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DEEP Dive Vol. 1

Edited by:

Piotr Gawliczek (Editor in chief)
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Jakub Niewelt
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All transcripts have been edited for clarity.

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Foreword

Dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to present to you the book NATO DEEP Dive Vol. 1, which explores a wide range of subjects covering international security and defence, counterterrorism, and current geopolitical events. The primary purpose of this series is to inform and enhance understanding of the global challenges addressed within the NATO Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP).

The content of this book is derived from transcripts of DEEP Dive podcasts led by Dr. Sajjan Gohel and his research team, Marcus Andreopoulos and Victoria Jones. The transcripts are from DEEP Dive episodes released between November 2021 and July 2022. All the podcasts are available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts.

I am convinced that NATO DEEP Dive Vol. 1 will be of great interest to professionals, academics, and students of defence and international relations. It is also an important resource for those who wish to understand the significance of counterterrorism matters within the broader security environment. I would like to express my gratitude to the editors and all those involved in the development of this book for their invaluable support.

I would like to mention that DEEP Dive seeks to engage and draw on the experiences of academics, journalists, and policy practitioners. The goal is also to learn more about the interviewees to provide a unique perspective on what has shaped their careers, as well as to discuss their current and future research.

Mariusz Solis

NATO DEEP Coordinator

July 2024

Sajjan Gohel - Global Threats Advisory Group

Prof. Sajjan M. Gohel has a multi-disciplinary background in global security issues and professional military education (PME). His research looks at the ideology that leads to international terrorism, the tactics and strategies of trans-national political violence, border security, the role of new media and the agendas of hostile state actors. Sajjan has conducted on-the ground primary research in over 25 countries.

As International Security Director for the London-based Asia-Pacific Foundation, Sajjan monitors emerging geopolitical threats, whilst acting in a consultancy role for law enforcement agencies, foreign and defence ministries, multilateral organizations, and the global media.

Sajjan is a Visiting Teacher at the London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE). He is also the Editor for NATO's Counter-Terrorism Reference Curriculum (CTRC) combining the expertise of academia, law enforcement, and defence practitioners. As an instructor and trainer for NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP), Sajjan serves as the Chairman for NATO DEEP's Global Threats Advisory Group (GTAG) and is the host of the NATO podcast series, DEEP Dive. Sajjan is also an advisor to the Metropolitan Police's Counter-Terrorism Advisory Network (CTAN).

Sajjan's research is case-study driven and he has fieldwork experience in 23 countries. Sajjan has provided expert witness testimony to political standing committees on the evolving challenges in Ukraine, Afghanistan-Pakistan, Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa. Sajjan is the author of the upcoming book, "Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist: The Life and Legacy of Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri" which was published by Oxford University Press in the Fall of 2023.

Episode 1 – Tim Marshall and The Dangerous Decade, November 2021

Key Reflections

- **The current period is 'The Dangerous Decade' of which the most consequential developments will stem from the Indo-Pacific region.**
- **The seas and shipping lanes are the arteries to history, geography and geopolitics and are so intrinsic to our lives.**
- **The Quad is growing in importance and will likely become a multilateral institution.**
- **China wants to build its military to the capacity of being able to take Taiwan before defence agreements and alliances grow between Western and Indo-Pacific nations.**
- **Afghanistan will serve as a platform for terrorism. The Taliban have not changed and will support terrorist groups and suppress the rights of women.**
- **China's relationship with Pakistan and Afghanistan is part of its geo-strategic outlook.**

SG - Dr. Sajjan Gohel

TM - Tim Marshall

SG: Hello, and welcome to DEEP Dive, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. On today's episode, we interview critically acclaimed author, journalist and practitioner Tim Marshall, whose books include *Worth Dying For: The Power and Politics of Flags*, as well as *The Power of Geography* and *Prisoners of Geography*. Tim, welcome to the very first episode of DEEP Dive.

TM: Thanks, and what an honour to be the first!

SG: We're very privileged to have you. One thing that I found fascinating about your books is the methodology that was used. Why did you pick on specific countries and regions when it came to your research?

TM: In *Prisoners of Geography*, which was the first of the two, it was simply to try to get the big players in: the United States, India, China, Russia, etc. And then Latin America as a continent and Africa as a continent—well and Europe—because I just wanted to lay out that these are the big broad brush geographic factors of these big players. And this is how that has partially—and only partially—determined what has happened in those regions and then bring it up today and say, building on that and building on that history. When you see these players through that lens, it's A) easier to understand why they're doing what they're doing at the moment and B) easier to make an educated guess—and that's what it is about the future, always—about how they will behave in the future. And it seemed to strike a chord. So in *The Power of Geography*, I've gone through the same formula but just with perhaps second-tier nations if you like, like Ethiopia and Iran.

SG: Yes, I noticed that in *The Power of Geography*, you focused a lot on countries that have coastlines. Is that deliberate?

TM: Yes, insofar as, you know, I think about 85% of cargo still moves by water. And I do think that the action is still at sea. Very good example of course is the South China Sea at the moment. That's what pushes and pulls so much. I mean, if China was busy being exceptionally forward looking, say in Mongolia, it really wouldn't capture the world's attention. But when it's busy pushing out into the South China Sea and beyond and into the international sea lanes, that's what catches our attention. Sorry, briefly Sajjan, going back to your first question about the sort of methodology, I do start from a country or a region or a conflict's geography, strip it down—in which direction do these rivers flow? I mean, it seems perhaps obvious, almost banal, but flowing—no pun intended—from which direction the rivers flow, you can make a number of educated guesses about what would happen. Direction of trade and travel. Ditto let's say mountain ranges and many other factors. And when you frame something like that, and then you go into the history, and then finally you get to the current affairs, and you build that on, I just think that that is a simple but effective formula.

SG: Very effective. In fact, what I would say, from my perspective, is that you kind of lay out the fact that the seas are the arteries to history, to geography and geopolitics, which is so intrinsic and important to our world today.

TM: Yeah, I'm not sure people realize still even to this day just how important the sea lanes are. I mean they don't get that much attention, and it's not to underestimate inland stuff obviously, the Eurasian Heartland being a very good example. But it's just that most countries cannot really survive without the sea lanes. America is the only one really. America is the only power that could theoretically be self-sufficient, given what it's got within its borders. Pretty much everybody else relies on trade and obviously, to a great extent, on seaborne trade.

SG: Why do you feel that there's not enough attention on the sea lanes? Because what you say is very true, that they don't necessarily get the attention they should—not just so much trade, but also you've got now defence related issues impacting.

TM: Well I think it is coming back into fashion, just as geography is coming back into fashion, but I think the concept of geopolitics went out of fashion, especially after World War Two, because the Nazis had a version of it. And the determinism factor of it. And so, it became unfashionable. Also, I do think there's a lot of people that don't like to think that certain things are deterministic—that we're not actually in a prison, whereas I argue, in a loose sense, we are in a geographic prison; you can bend those bars and try and escape but you start from a prison of what you can and cannot do. So it became unfashionable.

And the whole idea of sea power became unfashionable, and then technology really kicked in. And people thought that technology would overcome geography, whereas all it does is change where you need to—which bits of geography you need to focus on. A cruise missile, people said, "Ah, well, that gets rid of geography." Well, it doesn't, because it has to be launched from somewhere, and it has to land somewhere, and it has to travel a certain distance between x and y. And there are other things to that. So you put all that together, and it just wasn't part of people's thinking. But I think increasingly, it is. And this year, we have a very good example, which is that people are seriously waking up to what's going on in the South China Sea. And that is so much because of geography.

Two quick things: one, the first island chain that sits in front of China, which China sees as almost a wall blocking it from its destiny. If you take Taiwan out of that wall, there is a huge gap in it, and the whole concept of containment falls apart. And secondly, given that there are these competing parts of the South China Sea where Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, China all claim—sometimes overlapping claims—and right through this, other major international sea lanes of the world, which you want to be kept open and free. You don't want them controlled by one country, particularly if it's a one-party state dictatorship.

SG: Where do you see the situation heading in the South China Sea vis a vis China?

TM: But it doesn't have to be war, does it? I mean, everyone's currently talking about war and in fact, China and Taiwan are busy having a little war of words, but they've had those in the past.

It is a dangerous decade, because—I've started halfway through, let me start at the beginning.

We talked about the first island chain, talked about China wanting to break out of it. Then enters the Quad—which your audience will know what that is—which has been growing in importance year on year for the past five years, culminating this year in the leaders of the four Quad countries actually meeting in person.

You have to see the Aukus deal in that frame because it complements the Quad. And then you look at the increasing defence ties between Japan and Australia, and then India and Australia, on bilateral defence ties. Japan and Vietnam are increasingly warming to each other.

So you put all that together, and then China—pretty much only over the past two or three years—has suddenly realized it might run out of time. By which I mean, it might run out of time to build its military to the capacity of being able to take Taiwan before these burgeoning defence agreements, almost alliance—well, they are an alliance in a way—kick in and actually make them so strong that China wouldn't gamble, because trying to get Taiwan is a gamble. And the stronger and more robust the defence against that, the greater the gamble it is. So to come to the end of that answer, that's what I mean about "a dangerous decade," because the Aukus deal doesn't kick in for about ten years because of the subs being built. The defence ties are still relatively loose, and they are getting—they believe—closer to being militarily able to pull off an incredibly difficult military operation. which is an amphibious assault across 100 miles of rough sea.

SG: There are so many important dynamics that you've brought in. Let's see if I can try and unpack some of them.

TM: That was a very long answer, forgive me.

SG: But a very important answer. Do you feel that for China, this is now, in some ways, a race against time? That they want to have the capability—doesn't mean they necessarily will execute

it—but they want the capability of potentially having a military option when it comes to Taiwan, and for them, it's a race against time because of the fact that there is this Quad now that's emerging and gaining ground?

TM: Yeah, and you probably noticed over the past few days, some US Marines showed up in Taiwan. Now, they're only there to train, they're not about to base themselves there. There's a US Marine base near Darwin in Australia—that's fine, the Chinese can live with that; they would not be able to live with a US Marine base in Taiwan. So they're just there to train, but it just gives you the sign of the direction of travel, and that strategic ambiguity that the United States has— "would it, wouldn't it" come to the defence of Taiwan now, in the wording of the understanding. A lot of it depends on whether Taiwan declares independence. In that case, the United States says it probably wouldn't come to Taiwan's assistance. In the event of an invasion, without a declaration of independence first by Taiwan, the wording is that they probably would. So, the Chinese as and when they think they are militarily ready and the experts now talk about 2025 to 2027, at that point, they have that massive, massive decision to make: do we risk this? So you're risking a number of things.

Two of the main things: you're risking losing. Well, first of all, you're risking, will states—and people always say, "Will the Americans come to the rescue?" It's not as simple as that—it's "Will the Americans and the Japanese and the Australians and in fact, the Royal Dutch Navy—which you probably noticed was involved in the recent naval drills off of Japan—and the Canadian Navy? Are they really all going to ride to the rescue? Because if they are, the Chinese view of whether they can or can't succeed in this— you're seriously sowing doubt in their minds. And if you've done that, they then game out. If they've gamed out, we can do it in a breeze, it's fine. If they game out that "We're not sure, we might lose," they then game out, "Well, what are the ramifications of that? Which are not only massive economic hits to the global economy, which of course hit them extremely hard, but also, given that it's a cause Célèbre throughout China to regain this territory back to the motherland. If you fight and lose lots of young men, young Chinese soldiers, and you fail, the Chinese Communist Party is not necessarily destined to forever be in charge—you actually risk betting the farm and losing a lot.

SG: So we're talking about a very high risk scenario developing over the next few years.

TM: Yeah, I mean some of the analysts in the American military call it "the dangerous decade." And I think that's fair—well I mean, every decade's dangerous isn't it? You know, there's nothing new under the sun. This is why I don't lose sleep about the state of world affairs because it was ever lost, but the sky hasn't fallen yet, nor do I think it will. But in each decade, you look at which are the particular flashpoints, and there was a time where people thought India-Pakistan needed—and it did—acute attention. North Korea and South Korea, that rears its head again. But in this decade, the biggest potential flashpoint—and possibly the most dangerous one—is in the South China Sea.

SG: And would it be fair to say that the dangerous decade is ultimately the Indo-Pacific region—you said the South China Sea—but do we expand that across the Indo-Pacific region?

TM: Yeah, you're right. And it's funny you use that phrase, and we all now do. It was used 400 years ago. People in the region, especially the Japanese, thought of that region as a single region, "Indo-Pacific." It's actually in a speech made by a Japanese emperor or strategist, I forget which, 400 years ago. It was Abe, Abe Shinzo, the Japanese prime minister, a few years back, who really

brought it back into fashion. And I think we've all now accepted it again. And Australia is the hinge between the two. And nowadays, I mean, I've got a map of the world in front of me on my desk. And it's that classic Mercator map. And what's bang in the middle? Plucky little Britain, bang in the middle of the world. Now of course there is no middle to something that's round. Nevertheless, I think it's a lot better, conceptually, if we now buy our maps, which put Indo-Pacific in the centre of the world, because in a sort of geopolitical sense, that's where it is.

SG: Connecting to that, you mentioned the Quad, which is the United States, India, Australia and Japan. Do you see the quad developing further in terms of becoming an institution, an entity, with new members—how do you feel it's going to develop in the years to come?

TM: I think it will develop as an institution, yes. I'm not sure about extra members. There's already talk of "Quad Plus one," by which people mean South Korea. I would gamble, I would bet, I would guess that because it's so delicate for the South Koreans—despite hosting 30,000 US troops—they still do, for quite understandable reasons, hedge their bets. They have to keep on the right side of China. Look at the map, that tells you why. So I'm not convinced it will grow past the Quad in any way—you'd have to rename it. But I do think institutionally, yes. You've seen growth year on year, or closer ties, year on year, and I expect that to continue.

SG: These are, in many ways, important dynamics when it comes to being prepared militarily, strategically—also intelligence enhancements as well.

TM: Yeah, and Five Eyes—I remember a few years back, people used to say "Five Eyes" in hushed tones, and then there were sort of conspiracy theorists that that used to put five eyes up on websites to prove that they were in the know about this secret organization, not that it was secret at all. But it's come roaring into consciousness, I think, public consciousness. And it is the preeminent intelligence sharing platform in the world, and there's nothing close to it. It's possible to extend and deepen that—well you can't particularly deepen it amongst the five, but you can extend it, and there is already talk about—either as a full member, or as sort of an associate member—bringing Japan in. And I think that would make sense. There are other candidates to be brought in, people that the Five Eyes countries would absolutely trust with a degree of intelligence sharing. So that's all part of the future.

