe, part of the mission changed to attempt to rescue Afghanistan’s Sikhs.

Even though the defence minister at the time, Harjit Sajjan, [told a parliamentary committee](#) in April 2023 that he really didn't have time to check his e-mails during the evacuation period, he admitted to The Globe he was active on behalf of the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation in Alberta. It is a Sikh humanitarian organization named for someone Mr. Sajjan knew very well, a popular Alberta politician tragically hit by a tractor trailer in 2015 while stopping to aid a motorist on a highway. The foundation, created by Mr. Bhullar's wife, children and parents, was willing to privately sponsor the Afghan Sikhs for immigration to Canada.

"I relayed whatever information [the foundation] provided about the location and status of these Sikhs to the chain of command for it to use as it saw fit, in line with its operational plan on the ground in Afghanistan," Mr. Sajjan [explained](#).

"I did not direct the CAF to undertake a rescue mission at a gurdwara, or anywhere else."

Yet at the time, he was not simply an adviser to the chain of command, nor just anyone advocating for friends. Mr. Sajjan sat at the very top of the command structure, and was texting co-ordinates in Kabul to senior members of the Canadian Armed Forces, and following up on progress. How would any soldier interpret that? Our armed forces are taught to disobey orders that are manifestly illegal. Mr. Sajjan's information-sharing does not appear to reach that threshold. But from what I have come to understand about military culture, when the upper echelons of the chain of command become curious about something, the lower echelons become fascinated by it. Suggestions are taken as direct orders. Mr. Sajjan had previously served as a lieutenant-colonel, so he must have known that culture too.

Regardless of whether it was an order, an instruction, or merely a suggestion, it was suddenly acted on. The special forces operators were dispatched to the co-ordinates Mr. Sajjan provided deep in Kabul, but the Sikhs scattered before they got there for fear of being found by Taliban. So, according to The Globe's sources, the special forces spent their last 24 hours solely trying to get the Sikhs out. All the while, the evacuation window dwindled. Eligible Afghans stood outside the airport, [wearing red](#) as instructed by immigration and foreign affairs officials, Canadian paperwork in hand. Waiting.

Word of the unsuccessful Sikh mission spread like wildfire in the usually zip-lipped military community. Many other journalists heard about it too, but without sources with firsthand knowledge being willing to talk, it went unreported for years until The Globe found several willing to confirm what happened. Mr. Sajjan has hinted that racism is playing a role in how this is being cast. The other pertinent questions are why special forces were never sent to our much closer safehouses, where hundreds of eligible Afghans with a proven connection to Canada were easily located and waiting, or whether any of the 1,250 Canadian citizens and permanent residents left behind when the evacuations abruptly ended on Aug. 26, 2021, would have made it to safety sooner if many hours weren't allocated to Mr. Sajjan's mission.

A month after our special forces left Kabul, the financial support for safe houses collapsed. It took millions of dollars of donations by individuals and corporations in Canada to support them, and that could not be sustained. Afghans in our care scattered and hid. Some escaped on their own to neighbouring countries with Canadian veteran and NGO help.

The Sikhs of Afghanistan, however, had better options. Realizing India was their only hope of refuge, they finally accepted its government's help and fled there. Then, less than a year after the fall of Kabul, Canada's new immigration minister Sean Fraser [approved a special fast-track process](#) for Afghan Sikhs in India to finally come to Canada. The Bhullar Foundation sponsored them, and many have been living in Alberta for years.

The Afghans who worked alongside our soldiers during the war weren't offered those options, or perhaps didn't have enough friends in high places. While some have made it here and settled, many others remain in Afghanistan or neighbouring countries, still waiting to hear if Canada will answer their plea.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-harjit-sajjan-had-the-wrong-priorities-in-afghanistan/>

Kevin, ever the news anchor and now player in world diplomatic affairs, politely hangs Mr. Sajjan with his own petard, his disingenuous posturing. If Justin & Chrystia have any principles or willpower left as Liberal potentates, Mr. Sajjan needs to be shown the plank to walk or be thrown overboard. But of course ... the Liberals are too dependent on the Punjabi vote. While insisting he is fit to continue on as Prime Minister and lead the Liberals to victory in the next federal election, he can't even summon the resolve to flif pancakes again at the Calgary Stampede. Because it was winter, your father took his long walk in the snow. Take yours on Long Beach, Justin. TJB