SG: Choosing your partners being the key dynamic in all of this. So, you talked about the Five Eyes—which is the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—as being one of the most important relationships. Is that coincidental that they're all English-speaking nations?

TM: I think you know the answer to that. No, I mean it's to do with geography, insofar as the British Empire, the geography of that. And then building out from that, what subsequently happened in history. And this is because of their English-speaking ties and their affinity to each other, but the bit that's often overlooked is that they're also very advanced and flourishing liberal democracies. And so they have an awful lot in common. And of course it's in each of their interests, given that they are all formidable advanced technological powers, to stick together. So that trust, it is built partly on culture, which is a sensitive, difficult subject, but it is built partly on culture. But in the 21st century, I think, hopefully we got past just that, and it's actually built on shared values, where culture doesn't really matter, because, for example, Japan is culturally somewhat different to the Five Eyes coun-

tries but is a democracy, which now has fairly deep roots and has values very, very similar. So I think values are now more important than that culture argument, which is where Five Eyes grew up.

I also think—this actually flows into what I think is an emerging Biden doctrine—which is that the advanced industrialized democracies have got so much in common, that that's where the action is. It's not a case of the West anymore. It's a case of the world's democracies coming together.

SG: So if the Indo-Pacific is a critical element of this decade and the importance of the Five Eyes is only going to grow further with more collaboration with other countries, potentially Japan, is Afghanistan now a past tense issue when it comes to geopolitics, defence, counter-terrorism?

TM: Well, for those people who are still looking in the rear-view mirror—and I don't think there's that many of them—it's receding into the distance pretty fast, which might come as a surprise to people who thought it was the end of the world for the Americans. I mean, I thought it was a debacle, I thought it was a disgraceful exit. It was a betrayal, it was a whole bunch of things. You can make the case for leaving. You can make a strong case for leaving, in an orderly fashion, over a longer period, at the very minimum getting to the winter—you could have done it a different way. But it was done. And it's a done deal, and it's gone. People say "Saigon," yes it was a Saigon moment. But the Americans got over Saigon, and they'll get over Afghanistan. And there was much hilarity in Beijing and Moscow. I don't know what the Mandarin for *schadenfreude* is, but I'm sure they have something. But once they've got over that smirking, they surely have drawn the conclusion that: "Now the Americans will begin to focus on what they were going to focus on 20 years ago before they got side-tracked and bought us 20 years. Now they're going to focus on us."

SG: What about the concern that Afghanistan could once again become a hub or a cesspool for terrorism, which will attract foreign terrorist fighters around the world?

TM: Well, it already was a cesspool of terrorists and foreign fighters. For the past 20 years. I mean, but that's what the Taliban was, who had lots and lots of foreign fighters, Chechens and Uzbeks amongst them. So that argument only goes so far. Of course, now it's probable the space will be opened up and they'll be able to operate much more easily. And yeah, that's an issue. Biden's version of this is if they try anything, whack the hell out of them and go away again. Because whacking the hell out of them and staying didn't work. So yeah, I think there's every possibility that this will happen and it's quite possible that in x years time there will be an incident, a terrible one, and we will trace it back and it will have been hatched there. But yeah so I mean that's what I think, you said "what if?" I think that's a price that certainly Biden thought was worth paying.

SG: One of the challenges is going to be, what we've been talking about, the geography of Afghanistan. Its landlocked, it has Iran and Pakistan on one side and it has the Central Asian republics in the north. Many of them are not necessarily going to be that inclined to allow the over the horizon counter-terrorism strategy that President Biden has been advocating, so then how does one have a policy to try and contain potential threats that may emerge from Afghanistan?

TM: It's almost impossible, again, just look at the map, and then look at the history and the politics. I mean the Iranians are not about to allow an American base, the Pakistanis certainly aren't. None of the 'stans are, especially Tajikistan, because the Russians are busy building up their influence there

again. So, over the horizon, well, that's Qatar, apparently that's 12 hours flying time for a drone. So, it can only be trying to pay off the Taliban to ensure that they don't harbour groups that will then project their violence outwards. I'm not convinced about that, because people say "the Taliban are rational," yes they are. People say, "the Taliban don't want to expand their ideology outside the borders," and I think there's an element of truth in that. But that's in the broad brush, when you get into the detail, well the Taliban are true believers, I mean that's not irrational, to be a true believer. And already, you're seeing elements within the Taliban that are the Tajiks, the Tajik Taliban, I don't mean the Tajikistan Taliban, but the ethnically Tajik Taliban, of which there are—it's a minority—but there are some. They are already up there at the border, already fomenting problems, and already making their ties with the Tajik Taliban-types, who are actually from Tajikistan. So I think it's going to be extremely bumpy and I don't think there is a robust policy against it. Try and bribe the Taliban, maybe by giving them the money that is being held, subject to agreements and promises that they make, keep your drones 12 hours away, and invest in intelligence.

SG: Another dynamic tied to Afghanistan is of course, Pakistan. Many people believe that you can't talk about Afghanistan without talking about Pakistan. Now, the assumption was that Pakistan had scored a strategic victory with the return of the Taliban, but in some ways it seems the spotlight has also fallen on Pakistan's role over the last 20 years, that it wasn't necessarily playing the role of an ally, but was hedging its bets in every way possible.

TM: At best. This is one of your many areas of real expertise Sajjan, so you know, please do push back on the bits that I get wrong. But, you know, I thought the game was up on Pakistan when they were found, essentially, to have been harbouring Osama bin Laden. The curtain was pulled to one side. I don't actually think it is a strategic victory for them, because most Pakistanis are not from the same ethnicity as the Taliban are, the Pashtun. We saw at their height what they were able to do, which was to join with the Pakistan Taliban in the Pashtun regions essentially form one area, and Pakistan was on the verge—what was it 10 years ago—of losing a significant part of its territory. It could not control the North-West Frontier. So, I don't see how that's a strategic victory, given that there is the potential for that to happen again. You know, it's a bit like the Saudis in their role in helping to create the Mujahideen, you know that tiger that they rode eventually turned around and bit them, in the form of people trying to overthrow the Saudi state.

SG: Well it's interesting that we're seeing an increase in attacks in Pakistan by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and the theory that the Pakistani military had in the past was that if they can have a secure Afghanistan with the Taliban, then that would reduce the TTP attacks, but on the contrary what we're actually seeing is a rise in those particular incidents.

TM: This is what I mean about rationality. And then also I do think that in many parts of the world, and this isn't true of the Pakistanis, but it is true of many—certainly people in Western countries—a complete lack of understanding about religion, a lack of understanding that when people say something they mean it. They are doing God's work. And so what you think are your rational arguments, does not impact upon their rationality. And so if it's not only God's will to do this work, but also at a more mundane human level, your ethnic nationalism, that the Pashtuns should be joined as one people, then it would follow that, if Pakistan has done its bit to strengthen the Pashtuns in Afghanistan, it will inevitably strengthen the violent jihadist Pashtuns in the North-West Frontier. I mean I'm not talking about all Pashtuns of course because most of them, you know, don't like the Taliban, don't like that form of a belief system, but you've got to understand that the system, both at the ethnic level, and at the religious level.

SG: Do you feel that Pakistan also strategically, globally is also going to be left in the rear mirror, just like Afghanistan could be?

TM: Well, that's an interesting one, isn't it, because, you know, the world is upside down because Pakistan was close to the Americans in the previous century and is pretty far away now. And is now cuddling up to China, in a huge way economically, militarily, you name it. So, I think they are in danger of losing friends because China isn't really their friend. And in fact you look at the game, look around at the map and you think "who are Pakistan's friends?" and they haven't got any really. So, yes, I just think they have made a mistake here.

SG: If China is not an ally of Pakistan, how would you define the relationship?

TM: Well it's not a vassal state either, because Pakistan is a regional power. But, you know, in their relationship there is absolutely no question of who is the dominant power. And China is busy buying up parts of Pakistan. You know, the Gwadar Port that they developed as part of the 'Belt and Road,' the Karakoram highway. I believe that as an alternative to Gwadar, they're going to redevelop Karachi, as a port as well. So, they are busy buying into Pakistan big time, which of course is reasonably good for the Pakistani economy. But there's no question about who is the boss and who will call the shots. And you can make an argument for that because after all, lots of countries have a similar relationship with the United States of America. But again you know, China is not a benevolent source of goodness in the world I don't think.

SG: If we tie all of this together. You're looking at a China-Pakistan relationship that could also be played out in Afghanistan as well, because it seems that the Chinese have expressed an interest in what's going on in Afghanistan, they've been in talks with the Taliban, can that relationship be sustainable?

TM: Only if there's a degree of stability. And I think, you know, that's questionable if Afghanistan becomes a stable country at that point, yeah, China is interested in the rare earth materials and other things that they can get, mostly in the north, you know. They do have a border with Afghanistan. If they can get the promises—well they've already got the promises from the Taliban—that the Taliban will not encourage problems on their border. I mean it's a very, very rough terrain border there's not many people who can cross that. But it is a potential route to help the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang province and the Taliban have said they won't do that. So if there's stability, I think the Chinese are well positioned to get economic benefits from it, but they are very much hanging back at the moment, you know, they don't want to invest hundreds of millions of dollars just to see it all go up, literally, in smoke. The last little bit about that is that, and this is to Pakistan's advantage now, there is the potential for the Kashmir region. For the people to funnel up through Afghanistan, and help to destabilize Kashmir vis-à-vis the Indians. That is to Pakistan's advantage because, as you know, that is perhaps the cause célèbre in the Pakistani-Indian relationship.

SG: So another dynamic that could definitely cause further tensions in the region. There was an interesting and disturbing development that happened in Afghanistan, just a few days ago with a suicide bombing at a mosque, which was a Hazara Shiite mosque. And it turned out that the suicide bomber was actually a Uyghur. Do you think that that dynamic also will be a concern to China

because of the fact that they want the Taliban to rein in any Uyghur presence, but at the same time you're seeing Uyghur militants being used as suicide bombers?

TM: Well, I've been following your work on sort of this including the papers you've been writing about what the Taliban is and isn't so I'm actually going to turn it around because you know, a podcast being a conversation. I would guess—I mean I was aware of that event, yes. I didn't even know it was a Uyghur—I would guess that's a coincidence. I mean, you know, "which handy suicide bomber have we got who's prepared to die today? Oh, he'll do." But I could be wrong on that so actually I'd be grateful if you could tell me your thoughts on that, is this a conveyor belt of cannon fodder for them?

SG: The situation in Afghanistan is, as you know, having been there, is never black and white. It's often many shades of grey and what you could find is one actor that may end up being an enemy of another group could actually then the next day cooperate, for strategic and tactical purposes. So one concern that the international community keeps talking about is the ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan, IS-KP. Where I think, often the mistake that has been made is to draw a direct separation from the Taliban, because IS-KP are ethnically Pashtun predominantly. And you've got IS-KP fighters that are married into Taliban fighters' families and vice versa. So, sometimes they can end up murdering each other in one day, and then cooperate the next day, which is this very odd scenario that we're seeing in Afghanistan.

TM: Yeah. Yeah. They grew out of the Taliban, didn't they? Going back to this Uyghur chap, so do you think it was an ISIS-K [IS-KP] attack on the Hazara mosque?

SG: Well certainly IS-KP have claimed responsibility for it. The worry that I have is that IS-KP does have a very murky relationship with the Haqqani Network, which is a prominent faction within the Taliban regime where you've got a proscribed terrorist Sirajuddin Haqqani as the Interior Minister. And it seems the Haqqanis can potentially use these different groups against their own people, and also to undermine the other Taliban factions.

TM: Yeah which may have been what happened at the airport, in the airport bombing. I don't think people have got to the bottom of that. Again while I've got you Sajjan, how much do you think the Iranians will operate inside Afghanistan to protect their Shiite brothers and sisters?

SG: Well I was going to ask you the same question too, so it'd be good to exchange perspectives on this. Iran has hedged its bets, to use that term again, they saw a potential opportunity to work with elements of the Taliban, in particular, Mullah Yaqoob, who is the son of the founder of the Taliban Mullah Omar. But the Taliban have been, now, once again going back to their sectarian politics and systematically undermining the Hazaras, the Shiite, in Afghanistan and that has concerned the Iranians considerably, who have been watching with alarm. So what perhaps some countries thought about a Taliban takeover prior to it happening, they are now erring on the side of caution and the Iranians won't necessarily just allow this to continue without having some diplomatic avenue to pursue, or even potentially you could see the mobilization of troops on the border as we had seen back in the 1990s, especially when the Taliban murdered, Iranian diplomats but I would be curious for your perspective.

TM: Well yeah it's pretty much that. I mean I don't know about a cross border incursion, but you

know if the Iranians were willing to round up various Hazaras and ship them off to Syria to fight, I'm sure they can help to organise militia within Afghanistan, if they believe it is going to be necessary, if there is a sustained persecution of that minority. I also think they will operate inside at an intelligence level. I know they came up against the Americans several times in Afghanistan, some of their intelligence units—armed undercover intelligence units—came up against the Americans a few times, so they will operate like that as well. Can the Taliban help themselves from this opportunity to kill more of what they regard as apostates? What is it, they killed 30,000 or something, in Mazar-i-Sharif, in the '90s. You know, we pray that they are no longer like that, but I think within that network, and certainly within ISIS-K [IS-KP], I think if I was a Hazara I would be worried.

SG: I fear, not just for the Hazaras, but for the rights of women too.

TM: You probably saw this about six weeks ago with people talking about 'Taliban 2.0.' Its a nonsense. The only 'Taliban 2.0' is the one that took a PR course when it was in Qatar to learn how to fool the silly foreigners. That's 'Taliban 2.0.' They said a few good things in the press conferences and some people seemed to believe them. And just about every single thing that's happened since has been the opposite: girls are now not going to be going to school past twelve, they're busy cutting the budgets for female professors and the training schemes for women teachers. It's only going backwards.

SG: Very depressing, seeing all the hard earned gains for women's rights and civil liberties being eroded within a matter of just days. My concern is that when you see the rights of women collapse extremism tends to increase. The two are often interconnected that way.

TM: "'Twas ever thus all over the world." Hemingway wrote short stories called "Men Without Women" and the basic underlying premise was that men without women tend to behave badly.

SG: Indeed. One last question. It's a general question about how you approached your reporting as a journalist, but also your writing. How did you look at every dynamic in terms of—you're not just someone who talks about issues from afar, you've been to a lot of these places. What was your approach when you would visit them? Especially some of the more hostile parts of the world?

TM: Well hopefully many of the places that you'd go to, you already had a basic handle on it. And journeying there, which could sometimes take two or three days, you know I would devour whichever articles I had cut out and a couple of books I had bought at the airport or whatever. And then when you get there, you have to look and listen, which seems pretty obvious, but you'd be going around a roundabout in Baghdad and there would be a statue of someone and you would say "who's that?" And they would tell you who that person was and you start then to understand the emotional buttons that can be pressed in a people and why?

You know, it's a bit like coming to Britain and seeing the statue of Boudicca in central London and asking that and then getting a feel of what Boudicca means to the British people, which I'm not saying it means a huge amount, but it's just one of those touchstones of "oh yeah you know, very early Britain." Or, and of Churchill, a much more obvious one, but then the ones in between, and that's just the statues. And you just soak it up and you start to realise.

One of the most—just seems like a lightbulb going off once. It was in Kosovo and I was with some Serb friends and we were driving down and my friend said “See that satellite dish?” I said “yeah?” on the side of a house, he said “Which way is it pointing?” I forget whichever way. He said “And what’s in that direction? I said “Albania.” He said “Yeah, that’s what they’re watching. Albanian television, therefore?” “Therefore that’s a Kosovo-Albanian house.” And then he’d say “See that house?” Satellite dish is pointing the other way. It’s just little things like that and then you suddenly realise that a lot are getting all their information and views and this, that, and the other from them and that division. So when you learn something like that—I remember taking that to Baghdad and saying to a friend of mine, who, the day I got there after the statue fell, said “Tim, *al-Sunnah* [the Sunni] will never allow the Shiite to take over and we are going to have a civil war.” And he pointed at all the satellite dishes in this direction and that direction.

Little things like that, that tell you so much.

SG: Well these nuances are reflected in your writings and your books. It’s always a question I actually wanted to ask you, so I’m glad I had this opportunity because you’ve provided such fascinating insight during this podcast and I’m very grateful for you making the time for it.

TM: I’m grateful for the invitation, thank you and I wish you well with the podcast, it’s not before time and I look forward to subscribing.

SG: Well thank you Tim Marshall for joining us on DEEP Dive and we look forward to having you back one day.

Tim Marshall’s bio

Tim Marshall is a critically acclaimed author and journalist who specialises in foreign affairs. His books include The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World and the New York Times’ best-selling Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics, among many others. He is the former diplomatic and foreign affairs editor at Sky News.

Episode 2 – Neil Basu and the Complexities of Counter-Terrorism Policing, November 2021

Key Reflections

- **With an unfolding terrorist attack, it is essential to have well-drilled, experienced teams with the right skill-sets whilst making split second decisions in high conflict and highly charged situations.**
- **The pandemic and resulting global lockdowns have created a situation in which people are gestating over propaganda and imagery in their homes and becoming radicalised. The full consequences of the pandemic for terrorism are still to manifest and will unfold over time.**
- **The rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan will have consequences that could eventually impact on the UK directly, with the potential resurgence of al-Qaeda and other groups. British nationals may then be encouraged to travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan. ISIS have also not been eradicated.**
- **The more the West withdraws from the CT sphere, the easier it gets for terrorist groups to become resurgent, especially considering that the terrorist ideology has not gone away.**
- **Threats posed by state actors are dealt with in a similar manner to those posed by terrorist groups. In both cases, there is a need for information sharing and cooperation among governments, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement.**

SG - Dr. Sajjan Gohel

NB - Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu

SG: Hello, and welcome to DEEP Dive brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode we speak to Neil Basu, who is the Assistant Commissioner for London's Metropolitan Police Service Specialist Operations (Counter Terrorism and Protective Security) and was the National Police Chiefs Council lead for Counter Terrorism Policing. Much of his work has involved countering the threats from al-Qaeda and ISIS as well as state-sponsored actors. Mr. Basu is currently the Director for the Strategic Command Course at the College of Policing, which prepares police officers and staff for promotion to the most senior ranks in the service.

Please note, this podcast was recorded just prior to the explosion at the Liverpool Women's Hospital on the 14 November 2021, which has now been declared a terrorist incident.

SG: Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, thank you for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

NB: Thank you, I'm flattered to be asked to do this, thank you.

SG: It's a pleasure to have you. One question I've always wanted to ask you, and I'll take the opportunity now, is what made you want to be a police officer in the first place?

NB: Interesting because it's quite a long story, but I'll try and be brief. So I grew up watching lots of heroes and villains on television. You know, I sort of laugh now when I look back at it; Audie Murphy in World War Two films, *The Lone Ranger,* John Wayne, all the people who sort of rescued people from evil. And if you think about every great Shakespearean tragedy, every great Greek tragedy, there's a lot of this in there. It is the story of life as writers will tell you. And I guess there's a little bit of the childish thing in me that thought that I could help make people safer. I could protect people and I didn't really know what that was going to be when I was very young.

I wanted to be a soldier, and I had a very bad car accident. Physically, I couldn't do much for about 18 months. So I drifted into university and it was in the '80s. And everyone wanted to be a business person, or a banker, or a lawyer, or make a fortune, you know, the kind of 'loads of money' generation. I didn't really want to be at university but I got my degree, I got a degree in economics, and I did get a job with a bank and I came out and I worked for that bank for nearly two years, and I hated it. I didn't like the values. I didn't like the greed. I didn't like the attitude. And I thought where were all those ideals I had when I was a youngster about helping to protect people, because it's certainly not happening here! And I foolishly thought, because I was one of those graduates who left the university when the job market was booming that I could just get another job and I thought — my father was a doctor, as part of his practice he had a police surgeon contract in the Midlands and he had been a police surgeon for 40 years. Not that long when I applied, but he'd been a police surgeon for a very long time since the '70s. And a lot of people in my hometown were either — it was a military town — so they're either RAF or they were police officers, and my Sunday League Football referees or rugby referees.

So I grew up with a lot of positive role models in both the military and the police and my father did this and I thought, "Well, I'll tell you what, you wanted to protect people. This is a way of doing it. This is public service, not the private sector that you joined with all the values you didn't hear and your dad's a doctor, your mum's a nurse. You're not bright enough to be in medicine, but you might be bright enough to be a cop." So I applied and there was an 18 month waiting list. So I came straight out of that; that reverie, thinking I'd just easily quit the bank and join the police service and thought what am I going to do now to pay my rent, because I've already left the bank, for another 18 months. So I joined a sales company. Now if I talk about private sector values and the attitude of salesmanship, back in the 80s and early 90s, you'll kind of understand where I'm coming from again.

So the reason I became a police officer was because I looked at my mother and father and their public sector values and the heroes they were to me and thought I want to be the kind of person that can hold my head up high saying I did something for the public. And my dad once told me a quote which I use all the time which is from Gandhi, I believe, which is "there is no higher calling than to lose yourself in the service of others." Now I wish I figured that out when I was much younger, but at least in my mid-20s, I made the right decision. And that's why I became a police officer. And that is the short version!

SG: Well, I'm glad you gave us the more detailed version. That's absolutely fascinating and very endearing, I would say awe inspiring too, because that just shows you, I guess family values playing a big role too and the experiences of what to avoid as well.

NB: Yes, absolutely.

SG: So since you first joined, how has policing changed, both operationally, as well as in terms of recruitment?

NB: Well, there have been enormous changes. I don't think people who are outside of the profession realise just how complicated a profession it is. If you think about the 10s of 1000s of pieces of legislation and law that society is bound to operate within, it's the framework in which we all sort of live together in a society and the people who keep that together are the police. And having to make split second decisions in high conflict, highly emotionally charged situations or dealing with people who are incredibly vulnerable at the worst time of their lives. And these vulnerable people might not consider themselves vulnerable until whatever happens to them happens to them. Whether it's assault, a traffic accident, being involved in a mass casualty event, like terrorism, or a train crash, it doesn't matter what it is. The first people that people look to, to help them in those circumstances, tends to be the uniform on the street. It's a police officer who's got a split second to make a decision of what to do to help people. That is incredibly complex, and it's only got more complicated.

So in the nearly 30 years I've been in, people were not expected and were not under so much scrutiny that they had to get it absolutely right 100% of the time, and that they would be examined in microscopic detail for making a mistake. And I think what's changed is, there is no forgiveness for making a mistake anymore. And that is a crying shame because I think it puts people off public service, when they realize there is a terrible blame culture in society, and everyone's looking for a scapegoat. And if you're a very young police officer on the streets, making those kinds of decisions, that's very difficult. I was a young detective, I had a massive caseload. I worked as a Detective and as a detective sergeant and police sergeant in Lambeth - Brixton and Streatham. It was incredibly busy. I think my caseload was as high as any officer has today. But the difference was, people rarely interfered with my work. My supervisors were less interested. I was unlikely to be in front of a public inquiry for making a mistake. I hope I did, and I think I did, a very professional job, but I certainly wasn't under the kind of scrutiny youngsters are today.

The second thing that's changed is when I joined and I was really proud of this, we were called the social service of last resort, because effectively when nobody else could help we could, and that goes right back to my answer to question one. I thought Brilliant. But we are now the social service of first resort, because 10 years of massive cuts has meant that almost every time there's a vulnerability in society, there is no ambulance, there is no mental health care, there is nobody else to look after you. And so the first point of call is the police. Most of our daily crime bulletin is not crime at all. It's high-risk missing persons who are either suicidal or very young and very vulnerable to awful people in society taking advantage of them. That dominates our daily crime bulletins. Now that's London, but I guarantee that's replicated across 43 forces. That is incredibly difficult. So when your own resources are challenged and your USP [Unique Selling Point] is to effectively cut crime and arrest criminals, and you can't do that because only 20% of your work is now doing that. How do you square that? Incredibly complicated. So that leads me to your last point about recruitment. What kind of people are we trying to recruit who can deal with the demands of that, that I've just described to you? We are trying to professionalise the career, we're trying to say to people "if you can cope with everything I've just described, you are operating at a master's level. You should be given a degree because that's what you do for a job." We are trying to attract people who've got the intelligence to do a degree, they don't have to have one, but they've got the intelligence to do it because this job is so horribly complex and very, very difficult and you need to be well read and well capable of absorbing a lot of information and acting very quickly upon it.

So the kind of calibre of person we're looking for is, I can only put this…. is much higher, but we

still want the street smarts and the common sense that comes from, not being naive, being mature, knowing a lot about life. So that's never changed and should never change. And I don't think we should go down the route of hiring merely master's graduates from universities who don't have that grounding in real life as well. So it's complex. And we need to be very careful about who we recruit because we've spent two centuries building a reputation and I think everything that's happened in the news recently, I don't know when this is going out, but if you look at Wayne Couzens, one police officer can ruin 200 years of reputation – one - and there are 130,000 of us. And we all feel that that's what he did to us.

SG: Wayne Couzens, for those who may not be aware, is the police officer who abducted a woman during the lockdown and then brutally murdered her. In terms of the recruitment aspect. As you are one of the most senior police officers not just within the UK but within the Five Eyes network as well — which involves Britain, America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand — you're also a person of Asian heritage as well. Do you feel your position can help demonstrate that law enforcement is a career for ethnic minorities to not only be a part of but to succeed as well?

NB: The short answer to that is yes. I mean, you really underestimate your impact on other people. You've known me a long time, Sajjan, you know I'm not an arrogant person, so I don't really consider myself an Assistant Commissioner. You know, I say to Chief Constables — and I'm running a leadership program for future Chief Constables now— I say "you need to remember you were a constable once." The difficulty with that, that's very humble, and that's very good, but you forget your impact on other people as you go up in the ranks. And as you become more important, and as people see you more often and therefore you forget what impact you're having on their ambition and their willingness to succeed. And there is no doubt about it. Because I get a lot of feedback. I do a lot of mentoring in Black and Asian communities and with female officers and with people with protected characteristics, who look at you as a role model - that they can succeed if you can, and that is so true. I mean, it's obviously far more complicated than that, but you should be willing to, to stand up and show those people that it is possible. And some people don't want that. You know, when I was young, I did not want to be seen as an Asian police officer. I wanted to be seen as a police officer, and as a very good one. And everyone I meet who has protected characteristics, whether they're female, Black, Asian, whatever their background, doesn't want to be judged on that. It's a bit like Martin Luther King said, they want to be judged on the content of their character and their technical capability. We all do. But actually, it does help to see other people in the room who look a bit like you, or sound like you who have the same background as you who are getting on. It really helps.

SG: Absolutely. And your humility is what has always struck me in every interaction and it quite frankly, has a cross sectional appeal. I see that being one of the most important aspects in this work that you do. If we move to, I guess, predominantly what brought us into contact in the first place is terrorism. During the peak of ISIS' growth between 2015 to 2018. And in fact thereafter, you were very much on the front line of dealing with the threat to the UK. When an officer would brief you of an emerging terrorist attack unfolding, what would be the very first thoughts occurring in your mind?

NB: Yes. Do you know what, I always feel a little bit traumatised by the entire experience. For your audience. I've been in counter-terrorism for six and a half years I stepped down on 5 July 2021, 4 July 2021 was the first time in six and a half years I wasn't permanently on call for a terrorist attack 24/7 365 days a year, and I do describe that Fourth of July as my very own independence day in some respects. Because the first thing that goes through your mind and you can't help it because I've seen a great deal of death and destruction in my wider policing career, is how many people have died? How many people are about to die? How many more people are going to die because I can't

stop this? That's what first goes through your mind and that the reason I joined the police in the first place comes absolutely front and centre in that moment. And I'd be lying if I didn't say that for a split second, you're frozen, because you just think 'oh my god. It doesn't get any worse than this'. And it doesn't, you know, terrorism is considered the — I mean, my colleagues in organised crime, which is where I made my mark, countering gangs and organised crime. My colleagues would say far more people die because of that, you know, daily around the United Kingdom than ever die in a terrorist attack. It doesn't matter.

The consequences of a terrorist attack are the profound psychological damage to society that it causes. That's why terrorists do it. And trying to say to yourself, "how do I stop this becoming even worse than it is?" Is the first thing that goes through your mind and if you are not equipped or resilient enough or competent or experienced enough to deal with it, you would freeze. I like to think we didn't freeze and many of my colleagues in the Five Eyes have discussed in the past looking at how the UK responded in that terrible year of 2017 and we've obviously had five attacks since then, six attacks now since then. I think they were impressed that the UK didn't fold under that pressure. And it didn't fold because we are a very well-drilled, experienced team alongside our security service colleagues. So the next thing you start thinking of, after that split second of fear, you start thinking, "what's my time-frame?" We use these terribly military expressions of collapsing time-frames. So "how long have I got to get my hands around this? Who is briefing me? How good are they? Do I trust them? Have they got enough detail? If they haven't, and nobody has enough detail where are they going to get that detail from? How quickly can they get up on the threat? How quickly can we get more coverage on the threat? How quickly can we deploy resources ? Are they already en-route? And they are quite often already en route because this is a well-drilled machine And, have we got the right people with the right skills to deal with this? and what is the scale of it?"

So, you know, I'm due to give evidence again in Manchester in a few weeks time, you know, the scale of that was a bit like 7/7, almost unthinkable to the British public. So those are just some of the things [going through my mind]. I could go through a checklist of three or 400 things that go through my mind, which because of my experience go through my mind very quickly, but if you were sitting there going through them from one to 400, you'd probably spend the first day doing that and be fired very quickly!

SG: It seems very, very intense and also mentally demanding as well. Because in all my interactions with you, it has always been abundantly clear that you feel the loss of every civilian and police officer that has either been killed or injured as a consequence of terrorism. And you mentioned the Manchester attack, where so many young people were killed. I can tell you that from my own personal experience that was very emotionally challenging for myself. So how does one deal with that, whilst also ensuring that the investigations are ongoing and the perpetrators are brought to justice?

NB: Well, I think when people speak to people like me, they want the comforting answer that we're professionals, we're trained, we're highly trained, we get on with this. I always go back to that remarkable quote, when a journalist was questioning George Bush on how he slept at night because of the war. And I think it was Afghanistan rather than Iraq, but it may have been the first Iraq war. And he said, "Well, I sleep like a baby." And then they asked Colin Powell whether he slept like a baby, given what his Commander in Chief had said, and he said "oh yeah, I sleep like a baby. I wake up every four hours screaming. And I thought, you know, that is true. And people don't want to hear it. But yes, it is incredibly challenging. And the reality is, because you are trained and this is what you were trained to do and this goes right back to the answer to your first question is what's your core purpose of being here? Well, it's to protect people—and you keep going until you are confident that

people are safe. And you don't stop and think about it until you're convinced that that is the case. That's what you do. And the resilience comes—I used to think resilience came from—and I'm training lots of people about this at the moment—asking them, "what makes you think you're resilient enough to be a Chief officer?'—and the reality is I used to think it was, well, family and friends and, you know, colleagues and all of that support around you and your physical and mental fitness to do the job. And it isn't actually—all of those things are incredibly important by the way. I don't dismiss them at all, you need all of those things, but what you really need is a sense of purpose. You really need to know that you're doing the right job and you're in the right place at the right time. Because that's what keeps you going because without that sense that you're doing the right thing, it would be impossible.

SG: Absolutely. If we're looking at the challenges that exist as they've evolved, what developments have surprised you over the last 18 months during the pandemic, which perhaps would have been hard to anticipate prior to the lockdowns

NB: Oh, I mean, you're far more of an expert on this than I am, Sajjan. I think the two things that I think are—the really surprising things are...a lot of terrorists obeyed the government's directions because they were probably as terrified of the pandemic as everyone else. In reality, the threat reduced because of that. It didn't increase.

But what I felt—and I've said this publicly many times—what I was nervous about increasing was people sitting in their bedrooms, gestating over propaganda and imagery and getting more and more radicalised and more and more vulnerable because they didn't have wider protective factors of society. They weren't going out meeting people. They weren't seeing other people who might have less extreme views. They would be intensely looking at stuff and developing more and more radicalised instincts. And I strongly believe that we are not going to see the full results of what the pandemic has done to people who've been in that environment for a long time. But it will happen. And because I've been out of it, I'm not going to speculate on what the motive is—and clearly can't for some sub judice reasons on recent attacks.

But my biggest concern was always that malleable section of society being more and more drawn into propaganda on the web, which has become the de-facto war propaganda tool of choice for terrorists. So I don't think that surprised me. I think what surprised me is we haven't had as much of it as I thought might happen, but I think that we're very early in the time-frame.

And the second thing—and I don't want to get all political about it, I think it was a surprise to everyone—was the rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan. And the consequences of that for our future, I think, are very dim indeed. So I think I may have stepped down from this role, but my successor's successor will be dealing with the same problems that I dealt with over the last six and a half years because of that move, is my view.

SG: Well, you touched upon Afghanistan, that's something I was wanting to ask you also: are you worried about the unfolding crisis in Afghanistan that it could eventually impact on the UK directly? But with the potential resurgence of al-Qaeda, as well as other groups, which could then encourage British nationals to travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan like we saw in the pre- and post-9/11 period?

NB: Yes is the simple answer. I mean, I couldn't have put it better myself. Your question answers it. I'm incredibly concerned about all of that. And I think our ability to see that because of our experience should be highly attuned to that threat. I hope it is.

SG: This is probably almost an impossible question to answer: what options do we have to deal with this?

NB: We have legislative options that were put in place that would prevent people traveling to areas in which we know terrorist training is taking place. So the designated area offence. That was put in place as part of the learning from previous years, and that's obviously a government decision, but it would be based on intelligence. So there is an option there to prevent travel.

We are doing what we're doing every day—which is what we've been doing every day for many years—which is looking at the threat unfolding and taking covert and overt action against people that we think are either becoming radicalised or have become radicalised and are a serious threat. The danger is, of course, that the numbers become overwhelming for the resource that's currently in it. And I think we've made that point very clearly to the government, certainly since I joined CT [counter-terrorism] in 2015. And the government has stepped up and has kept the resource where it's required against the threat. It must continue to do that. I'm not being political about that, it just must continue to do that.

And it is very tempting in austerity and you know, we're still in a pandemic, which will have years to run and the consequences of that and the consequences for budgets and the consequences for prioritisation. I get all of that, I know it's a massive problem. But because of what's happened, and lots of other effects on the world, terrorism is still going to be a clear and present danger for, in my view, my lifetime

SG: To that point, if we look at al-Qaeda's terrorist rival, ISIS, do you still feel that ISIS is an existing threat or that it will evolve into different manifestations but still pose a challenge for all of us?

NB: Well, I mean, yes, they're still a challenge, they're still a threat. They weren't eradicated... winning the war on the battlefield didn't eradicate them. I think it was bin Laden who talked about becoming an idea rather than an organisation, because organisations are easy to target. It's what military and policing and security services do very effectively. Capturing an idea is very difficult, and ISIS is still a very clear idea—an ideal for some people. And that is still a massive problem, so yes, they pose a continuing threat.

It's much harder for them to organise—that's great. Disrupting terrorist organizations, making them difficult to organise and plan and plot and communicate is absolutely what we should be doing. It's definitely harder for them to do that. But the more we withdraw from the CT sphere, the easier it gets for groups to become resurgent, and the ideology hasn't gone away...unless I've missed something, I've only been out of the game for four months. I don't think I have...it's still a very clear and present danger. And you know as well as I do that al-Qaeda had a very different business model to ISIS—a much more patient one and a much more long-term one, and that certainly hasn't gone away.

SG: Absolutely. It's a threat that, unfortunately, is going to impact on all of us at some point. I guess it's a question of when and not if.

NB: Yes, and it's just really important to reinforce....members of the public listening to this would be absolutely terrified by some of the things I've said, I suspect, but...the Five Eyes community has been incredibly effective in dealing with the terrorist threats. It doesn't look like that because of the number of attacks against Western democracies, but the number of attacks that have been disrupted and stopped because of the effectiveness of that machine is really impressive. It's a lot of stuff that no one ever hears about and will never know, but I think it's important for people like me to be able to say it out loud. People are being protected every day and because that machine is good, and it's resourced by governments, and it's competent, capable, and full of experienced people. My view is, just, we need to maintain that.

SG: Do you think that's part of the problem in the sense that, as you mentioned, the police are working 24/7, not just in the UK, but across many nations to foil and disrupt plots that perhaps don't get the same attention as an attack does? And therefore there is this view in the minds of some that well, terrorism has diminished, it's no longer the concern that it used to be, whereas in fact, officers are working all the time to try and prevent something very bad from happening.

NB: Yes, I think that's true for the wider public, but it isn't true for governments because they get briefings every day. And they certainly get personal briefings every week in the UK from intelligence professionals sitting alongside people like me. So I think we keep it front and centre—they get the intelligence feeds, so they know it's important. And of course, in this country, we have the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC), who sees all of the intelligence and effectively is independent of government and sets the threat level. And I know the people who run that, and I'm impressed by them, and I'm impressed by their access and their ability and their analytical capability, and we should pay attention when they tell us the threat is rising, and we should pay attention when they say the threat isn't as bad as it was, and we do get consulted on that. But it is their independent decision, and they're the people who see the full picture.

I think it is a problem keeping people's focus on resource requirement because being able to put good prevention in place is incredibly costly. There is no doubt about it. Absolutely no one I've ever met would query the need to have all of the resources to respond to an actual attack.

It becomes a bit more of an esoteric academic argument to say I need all of these resources to prevent one. I used to laugh when I came into CT—I wasn't used to looking at a daily crime bulletin and seeing nil return every day and thinking well, that's a bit odd. Whereas of course, that's exactly what you want. Every day, you want to see that nothing happened.

In our modern world of judging how effective and efficient our resources are, that is what you should be concentrating on: the fact that nothing happened. But actually it's quite difficult to convince people that it's worth the hundreds of millions of pounds of investment that it takes to make sure nothing happens.

SG: Right. Having a mundane period is actually a success that you in many ways want to keep and maintain.

NB: Massive. It's always hysterical that my friends, and particularly my mother, say "Oh, I haven't seen you on TV recently." That is a good thing, mother, if you're listening.

SG: Well, in terms of seeing you on TV, pivoting to another aspect that you've been involved in, in terms of the security challenges—is that of state actors that have posed a threat to the UK. Is there a different process involved when it comes to dealing with the threat of state actors as compared to, say, terrorist groups?

NB: There's an awful lot of similarities in terms of the requirement for cross-government, international cooperation, intelligence and law enforcement, sharing of information. It's obviously much harder because it's the highest security levels possible. But the fundamental principles are the same. There is no single agency, no single government, no single part of Whitehall that can deal with that on its own. It needs to be a deep and broad approach to the issue. And that is a very clear and present danger. Long-term, it's actually probably better dealt with by political means and a lot of other tactics that are way, way above my paygrade.

SG: Well, sticking briefly with this dynamic, we're seeing right now accusations that Russia is playing a role in hybrid warfare to do with the migrant crisis on the border with Belarus and Poland. There are also concerns about cyber issues and hacking and state-sponsored activities there. Are you concerned about the role of Russia and China in terms of what they can do or potentially can do to another country?

NB: I'm hesitating Sajjan because I think the answer to that is yes, I am concerned about it. I think open source-wise you've only got to read things that journalists say to kind of understand that there is deep concern about the stability of the world and—I mean, this is a NATO podcast—the ability of NATO, United Nations, other countries to coalesce around threats and how they are manifesting themselves in other parts of the world are a very clear source of anxiety for people in the national security community. Nobody is taking these things lightly. And neither am I.

SG: As long as I've known you, as I was mentioning earlier, your humility has always stood out, which has huge value and appeal and inspires many people. But if you could go back in time, sort of tracking back to what we were discussing earlier, what one piece of advice would you give to a young Neil Basu that you wish someone could have told you about your career as you were about to take part in it?

NB: It's a classic question, isn't it? I mean, I have been asked it a lot, and it's really quite hard to understand what that one piece of advice is. Because a lot of it's gone really well. I hope no one's listened to anything I've said today and thought, "My God, I feel sorry for him." I mean, I don't feel sorry for myself. I've had the most amazing career. I'm close to the end of it, but I consider myself a career detective, and being head of counterterrorism is pretty much as good as it gets.

The advice a very good friend gives me all of the time is relax and enjoy a bit more. That's quite difficult because of some of the things we've talked about. The strong sense of purpose, figuring out very quickly or more quickly what it is about you that makes you who you are, and what is it that

really gets you out of bed in the morning. And this is quite difficult to say to a 17,18, 19, 20, mid-20s, perhaps even early 30s person, because you're still working all of that out. But if someone has the opportunity to say, everything I told you in the answer to the first question—that's you, that's really what makes you tick. So find something that delivers that for you, would be the best thing.

And don't forget, it isn't all about that, life isn't all about that. Because I'm in policing, and I consider it a vocation, not switching off 24/7 365 sounds like a curse to some people. I consider it a bit of a privilege, and it is a vocation, it isn't just a job. But it can become absolutely all-consuming. And I mean, lots of police officers and members of police staff who do incredible things every day and forget they've also got incredible families and friends, have hobbies and interests. And the one thing I would say is don't forget. Find your purpose. Really be good at it, because it'll make your job not seem like a job at all. But just remember to keep something back for yourself and the people who love you.

SG: These are pearls of wisdom here that I think we should all take on board. And I think it's also important to point out the sacrifices that the police often make in terms of their personal lives because it has a huge bearing in terms of the work that they do, their commitment, how challenging counter-terrorism is. And then that has a knock on effect because police also have private lives too, which perhaps doesn't necessarily get the attention that it could.

NB: Yes, absolutely.

SG: One final question then, Neil. You're currently with the College of Policing. What does that entail exactly? And is it nice to be able to do something where you're giving back to the police training aspect that perhaps is so important in producing the key future leaders in law enforcement?

NB: It's just been the most amazing privilege. I kind of suspected that I would really like it. I mean, you've been incredibly kind to me, Sajjan, by calling me humble and recognising the humility in me, but this has not been an entirely selfless exercise because when you get towards the end of your career, and you've amassed all of this experience, you kind of want somebody to listen to you. Now, that's not going to be my kids—sorry, kids, if you're listening because you don't want another lecture from Dad. But people who are on their way up this career who are 10 years behind you really want to listen. They're like sponges. It's like having children and rearing children in front of you again. I don't mean to patronise them, I actually mean to praise them because they're so eager to learn. So that's a huge privilege to be able to stand there and give a few pearls of wisdom and hope that they take one or two things that might help them in what is a very hard profession. So it's been an incredible privilege.

And the other thing of course is we're all very fond of saying, "Well, it wasn't like that in my day, he'll never be able to do as good a job as me" and stuff. And then suddenly you meet 50 odd people on my course, and you think, my God, policing is in safe hands. So yes, it's been brilliant, absolutely brilliant.

I think I read something about whether I would like to demystify anything about policing as a professional police officer or member of police staff, and there's one thing I would like to say about them. We do an incredibly hard job but you said it in this podcast, you know, we're not robots. They're

human beings who have very interesting, difficult lives just like every other member of society, and yet they still choose to get out of bed and try and protect people every day, and their job isn't to be authoritarian and in conflict all the time. They do things that are horrific, and it takes a massive toll on them. And they do it because the vast majority of them are trying to protect people every single day. And I think the misconception is that they are somehow there to stop your fun. They are precisely there for the opposite reason: to make sure that you live in a society that's safe enough for you to have some fun. And I sometimes wish that people would see us more as the human beings we actually are.

SG: Hopefully, this interview can provide that perspective that perhaps people were not aware of before. For me, I have to say, even though I've known you for quite a while, it has been very enlightening and insightful. Seeing so many aspects that I didn't necessarily think about in detail before but it's giving me a lot of food for thought for what actually the dynamics are and also the nuances of what police have to handle and deal with. So I'm most grateful to you for providing the time to be able to take a deep dive in what we're actually talking about.

NB: My absolute pleasure, and thank you very much because I've found it's been a very cathartic experience, Sajjan. Thank you.

SG: Well you're most welcome, and thank you so much again for being on the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, and we hope to have you again at some point.

NB: My pleasure.

Neil Basu's bio

Neil Basu is a retired Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service, where he served for three decades, including as the head of Specialist Operations for the United Kingdom's law enforcement agencies. He is now a Non-Executive Director of the College of Policing, where he leads the strategic command course for officers seeking promotion to the highest ranks of the force.

Episode 3 – Douglas London and the Prevailing Value of Human Intelligence, December 2021

Key Reflections

- **Human intelligence (HUMINT) needs to be enhanced amidst the potential regrowth of trans-national terrorism and the importance of great power competition.**
- **The Haqqani Network played a decisive role in facilitating the Taliban's military victory in Afghanistan and retains very close ties with al-Qaeda.**
- **All the Taliban factions, including the Haqqanis, maintain strong ties with the Pakistani military establishment, thereby undermining the West's mission to develop a stable Afghanistan.**
- **Ideological sympathy for terrorist groups within the Pakistani military has threatened the stability and control over its nuclear weapons.**
- **Counter-terrorism options in Afghanistan are fewer and more logistically challenging. Equally concerning is the ability to conduct counter-intelligence and run a HUMINT network securely.**
- **The West needs to get smarter about Russia, who are buoyed by the West's departure from Afghanistan and want to be a central player on every stage.**
- **China is trying to find a balance with the Taliban whilst attempting to promote their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and increasing its leverage over Pakistan.**

Transcript:

SG - Dr. Sajjan Gohel

DL - Douglas London

SG: Hello, and welcome to DEEP Dive brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Douglas London, a retired senior Operations Officer with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and currently an adjunct associate professor at Georgetown University's Centre for Security Studies, and a non-resident Fellow at the Middle East Institute. Over the course of his 34 years in the CIA, Mr. London predominantly served in the Middle East, as well as South and Central Asia, and Africa. He was decorated with the CIA's career intelligence Medal, the 'McCone Award,' and multiple unit and individual citations. He is also the author of the book: *The Recruiter: Spying and the Lost Art of American Intelligence.*

Douglas London, thank you for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

DL: Thanks for having me on the programme.

SG: It's a pleasure. I've read your book, *The Recruiter* and it's a fascinating insight into intelligence,

the roles and the challenges that exist. What was your motivation for the book? Did you want to convey to those that know some degree of the world of intelligence, dynamics that they perhaps had not thought about? Or was this also for people that were interested in something that they had not looked at before?

DL: I think in a selfish way, it started as a personal journey. I had been an intelligence officer for about 35 years. And when you hang it up or you retire, that's a tough reflection for anyone, when they're moving on from a career. I was driven somewhat to retire when I did by some of the circumstances, the political weaponization of intelligence that had increased, and I wouldn't say started, but certainly increased, and dramatically so, during my last couple of years at the agency. And I think on reflecting upon that, I found that the agency was really at a crossroads. And I found that crossroads really to have started the path after 9/11. And having served sort of symmetrically—equally—half of my career prior to and following 9/11, I thought that the best way to illustrate that might be through some of the anecdotes and to demonstrate one the value of human intelligence (HUMINT) and how maybe that was not being applied as judiciously as it should be these days. And then the impact that 9/11 had, obviously, in so many ways on our country, but particularly on the capabilities of our intelligence community. And for me, it was really timely in that we find ourselves now the discussion is about pivoting to great power competition or strategic competition. And the agency does indeed find itself at a crossroads. And I thought I could find a way to place some illumination on the issues and start a conversation but do so in a way that didn't hurt the agency, didn't compromise its capabilities, but encouraged a greater appreciation of the redirection it needs to take on the new landscape.

SG: Well, certainly, it does provide a huge appreciation to the work that the agency has done, especially when it comes to things such as counter-terrorism, which is one of your areas of specialty and how I got to know you in the first place. One aspect that you spoke about, in your book, you said that terrorism is a family business, and you spoke about the fact that you had many people that were actually related. How common is that, is that something you could just expand on because I found that fascinating?

DL: I found a pretty consistent thread, particularly in al-Qaeda, maybe to a lesser extent, in the Islamic State. But certainly, over the years in addressing al-Qaeda and many of its partner groups, other Sunni extremist organisations with which it partnered, and I would include the Taliban and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the list, goodness knows, can go on, that somewhat, maybe like an international organised crime family, someone has to vouch for you. You don't just send in an application. ISIS people actually did, right, didn't they, in 2013 and 14, to go to the caliphate, but particularly for al Qaeda and the external terrorist cells that the Islamic State operated, it was a matter of who you knew. And those connections were very often familial. But at a minimum, they were tribal, ethnic, same places, same region, al-Qaeda, particularly after 9/11 had a huge contingent of Libyans, that all began in the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). And they—several of them—rose to great positions of power, the significance of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is regarded as the mastermind, and I find that an intolerable and inappropriate word for him, but the architect, if you would, of the 9/11 operation is one member of a large family. Ammar Baluchi, Abu Musa al-Baluchi, I mean just a great number of his relatives. So, I found that for the level of trust that was required, certainly al-Qaeda and ISIS took people in—I mean, there were Americans, al Qaeda certainly had no family connection—but those who rose quickest and rose to positions of the greatest responsibility, tended to be those who already had a connection and it was often by blood.

SG: That's absolutely fascinating. Are you worried that there will be a new generation of terrorists whose fathers, uncles, brothers, were at one time involved in terrorism and now you see that the

next generation potentially taking on the mantle, especially as for example, we have seen cases where al-Qaeda fighters will be married into the Taliban fighters' families and vice versa?

DL: Well in al-Qaeda's case, doing so was a very deliberate strategy. It was not coincidental. Their operational method was always to integrate themselves in the society in which they were operating. And they were doing that in North Africa, with their affiliate there, as well as Yemen. But it really started in Afghanistan, or even as al-Qaeda began to establish itself, in the 90s, they very much focused on being part of that landscape. Abu Hamza Bin Laden, the deceased son of—one of the deceased sons —of Osama bin Laden, wrote about that extensively in his media musings for as-Sahab, their media organisation, how they in the Afghans really much tied together and tied to the land of the Khorasan, which, of course they consider biblically is parts of Iran and Afghanistan and such, and the region.

So it was quite deliberate, because blood is thicker than water, and blood promotes loyalty, that I certainly saw with al-Qaeda operatives who we would have the fortune, sometimes, of being able to detain, because it was always far better to detain one than to remove them kinetically, because there's, quite, I will tell you, quite frankly, there's greater value in a live terrorist who might be a source of information. I recall one, and I wrote this in my book, where this was an individual who had not been out there on the front lines without al-Qaeda, he was certainly a supporter, but he was a member of the family that kept taking in other members of the family. When a fighter would be killed, or when one would be arrested, he would bear the responsibility for wife or wives and children. But finally, it was his time to stand up and take his role and I remember my team being able to attain and I asked him directly, I said, you know, "who's going to take care of the family now?" but given an opportunity, in his case, he still wouldn't cooperate, because those bonds of family were so strong, and I and I believe that's very much the strategy behind, well, al-Qaeda's done that, we see that across its affiliates and we see the Islamic State, again, a bit more of a bureaucratic and a bit more of a diverse organisation, doing that, particularly with its tighter external sense.

SG: So, the bonds, the family ties, the sense of loyalty is very pervading across all of this. You said, in your book also, that when it came to the Taliban, and the Haqqani Network, which is a faction that operates effectively within the Taliban, although they are, I guess you could say, semi-autonomous. You mentioned that they were—you describe them as untouchables when it came to dealing with Pakistan and the cooperation from them post-9/11, that they were untouchables from the get-go. Why was that the case?

DL: Pakistan was always a special case. And trying to find transactional areas of common interests; Pakistan also suffered from Islamic extremism and attacks from al-Qaeda, though I would contend, and I've written that some of that being their own doing by nurturing some of the very extremist elements and jihadist organisations that they saw as a fifth column of defence against India, which I've always expressed, with confidence, is going to come back and bite them. But for Pakistan, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which was the CIA's primary partner and the primary intelligence service, their military organisation, they had pretty much gotten into bed with the Haqqanis for that very same reason. They needed to pre-empt India, in their mind. But in so doing that means they had to side with the Taliban, and they had to very much side with the Haqqanis, whose business interests straddle that border. The Haqqanis, again, they're Pashtuns, just like the core of the Taliban is. But you know, 40% of, I think it's 40% of Afghanistan, is Pashtun, but not all Pashtuns are alike in the sense that they have divisions based on parts of the country they're from, region and tribe.

So, the Haqqanis, who played, I think, a decisive role in facilitating the Taliban's military victory, by their operations they're very effective, they're closer knit, they are a family organisation, they are inherently a family business. And it was some of those business interests, I believe, that also influenced the Pakistanis, because some of which they reap some profit from. But fundamentally, they needed the Haqqanis as part of that fifth column to prevent what the United States wanted, which was a stable, centrally ruled Afghanistan, which at that time, was developing better and better relations with India. And they saw a threat from India. So, at the very beginning, even at the point of greatest cooperation with Pakistan, which I'd say was in the immediate, let's say, two to three years after 9/11, where they were a genuine partner in identifying and locating al-Qaeda members, Arab al-Qaeda members, within Pakistan. And of course, it wasn't totally unselfish. they received a lot of money from doing that. United States would pay the Rewards for Justice programme amounts for captives, which ranged in the millions, many millions, they were also making a lot of money operating the ground and air lines of communications that allowed NATO forces, ISAF forces, United States forces, to operate, but at the same time, facilitating the sanctuary for the Taliban, providing transit points for their fighters for an ordinate amount of fertiliser, which was the foundation of the improvised explosive devices that Afghanistan used, despite us, the West, Western nations, NATO, putting a great deal of evidence in their face about how this was going on, there was too much at stake for them. They needed to support the Taliban, they needed to support the Haqqanis.

So, from the very beginning, as early as 2004/2005, Pakistan had made it very clear, policy wise, they were going to support the Taliban and it was going to be the worst known secret kept, but they were certainly going to do that. And that's why operating against the Haqqanis, and the Taliban was pretty much off limits. There were some exceptions, where a transactional incentive could help or were, they really had very little choice but to cooperate. And there were a couple of arrests that are kind of timely, because one was Baradar who was arrested, I think, in 2011, and he's now one of the two deputy prime ministers, as well as both Tajmir Jawad, who was likewise arrested around the same time, and they didn't have a lot of choice based on the evidence and the circumstances and the possibility that they would be embarrassed by not. But Tajmir Jawad was released long ago. And he's now the Deputy Intelligence Chief in Afghanistan. And I would argue, maybe in reality, that the true intelligence chief, because the current chief, [Abdul Haq] Wasiq was a member of the Taliban five in Guantanamo, I don't think those people are fully trusted. Baradar was kept in jail because the Taliban had no interest in seeing him released, which was one of the points I made that Baradar did not have the influence and insight into what was going on that our special envoy would like to claim and that the United States government would like to have believed.

SG: So, this lays out a very complex scenario, which also perhaps also has paradoxes too, that if on the one hand, Pakistan was ostensibly an ally, in the war on terrorism, but was supporting groups like the Haqqanis, who were responsible for a lot of the violence in Afghanistan, including the deaths of hundreds of American soldiers. How did one find a way of trying to resolve this? Or is it that there wasn't a way to effectively resolve this?

DL: Ideally, the United States government would have liked to have identified a transformational solution to our relations with Pakistan. Because just throwing evidence at them really didn't matter. I sat across from Pakistan ISI generals many times over the years, and those conversations had a familiar agenda. It was usually an airing of the grievances if you're a Seinfeld fan, you'll appreciate what that means, where the Pakistanis would lay out for 45 minutes to an hour, how they are the aggrieved party and the victims of terrorism and it is only, you know, their sacrifice to work with the United States that has brought them this pain suffering. And then one would lay out, you know, concrete evidence and clinical evidence to the point that we could because we also had to be wary of sources and methods, because providing them too much as occasionally might happen, would

allow them to find where the intelligence was coming from and change that, either killing an agent or making a change that would impair other collection methods.

So, the fundamental impasse was really India. Pakistan's policy in the region was and is based on its concerns over what it perceives as an existential threat from India. It's never won a war with India, India is far larger, has far more arms to bring to bear. Thus, Pakistan's development of a nuclear programme to try to find some way to even the playing field. But in a conservative war, they see the greater likelihood, and they do believe, that India is an aggressor, and that India would take advantage of weakness and strike at them if they could. So, unless or until one can find some way to address the Indo-Pak drama that's been ongoing and will continue, for some time. There was no way they were going to change what is an actual pillar of their defence strategy, which is supporting jihadist groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba, the other Kashmiri groups is a perfect example. These are groups that survived, were sponsored, matured, trained, and aided by the Pakistani intelligence. That Pakistani intelligence did a lot of the recruiting for them. But the danger is these groups have grown more independent, and they grow more international. Lashkar-e-Taiba, for example, is hardly and solely a Kashmiri independent group right now. It trained and worked with the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan; it has a much more internationalist agenda, as an international Sunni extremist group.

And I believe the danger for all of us, and I think right now the danger with the Taliban in control in Afghanistan, its military victory, is for the region, in that I don't know how much control Pakistan continues to exercise over some of these groups. I know in the recent weeks, we've seen the press discuss the political group [Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, TLP] that wanted the expulsion of the French ambassador, because of caricatures of the Prophet, was supporting the assassin of Pakistan, a governor who had sided with someone who was accused of blasphemy. That's an ultra-extremist group that actually seeks the overthrow of the generals and seeks a Taliban-like government. They were flying the Taliban flag at the Red Fort. But the Pakistanis tried to detain their leader, designate the group as a terrorist organisation, but then, because of the ensuing violence, they backed out. That's now a legitimate political party, the leader has been free. And the only thing that group had to step back from was calling for the expulsion of the ambassador and some language about promoting violence. So, I don't know that the Pakistan government, as it stands today, the military run government, is really in a position to control some of the groups that it has long nurtured.

SG: Yes. And that group that you mentioned, is the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, which is effectively a very radical entity that has held the Government of Pakistan to ransom on various issues, in fact, that the Prime Minister Imran Khan has effectively had to surrender to their demands just illustrates how powerful radical forces are in in Pakistan.

When we spoke last year, you were kindly helping me with my research to do with al-Qaeda and the region, we discussed what the potential consequences would be of a Western withdrawal from Afghanistan. Sadly, all of those scenarios have proved to be true. What were your thoughts on the situation now in Afghanistan? Is there anything that has surprised you or worried you more than you were previously worried about?

DL: Well, I really wish I could say I've been surprised or that things are worse or maybe better. But they've played out essentially, as I expected. The Taliban has been very predictable, over the course of this war, they've not done anything that's been surprising, which was the disappointment I had in the United States approach, particularly under the Trump administration, and trying to negotiate

a settlement with the Taliban from a position of weakness without any serious conditions, because we never really kept any conditions, without a true end game of the state which we wanted to see when we left. It was just trying to find the most honourable, face-saving way out, which is, which is ultimately what happened.

President Biden, likewise, he inherited a very bad deal, perhaps, and I call it the absolute worst diplomatic deal I've ever seen. But you know, President Biden had an opportunity to re-examine our policy in Afghanistan, not necessarily perpetuate what we had done and done wrong, or to accept what he was handed. But I also believe President Biden thought the American people were just exhausted, he was certainly exhausted with the issue, and he just wanted the quickest way out. So I think you just need to look at the actions of the Taliban to understand what they're going to do, and certainly not their words, look at their actions over the past 20 years and the years that they ruled, and you pretty much have a set pattern of what they're going to do in the future, because the people running that country are those very same people. It's predominantly the Taliban leadership, which took to hiding in Pakistan, they are essentially running the country. Very few exceptions, the Taliban Five got some portfolios, some minor, I would say minor, some of the deputy positions, I think, are for face more than anything. I don't necessarily think they exert much of a progressive stance anyway. Because if you look at some of their comments given, that's available on public record, to their briefers, they were part and parcel of the genocide against the Hazara, the Shiite, the misogyny and punishment of women. And I don't really believe we're going to see any change of that.

I think the challenge and the questions for the United States, for its NATO partners is well, you know, in try to find the most effective way to deal with Afghanistan, in what the reality is, not what we like it to be. Are we better off engaging it, not engaging it? Do we provide aid because of the humanitarian crisis and conditions? Do we not provide aid without some ability to exert behaviour that we'd like to see out of Afghanistan? Those are tremendously hard choices, choices that I personally as a human being, really have. To see people starving and suffering. That's not politics. That's real. And are we better off just trying to establish some credibility by providing aid for the sake of aid itself? Again, I am personally torn.

But I see the Taliban, if anything, being smarter, but not having changed its objectives. I think the Taliban, in fact, I'm certain the Taliban will continue to aid those groups, which it feels loyalty from and to, such as Tehrek-i-Taliban Pakistan, which continues to operate from Afghanistan soil in attacking Pakistan and seeking the overthrow of the government. And the only language I've seen coming out of Taliban is not "oh we'll turn TTP [Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan] over, we'll push them out." It was, "you know, you all should negotiate an agreement." The Eastern Islamic Turkmenistan groupment, the Uyghurs from China, or at least one element of the Uyghurs from China that the Chinese are worried about, the Talibans not going to abandon them. It's certainly not going to abandon al-Qaeda. I think they will try to be careful, but you know, what do they have to lose?

The Taliban is not looking to be a global economic powerhouse, or even to integrate into the global system. They need just enough to keep control. The Taliban needs to exercise control. They don't necessarily want the influence and the danger that comes with too much Western influence, which comes with too good an economy which might make the people have higher expectations. But I think that at the same time it's a danger for the Taliban. This is not the country they ruled between 1996 and 2001, particularly the cities. The cities are totally different than what they left behind, the people's expectations, society has changed. The countryside. Yeah, that's pretty much the same. They've controlled the countryside. But the cities, I think they're going to have a hard time. And that's where there could be some gaps, some problems, some divisions within the Taliban itself, as it tries

to wrestle with how to maintain control, which is their primary goal. How do they maintain control without ceding too much influence or weakness to outside powers, which they desperately want to avoid? And how do they stay consistent with their ideological agenda, which is a very conservative and often with the pillar of jihad approach to at least their region, and I think their region is what they care about most. So those are those are quite the dilemmas for NATO and the U.S.

SG: Well, and tying in those dilemmas you have Sirajuddin Haqqani, the leader of the Haqqani Network, who is now the interior minister of the Taliban regime, effectively he is the most powerful person in Afghanistan and retains those very close ties with al-Qaeda. Do you envisage al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups looking to reassert themselves in Afghanistan via Pakistan? Because they already seem to be there in some numbers, do you see that growing and expanding and then presenting a problem?

DL: I think it will, I think the Taliban will try to be a little more careful about it. The Taliban has the advantage that they know we're not going to reinvade Afghanistan again. I mean, we might retaliate, we might take economic sanctions, we might take military strikes, but we're not going to invade Afghanistan, we're not going to overthrow the Taliban again, at least not directly, not militarily. I mean, there's always a possibility of covert action and regular warfare, but even that's pretty broken at this moment, because there's no Northern Alliance as there was in 2001, that the United States was able to support. So, I'm confident that the Taliban will continue to provide sanctuary, will no doubt ask those groups operating in their territory to keep a lower profile, and to at least to allow some window dressing to impede the possibility of tying future attacks to training, recruitment, organisation, planning, leadership, command, and control that might be conducted from Afghanistan.

But look at just some of the metrics we've seen, what information we could trust, a great number of al-Qaeda operatives who were in Iran, maintaining their sanctuary there, that the Iranians provided, have gone back to Afghanistan. They are now joining the significant number of highly placed, well experienced al-Qaeda operatives, particularly those of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which is the regional affiliate—the local affiliate—who were released by the Taliban, who are still there. There were releases of a couple of notable former al-Qaeda individuals, one who had been arrested and then released by the Pakistanis, who has gone back, and very publicly gone back, to Afghanistan. So, I think that's the real challenge. It is a largely ungoverned space still, where these groups will be able to conduct a lot of their most important functions.

The biggest advantage the United States had over the 20 years, it was in Afghanistan was attrition, essentially, which was keeping terrorist organisations that were operating there on the defensive, trading their numbers, pre-empting their capabilities to transition to the offensive, because they were busy trying just to survive, moving fighters out moving many to Iran, moving those to Syria, Yemen, and such like that. That no longer exists, there's no longer any counter-terrorist pressure. So those groups are free to exercise command and control, operate on the media, train, raise money, it's certainly beyond our reach directly, right now, because there's no local partner with whom to work. We're not going to be working with the Taliban. And there's no rebel organisation right now, no insurgent group fighting the Taliban, that we could work with.

And you know, people speak about "oh we have ISIS as a common enemy," certainly, ISIS is a common enemy. It's no friend of the Taliban, though ironically, their philosophy is essentially the same. It's really my opinion politics that divides them. ISIS in the region, ISIS-KP, of the Khorasan province, largely made up of people from Pakistan, people who came from Tehrek-i-Taliban Pakistan and the

Sadozais, the Waziris, I think there was one of the Emir's, who was a former Taliban member, but that was the exception. So, there was a lot more in terms of political differences in power, and a grab for resources. So, for that reason, ISIS is a threat, and it's a threat to us as they look to the possibility of using successful external operations, to generate greater credibility, raise more money, raise more recruits. But even there, that's a real dicey path to lead, working with the Taliban against ISIS, because we don't necessarily want to see one or the other, but we are compromising our sources and methods and capabilities by working with them that, they will most certainly share with the likes of al-Qaeda and Tehrek-i-Taliban Pakistan, and other groups to whom they're loyal.

SG: Well, sticking with the ISIS affiliate IS-KP or ISIS-KP, there seems to be again this situation where nothing is ever black and white in Afghanistan-Pakistan. You've got all these complicated relationships, where even sometimes you could see low level support between IS-KP and the Haqqanis, for example, and there are reports suggesting that the group IS-KP could be able to launch attacks globally, within a year, potentially 18 months. Do you agree with that assessment?

DL: There's a little bit to unpack there. I think what notoriously was absent is any comment about what al-Qaeda is able to do in six months to a year. Secretary of Defence Austin commented as Afghanistan was collapsing that the intelligence community had anticipated that al-Qaeda could reconstitute and form a serious homeland threat within one to two years. That's roughly true, but that was a projection based on still having a partner force in Afghanistan, that there was still an ongoing war between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban, not one which the Taliban maintained complete military control of the country. I thought it was suspicious that there was no mention of al-Qaeda, yet ISIS-KP, which truly is not as well-organised internationally—they depend on core ISIS, which remnants or pockets of are still in the Levant for a lot, otherwise they have to turn to their own sort of familial ties, those Afghans and Pakistanis, and maybe Indians, who are in places of the world that they could support. I think there's certainly the potential to inspire attacks in that timeframe, six to twelve months for any group, because that doesn't really take a whole lot of time. And it depends on how they're doing with their media, it's how they're doing in terms of promoting themselves, and if they can promote success that they can claim from a home.

So, I don't discount the assessment that ISIS could present a homeland threat. I think it'd be more problematic for them to constitute the type of 9/11 or July 7, 2005 threat, or threat to the trains in Spain that we saw over the years, where they're actually sending fighters—I'm not discounting it, I just don't know that they have the logistical maturity to do that, because there's a lot of logistics, and I don't know that that's their priority. Al-Qaeda's priority is striking the United States homeland—that's without a doubt— striking the United States externally. So, they're certainly going to be much more in gear, and they've got a greater web of connections to do so. So, I think when I read that, I certainly didn't discount it, but I focus more on, what about al-Qaeda? How come that's sort of notably absent?

SG: So, your opinion is that it is al-Qaeda that potentially is the greater transnational threat, rather than IS-KP, who could still be a challenge, but principally, it is al-Qaeda?

DL: Again, I don't want to underestimate what IS-KP could do, but they're going to play to their strengths. Core ISIS from the Levant was able to connect to a great number of contacts and colleagues who work in Europe or have been in Europe, and then join them and then went back—those who have Algerian and Moroccan ethnicity, who are French nationals, citizens of Belgium and such. ISIS-KP may not have that same bench of connections and people. And again, I can't speak with

any authority, because basically you'd be looking at those from the Sadozais, to the Waziris - Pashtuns - and they're certainly global. But I don't know that they're those who are tied to ISIS for being part of ISIS' sake, as opposed to being just ethnically tied to people who are in the organisation.

So, I'm not just counting the capacity to do something. I think the greater threat—both short-term, but I think it'll be more long-term, actually, to be honest—is going to be from al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is probably going to be more patient in establishing itself because it's going to want to be successful. And I think they might be able to throw something together sooner than ISIS or IS-KP could externally. But I would suspect if I had a bet, they'll probably be a little more patient and try to do something that will not be an embarrassment, but that will be more likely to succeed.

SG: Most definitely, I would agree with you on that. Then, in terms of our counter-terrorism operations, Doug, for Afghanistan, what options are there that are actually viable? You have to look at Afghanistan on the map; it's completely landlocked. We don't necessarily have an ally that is going to allow us to operate on the ground. So potentially having that intelligence gathering has been severely impaired. Negotiations with Pakistan seem to be continuing without reaching any clear resolution. So, do we have an effective strategy for dealing with a regrowth of terrorism in Afghanistan?

DL: We have the resources that are available to us, which are fewer and more logistically challenging. So, intelligence has been collected from closed borders before, it's part of the business you operate with. President Biden refers to an "over the horizon" strategy, and that that relates to it, but on the intelligence piece, you try to have stay-behind agents. I would like to think that for the years we were there in Afghanistan that CIA and other intelligence services have agents that deliberately wanted left behind, who were willing to stay behind, who retained access to intelligence and a means to communicate. And those means are going to be personal, most likely, either electronic or otherwise, might rely on couriers, might rely on what we refer to as a "principal agent," which is an agent from that country that you've recruited, whose job isn't to provide intelligence him or herself, but to collect intelligence from others who have access.

But there's a lot of complications and dangers. It's much more challenging from a counter-intelligence perspective. It's much harder to run any network securely, because anytime you're operating an agent network where more than one agent knows of another, then compromise of one can result in the compromise of the others. When you're dealing indirectly with intelligence, it's not as timely. It's often indirect, might be second-hand, the chain of information, chain of acquisition might be more extended. So, it's more difficult to vouch for and validate the access of the ultimate source of the intelligence. Does the ultimate source even know they're providing intelligence, or just having a meal with a buddy, who's talking to another buddy, who was talking to the CIA? So, the quality of the intelligence will also weaken our ability to test it and stand behind it.

So much of the conversation is on "can we fly drones from far away?" That's not the issue. We've got great satellites, we've got terrific drones, the technology is super, they can fly from hither and yon, and loiter over Afghanistan. But what are they looking at? What are they listening to? How do they know what to look at and listen to, and where to look and listen? That's provided by agents on the ground. Agents provide phone numbers, radio frequencies, locations of houses, homes, safe houses, commands, times of patterns that people take when they're out and about, what they look like, physical descriptions. So, all the great technical collection we have—and we do have extensive technical collection and capabilities—depends on people at the end of the day. And we will still be collecting intelligence, we will still be operating agents on the ground, very much remotely, indirectly.

We will strengthen those networks over time, as Afghan dissident groups grow, we will most likely start engaging them and cooperating and try to take advantage of their networks. But again, they'll have their own biases, they'll have their own flaws. And they'll have their own counter-intelligence challenges to deal with that will be inherited.

So, the strategy is to go with what we have and try to be as scrupulous as possible, to be really vigilant about the quality of the intelligence, but then decide at the end of the day, as you said, what are we going to do with it? We don't have a local partner on the ground. So, you don't have an ability to reach down and capture someone, unless you want to send in Special Forces, which is doable but highly dangerous. And do we want to have the nightmares of Special Forces operatives being shut down and taken captive? I think those are going to be political decisions—that will drive a lot of what we do. So, if you're just left with kinetic activities to take people off the map, I don't necessarily know that that addresses the conditions for terrorism with which we should be most concerned. How do we actually impede the rise of terrorism or the drive of those to conduct violence against us and others? I think it's a lot more complicated and more holistic. It has a security component, it has certainly a military component. And a lot of that's going to be driven by just good intelligence, to try to inform our understanding of the dynamics, so that we can best manipulate that in the most advantageous way to our own security.

SG: So, there are options, but it's also a question of waiting and biding one's time to see if those options can increase. It's interesting that we may not necessarily have a strong visible footprint, but you could say that there is a low-key toeprint in Afghanistan. If we look at some of the other neighbours of Afghanistan—in our conversation, you were mentioning Iran—I always found that curious, because in your book also you spoke about it, that there were al-Qaeda fighters that would go to Iran, that they would be based there, that they even found sanctuary there. Now, everyone knows that Iran plays various different strategic games. On the surface, they're supposed to be hostile towards al-Qaeda and vice versa. And yet, you had this whole host of al-Qaeda figures that at one time were being based in Iran. So, what does Iran get from having these groups operating there? Why would they even allow it in the first place?

DL: So, Iranians are—and I say this with admiration as our political opponents and intelligence opponents—extremely practical. I think they can afford to be practical because they do most of what they do in secret from their own people. So, the idea of them hosting al-Qaeda, I mean, that's not a question. Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who was the deputy emir of al-Qaeda, was killed in Tehran, living comfortably, happily, driving with his daughter, in conditions provided by the Iranian government. Saif al-Adel, who moved up to succeed him, likewise is there, along with a host of others. Now, a number of them did move back.

For the Iranians, it's not something to their advantage to thumbing their nose in the Americans' face, or even a practical advantage of making it less likely al-Qaeda would do something against them elsewhere, because it depends on conditions. I believe al-Qaeda is a valuable proxy, another valuable surrogate to the Iranians that serves their purpose in a very measured way. I think their cooperation went from simply sanctuary and trying to impede al-Qaeda acting against them and thumbing their nose at us, to a more active role around 2015. And the reason for that is the JCPOA: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. I think that was a lever that they wanted to have as a safety valve for them to be able to act.

But at the same time, Iran today is looking with some apprehension at what's going on. Now, the

Iranians wanted the United States out, that was their priority—because a United States military presence, whether it's in Iraq or Afghanistan, they see as the Pakistanis see India as an existential threat to them. So, getting us out was great. They certainly cooperated to some degree with the Taliban, provided aid, material aid. At the same time, they were talking to the Afghan government that was in place at the time.

But now what? The Iranians know up close and personally what the Taliban will do to Shias and Hazaras—they lost nine diplomats, I think, at their consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif when the Taliban was in power. The Taliban has operated in a genocidal fashion against the Hazaras, which is a community very much that the Iranians want to protect and support. So, I don't think it's a real happy day for them to see the Taliban in charge, and I think, being practical as they are, they will try to find some practical modus vivendi. But at the same time, it's been interesting some of the language they've had about Taliban actions or lack of actions and promoting minorities, Hazaras in the cabinet posts that they've announced, and the care they've taken, or support and resources they provided to Hazara communities. The Hazaras have been the primary target, after all, of the Islamic State. Taliban fighters and the Islamic State continue to target Shia schools, Shia hospitals, Shia communities, Shia mosques.

So, I don't think it's a happy day for the Iranians, and they will try to find their footing. I think, if anything, it makes them not necessarily an opportune partner, but at least an indirect partner to promote certain stabilising measures the West and NATO would like to see Afghanistan take and pressure we'd like to apply to them. They might, without making it look like they're supporting us, be helpful in that fashion.

I think the same could be said of the Central Asian states, which have their own insurgency issues, which have their own Islamic extremist groups, their own stability problems. Remember, Tajiks, Uzbeks—they form a significant part of the Afghan population. Now, there's not that many of them in the Taliban. There's a few they've promoted, but really not that many. They are in high-profile positions, and still the Taliban is fundamentally a Pashtun organisation. But they're certainly worried, the Central Asian states are, so again, I don't think they are totally thrilled to see the Taliban in charge.

So again, I'm looking for some quiet support, some quiet activity. I don't see Vladimir Putin ever allowing a US military presence, but I could be wrong. You could find some advantage in targeting us there by having a presence there—targeting mostly from a collection point of view, not directly targeting kinetically because he doesn't want to bring US forces closer to Russia or to the Baltics these days, for sure. But I think those factors and concerns of the regional players might at least lend to an atmosphere for some quiet behind-the-scenes activity, which could help put some pressure on the Taliban, nut again, I'm not really optimistic that pressure like that really has an impact on them.

SG: I noticed you mentioned Russia and Vladimir Putin and Afghanistan. So, does Russia play that much influence now in the country where they can effectively, or regionally, stop the West from potentially coming back or having a greater involvement?

DL: The Russians obviously, and Putin particularly, are delighted we're gone and delighted we were bled as much as we were, and they contributed to that bleeding by their support to the Taliban. Russia wants to be a player, they want to be on every stage, they want to be centre stage. They played a role in diplomatic activity with Afghanistan and with the Taliban—they'll continue to do that, be-

cause they see it as a means of exercising influence and undermining our own, largely at American expense.

I think the Russians have to be concerned about the threat from Islamic extremism from Afghanistan—Chechens and other elements in their own country, or their sphere of influence that they're worried about, or the Islamic State, but it's not really a high threat to them. Even if there were to be an occasional, small-level attack in Russia, Putin doesn't face the issues that an American leader has to, from public outrage, from a free press. He could endure some of that, and he could then respond very brutally, if he wants to, as he has. So, I think Russia is less worried than the Central Asian states. The Central Asian states have more to lose than Russia has. I think Putin is in a greater position of security. But at the same time, you know, he's no fan of the Taliban. And he's obviously going to have to contend with threats from the Islamic State, from other Sunni extremist groups that will be using Afghanistan for sanctuary.

SG: Well, I definitely want to come back to Russia for a final question. But before we do that, factoring in that one of Afghanistan's other neighbours is China. And there's been increasing talk about China's role in Afghanistan, assisted by Pakistan. Do you think that China can succeed in Afghanistan in terms of its objectives that may be economic or strategic, especially if they have Pakistan's backing, which is something that perhaps the West was not able to achieve in the last 20 years?

DL: China wants stability and influence. Their Belt and Road Initiative is the cornerstone of their policy in the region. And that extends to them the type of influence that they're looking for: economic as well as military, access to ports and such, and leverage over countries—look at the leverage they have over Pakistan, in terms of how indebted Pakistan is to China. China is worried about its own internal security in that respect and the Uyghur question is at the forefront, and how forthcoming will a Taliban-run Afghanistan be? I think the Taliban will cooperate concerning Uyghurs who are working with ISIS, and there are a fair number. I think the Uyghur community tended to split somewhat. Originally, they were really focused with al-Qaeda associated groups such as ETIM [East Turkistan Islamic Movement], and they drifted, like some of the Central Asians did, to ISIS for power and opportunity and such like that.

So, I think China will be also trying to find that balance and trying to promote their Belt and Road Initiative and trying to have access and trying to have influence. Their main nemesis in the region is obviously India. So, they share that with Pakistan. I don't think the Taliban feels terribly threatened by India as much. I think China likewise is not all in with the Taliban, is going to try to find a chord in combination, which they're good at. I don't know that they'll get as much from the Taliban that they would like. They're not going to get the Taliban to turn over or impede Uyghurs who associated with ETIM. The Taliban is not really thrilled about infrastructure. The Taliban won the war based on a lack of infrastructure, based on the demographics and the topography and geography of Afghanistan, which is a very decentralised country— they're all proud of being Afghans, but they all kind of fall along very decentralised lines of the region and tribe. So, I think the Taliban will only go so far in allowing for that much infrastructure, tying all the roads together, which is very much at the height of the Chinese policy. So, there'll be some frustrations, but the Chinese will try to find a way to work with it. I don't think the Chinese are going to abandon the Taliban. And at the same time, I don't think they're going to be an unquestioning, unconditional friend as well; they're going to try to find ways to promote what's in their interest, which is some of that balance we talked about.

SG: If things go wrong in Afghanistan for China, does that then impact on their relationship with Pa-

kistan because of Pakistan's very close relationship with the Taliban and the Haqqanis?

DL: The Chinese were always concerned about their investments in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the Chinese did a good job of dealing with the Taliban in the countryside, paying them off to allow them to continue to operate their mines. So, the Pakistanis have often been messaged by the Chinese to temper it down, and the Pakistanis would do perhaps what they could superficially. I think that the Chinese-Pakistan relationship is very sound, as it is. I think China has only increased its leverage. Pakistan doesn't want to be a slave to one state to fight off being a slave to another, so it's going to try to maintain some degree of independence. And I'm sure that Chinese individuals sometimes have the same frustrating meetings with their Pakistani counterparts that I endured over the years. But I don't see that relationship breaking.

Similarly, I don't really necessarily see the US-Pakistan relationship breaking. I see it getting really frail at times, and even by a thin thread at others, but I don't think there's, at this point, a willingness by either party to break the relationship, though there are times I think the United States should push it more for the American part. For the NATO part, the great worry is, well, if that relationship breaks, we no longer have influence at keeping what might be a jihadist Taliban-like government coming to power in Pakistan and having control of their nuclear weapons—that's the ultimate nightmare. NATO does not want that. Even in its worst days in Afghanistan, when we were losing the highest number of casualties from facilitation provided to the Haqqanis and the Taliban by Pakistan, we were not willing to break that relationship, because the threat and the danger we saw of a broken Pakistan, from whose ashes could come a Taliban-type government, was a nightmare with which we did not want to have to contend.

SG: I know I said that I was going to get to Russia, but you keep raising so many good points that it just keeps making me want to ask you more interesting questions. So, this will probably be the penultimate question: you spoke about the concern that there is of nuclear weapons getting into the wrong hands in Pakistan. And that was certainly something that I've heard a lot by policymakers in the last 20 years. Is that a genuine concern? Because they seem quite safe and secure under the military. Has there ever been an occasion where it's actually got close to being in the wrong hands? And I guess then it also comes down to defining what the wrong hands are.

DL: So, I'll answer that backwards. First, I'd say there have been insider threats within the Pakistani military that would give one pause. They had been disrupted, the ones of which I'm aware, over the years, but they have come. I don't think that we should overestimate the stability of the military. I think one of the greatest denial and deception operations I've ever seen done has been done by Pakistan, in convincing the West, convincing the United States, that we should be betting on them, we should rely on them, they're just like us, they're progressive, you know, they believe in God, they're Islamic, they're progressive, and they run the country, I wouldn't say in a secular way, because it's an Islamic republic fashion. But we've got to invest in that, we've got to trust them, because we're all together in this.

I think that's one of the greatest D&D [Denial and Deception] programmes I've seen, because I don't think the Pakistan military is that cohesive, I don't think it's that stable, and I don't think it's that resistant to an uprising. I worked with Pakistani security elements against al-Qaeda, tried to against the Taliban, and there was no shortage of sympathy for some of these movements. There was no shortage of content for what they still saw as a very imperialist, colonialist West—not just the United States, Great Britain and others, who they did not cry for when we suffered our own defeats and

problems. So, I would not really have that confidence in Pakistan's military. I think that's one of the reasons why the West, the United States in particular, wanted that continuing influence and access, to provide training, to have some eyes on, to provide means for the Pakistani leadership to continue to secure its nuclear weapons, its way it delegated authority. But I do not sleep well at night thinking that all is well there.

SG: Well, that is a very sombre assessment. So, this is the last question now, I can promise. We spoke about Russia, and right now, as you've probably seen, there is this migration crisis on the border between Belarus, Poland, and Lithuania. And there's a belief that it is being created deliberately by President Lukashenko of Belarus, involving hybrid warfare, potentially with the support and assistance of Russia. And this is now a major concern for NATO. What is your take on what is happening?

DL: I think we have to get a lot smarter about Russia, I think we have to be a lot more realistic. Vladimir Putin has thrown out all the rules of order that we went by, because largely they were imposed by the West, they were imposed by NATO and the United States on the rest of the world, in terms of comportment and behaviour. Putin started talking about Ukraine, unashamedly saying Ukraine's part of Russia. He does not even respect Ukraine's sovereignty as an independent country. So, threats about embarrassing or cajoling the Russians are futile because you're not going to embarrass or cajole Vladimir Putin.

Russia, historically, and Putin as very much in that grain, understands consequences, reciprocity, actions. So, there's got to be a threat for Putin to be concerned enough to change his behaviour. I don't see us yet embarking on that multidomain warfare that Russia is, which is very much in the charter of General Gerasimov, his famous doctrine from 2013, which is essentially, it's been written on that all measures short of war, addition through subtraction, where we're weaker than the United States, we have to even the playing field. So, we want to win the war without having to fire shots, we want to be able to win the war by compromising alliances, using propaganda, disinformation, intimidation, economic hegemony, in order to make sure that the United States and NATO doesn't have the chance to send Marines, the 82nd airborne, the German armoured divisions forward, because we would have already lost the war before it became a military one.

That multidomain warfare, fighting in the cyber realm, the information realm, the economic realm, is one that I don't think NATO and the United States have put their arms around holistically as a campaign. We do it independently. We fight cyber with cyber; we try to fight disinformation with influence and messaging and diplomacy. But the Russians do it as a campaign, it's all very much synchronised and tied together, which is what's been effective. Russia is not a supreme military power. They are enhancing their capabilities by embarking on a strategy—this multidomain strategy—which we're not yet fighting back with. So, I think NATO and the United States really have to start embracing that, starting to synchronise how we deal with Russia across the playing field, because it's not necessarily symmetrical. If they are going to threaten us here, we may not have the capacity to counter that threat there. We need to find an asymmetrical way which the Russians get and understand "okay, that's the price, we're not going to do it." Because other than that, I think we're still now playing Putin's game, and by Putin's rules, as opposed to one where we could exercise our own advantages of which we have many.

SG: Well, on that note, I think we can conclude with knowing that this problem is not going to go away and is something we're going to have to address, and as you said, we're going to have to get a lot smarter about Russia. Douglas London, it's been a real pleasure to have you on NATO Deep

Dive. We're very grateful and thank you so much for spending the time with us.

DL: The pleasure is all mine. You all have a great day.

Douglas London's bio

Douglas London is a retired senior Operations Officer with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). He is currently an Adjunct Associate Professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and is frequently published in outlets such as The New York Times, Foreign Policy, The Hill, Just Security and The Middle East Institute. He is also the author of The Recruiter: Spying and the Lost Art of American Intelligence.

Episode 4 – Sebastian Rotella and the Fusion of Criminality, Borders and Terrorism, December 2021

Key Reflections

*** The blurring of borders and change of geopolitical structures has created gateways to human trafficking, drug smuggling, corruption, espionage, and terrorism.**

*** Hezbollah with Iran's guidance, funding, and support has been able to exploit the Lebanese diaspora around the world including in South America.**

*** There is a convergence in Europe between crime and extremism with regular interchange between criminal gangs and ideological radicals.**

*** The Mumbai Siege Attacks represented one of the most important cases in terrorism as it demonstrates the interplay between Pakistani military intelligence, the Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist group and al-Qaeda, all of which have had ramifications globally.**

*** Investigations into the September 11 attacks have demonstrated angles involving Saudi nationals that require further analysis and introspection.**

*** The rise of China has resulted in the West shifting its geopolitical priorities to address the activities of the Chinese state, involving commerce, defence, espionage and intelligence. Australia has been the frontline for the West in its strategy to counter China's expansion.**

Transcript:

SG - Dr. Sajjan Gohel

SR - Sebastian Rotella

SG: Hello, and welcome to DEEP Dive, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Sebastian Rotella, a senior investigative journalist at ProPublica As an award-winning correspondent, he covers international security issues including terrorism, intelligence, organized crime, human rights, and migration. His reporting has taken him across the Americas and Europe, and to the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa. Working with PBS's Frontline series, Mr. Rotella's documentary, *A Perfect Terrorist*, focused on the investigation of the Mumbai siege terrorist attacks, and was nominated for an Emmy and received an overseas Press Club Award. Amidst the emergence of great power competition, his current research includes assessing the role and influence of China. Mr. Rotella has penned three novels: *Rip Crew*, *The Convert's Song*, and *Triple Crossing.* He's also the author of *Twilight on the Line*.

Sebastian Rotella, thank you for joining us on NATO Deep Dive.

SR: It's my pleasure. Thank you very much.

SG: Let's talk about your career in journalism and the research that you've done because it is so varied and so important. You've covered many critical stories when it comes to security, terrorism, transnational crime, and perhaps the starting point of your career. You began life as a young journalist covering border issues and organised crime and corruption in Latin America. What got you interested in that in the first place?

SR: My parents were immigrants from Italy and Spain. And so, I grew up speaking those languages and traveling and having a great interest in the Spanish speaking world and in Latin America and in writing and being a journalist. And so, from a young age, I was always interested in being a journalist and particularly in being a foreign correspondent, and it made sense to follow that line.

The first big job I had at the *Los Angeles Times*—I had been there about four years—was covering the Mexican border, which is an extraordinary opportunity, right, So I was based in the San Diego/Tijuana area and covering that entire border in the early 1990s, which was a period of great change and conflict and crisis. After the Cold War, this kind of erasing and blurring of borders and change of geopolitical structures really manifested itself. So, I'm covering for the *Los Angeles Times* this region, which is just full of stories and secrets, and as you said, stories about migration, about corruption, about the rise of the drug cartels—all these remarkably international stories, and difficult to investigate stories, just a couple of hours from Los Angeles where the paper was based, and it was really a rich area to discover.

And the *Los Angeles Times* was one of the few major newspapers that had someone covering that reality full-time, which was very important, and that I think is where I learned a lot of the skills and got interested in a lot of the issues that I've pursued ever since then. Borders are kind of gateways to secret worlds. And so, I certainly started learning a lot about migration, about human rights, about corruption, about law enforcement, about intelligence.

And it sort of led naturally—one thing led to the other—because of Mexico, during that period, I covered some major cases such as the assassination of the presidential candidate Colosio, the murder of the cardinal of Guadalajara in a shootout between drug traffickers, the dramatic changes in Mexico as it sort of moved towards a semblance of democracy. And from there, it became rather natural that I became a foreign correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*, based in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro and covering most of South America. And again, it was a very rich beat and a very interesting time, where I was covering issues such as the rise and fall of President Fuji Modi in Peru; the arrest of Pinochet, the Chilean ex-dictator in the UK and its impact in Chile; the election of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela which became a historic point of change for the region. And so, I really learned a lot there and got a chance to cover a whole range of stories in organised crime, intelligence, human rights, justice.

And actually, it's where I first started covering terrorism, because in Buenos Aires in 1994—shortly before I got there—there had been one of the biggest terrorist attacks in the hemisphere, which was the bombing of the AMIA community centre, a Jewish community centre, by Iran and Hez-

bollah. And so, interestingly enough, down there in South America, I really found myself learning about Islamic terrorism for the first time and exploring all those worlds and the Tri-Border Area, which is where Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil come together. And there's some great activity, where organised crime, terrorism, and intelligence services converge. So, it was a great experience, a lot of interesting stories, and a chance to really prepare myself for what would be the next step.

SG: Well, there are so many important aspects that you have been looking at, and in fact, many of these issues are still so relevant today when it comes to organised crime, human trafficking, the drug running that is taking place, and the different fissures that exist amongst all these countries. The Tri-Border region that you mentioned—that's absolutely a fascinating part of the world, as well as Latin America. Is that something that doesn't get enough attention?

SR: At the time, it didn't. This was the late 1990s. After 9/11, there was more focus on it anyway, though, not always a great understanding of it. But at that period, it was this window into that world where terrorist groups and lawlessness thrive. It was a place that people would talk about without knowing much about it, and I had a chance to really spend a lot of time there on the ground, and also just working with sources—American and Argentine and Brazilian and Paraguayan—to understand it well. And what you had was this microcosm, the typical border community—where, as I said, the thing about borders is they become these windows into these global networks. So, you had a Middle Eastern community and an Asian community, you had drug trafficking, you had contraband, you had smuggling, you had all these different intelligence services operating there, because of the presence of people connected to Hezbollah, to Iranian intelligence, even to the some of the Sunni groups that would coalesce into al-Qaeda. So, it was a remarkable sort of landscape for a journalist to learn in and to try and to understand and tell these stories about. So, I think what was good about working there and seeing it firsthand was that I was a bit ahead of the curve in that sense, because after 9/11, a lot of places like that started getting more attention, but there I felt that I had kind of seen it first-hand.

And I had some interesting experiences. Just to give you one, I remember interviewing the head of the Chamber of Commerce of Ciudad del Este, which is the little border town in Paraguay, which is kind of the hub of all the illicit rackets down there. And he was a Lebanese gentleman who I had a long conversation and who was very charming and hospitable but also told me that there was no terrorism at the Tri-Border Area and if Hezbollah was there, it wasn't really terrorism because that was the equivalent of Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln for his people. So, we had an interesting conversation there, and sometime later, he was assassinated in that very shop where I had interviewed him. And the theses as to who had killed him—there were about half a dozen of them because there were so many different forces at work there, whether it was organised crime or terrorism or intelligence. So, experiences like that really had a powerful impact on me as I realised that the way to learn about these forces is to really try to dig in as in depth as possible within the limits of newspaper work. And the way to really understand issues like terrorism and organised crime is to really stay on them over a long period of time, and I've been fortunate enough to be able to do that. And so, as you say, things like that—now we're going on 25 years—have remained relevant and interesting to things that I've covered much later.

SG: Well, you mentioned the terrorist group Hezbollah and its ties to Latin America. Is it a group that still holds influence there? Do they have a presence? It's interesting that in many ways, some other Latin America-based groups such as Shining Path—Sendero Luminoso, —had some ties, I believe, to Hezbollah. What is the Hezbollah dynamic when it comes to Latin America?

SR: It was very interesting—I think what Hezbollah has done, with Iran's guidance and direction and funding and support, has been to really exploit the Lebanese diaspora around the world, which obviously is full of upright, hard-working, legitimate people—some of the most prominent politicians and popstars and others in Latin America are of Lebanese descent. But there are these networks in places like Venezuela and Colombia and Argentina and Paraguay, and then in places like Africa and others, and what Hezbollah and Iran I think were doing was using these networks for funding, which became increasingly important. And that's why Hezbollah was always strong in Latin America, because it was a place to make money. So, there was a lot of drug trafficking, a lot of arms trafficking, a lot of mafia activity. And then looking for places to strike Israeli and Jewish targets. In fact, there were two attacks in Argentina: one against the Israeli embassy in 1992, and then the one I mentioned, the AMIA community centre in 1994, which were major, and some of the biggest attacks outside of the Middle Eastern theatre carried out by Hezbollah. So, it showed the reach and the sophistication of these networks—and this was difficult to cover because some people would simplify it a great deal. Some people would completely sort of deny that Hezbollah had any sort of criminal role. What became increasingly clear to me starting in that period—and then when I was in Europe and talking to people about the evolution of drug trade—was that Hezbollah got very involved in the drug trade, including the emergence of a new route into Europe from South America through Africa in the 2000s.

So, I think, Hezbollah has really been this vanguard of the fusion of the world of criminality and the world of terrorism, and that has been a very interesting phenomenon to watch. And again, I think with the involvement of Iran and with the dynamic that some of this was just people making money, some of this was people absolutely directly involved in terrorism, others kind of just helping out. Because Hezbollah has been traditionally this entity with many faces, right? So, it's a political party, and it's a military group, and it's a terrorist group, and it has its charities. And it has needed money and global reach. And I think there in Latin America, I had a window into the development of that phenomenon, which there was a lot of debate about, I think for ideological reasons, but I think it became increasingly clear and has become increasingly clear that this organisation, as often happens with terrorist rebel groups, has gotten deeply involved in crime and corruption, as well as its military and terrorist activity.

SG: Well, this window that you talk about, it's becoming clearer to me now to see how you evolved your research from looking at Latin America, which clearly has many transnational ties to terrorism, which perhaps don't get the attention they deserve, and how that has moved towards the groups such as al-Qaeda and affiliates. But I'd be curious to get your take more specifically: what made you then want to start looking at al-Qaeda and the other affiliated jihadist groups that have been associated with them?

SR: I came to Europe as the Paris bureau chief of the *Los Angeles Times* in July 2001. And I had spent those final years in South America covering a lot of different issues, but very focused on that case and on the window into terrorist networks inside of it that I had seen in South America. I'd been hearing stirrings about al-Qaeda, and there were some cases in Latin America connected to it and people who I was talking to were telling me about the size of the al-Qaeda threat. But there in Paris, I really found myself less than a couple of weeks into my tour as Bureau chief, the 9/11 attacks happened in the United States. And our newspaper like so many other newspapers and like so many other academics and so many other people in law enforcement and intelligence sort of began this incredible effort to start covering this issue and understanding al-Qaeda, understanding the terrorist threat, understanding Islam in the West, and Islam around the world, and radicalisa-

tion, and all these connected issues.

And my editors at the *LA Times* put together a team and they sort of got me involved in a very central way to focus on al-Qaeda and take advantage that I already had some understanding and had done some investigations of terrorist phenomena and had some sources and had the languages and whatnot. And so, I really tried to make the most of it and move around Europe, also in, to some extent, in the Middle East, and try to understand al-Qaeda in the West working on specific cases, working on sort of concentric issues—so if it wasn't specifically on terrorism, on Muslim immigrant communities and integration and things like that in Europe.

And Europe was a remarkable laboratory to work in, first of all because there were all these different countries with different takes or different experiences of this phenomenon. A lot of different sources—I had the advantage of speaking Spanish and Italian and French, so I could get to know people in different security forces and go out into these cities around Europe and see some of these issues happening. So, I sort of plunged headlong into learning about al-Qaeda and about these issues. And obviously, one thing led to another; we were working on issues related to 9/11 then the lead-up to the Iraq War, then jihadis going off from Europe to Iraq, the Madrid attacks, the attacks in London in 2005.

So, I just sort of stayed on that beat in a very intense way in the years in the aftermath of 9/11 and learned a lot as quickly as I could and really trying to understand how al-Qaeda worked in a very in-depth way, talking to as many different sources as possible, both in the communities and in law enforcement and intelligence, digging into specific cases, reading transcripts… really trying to go beyond the story on the day of the attack to understand the networks in depth. And understand how people talk and think and how radicalisation works and understand some of the nuances. All of us were trying to understand a world that we should have understood better. And so, I really sort of dedicated myself to that, ever since 9/11.

SG: Those nuances certainly bring back memories for me, because a lot of the case studies you're talking about—that's how we actually began to get to know each other and talk about the threats of terrorism that existed in Europe and then also had wider implications.

SR: That's right.

SG: I remember a lot of your work was very much focused on primary research, so looking at the transcripts of terrorist trials, but also digging even deeper to see how those networks had been created and formed. Did you find comparisons between the terrorist networks and the composition to, say, the criminal networks that were involved in Latin America? Was there convergence in terms of the way they operated, or were there actual major differences?

SR: Well, there were obviously differences particularly I think in the al-Qaeda generation in the first years after 9/11. There were a lot of people who were radicalising in Europe. Joining al-Qaeda and becoming involved in al-Qaeda was a slower process maybe than, say, the Islamic State [ISIS] some years later, which I'll talk about in a minute, but it took a while. Not everyone, but there was some sense that people actually knew the religion and had to learn about the politics, and there was a certain amount of reading, so to speak; to make your way to Afghanistan was not easy, peo-

ple were sort of filtered.

But there was already a phenomenon happening that I think accelerated—and I think here are some of the parallels you mentioned that were valid—that there was always this convergence on the streets of Europe between crime and extremism. And I was fascinated by that. And that was something that really didn't exist in the United States, for example, which ultimately was the audience I was writing for. And so, I was really trying to show that you had a lot of people—and I remember a French intelligence officer talking to me about this early on in the post-9/11 period, he covered the banlieue, the housing projects in the outskirts of Paris, and he's saying the two dominant groups in these housing projects are the criminal gangs and the extremists. But these are people who have grown up together, who know each other, who are relatives or friends or went to school together, and there's a lot of interplay. And he said, "The scary thing I'm seeing is that a lot of people are crossing from crime into extremism. And once they cross, they don't go back."

And that phenomenon, I think, built and built. It was interesting because one of the things I was fascinated by was radicalisation. And I did get a chance to interview for example, some people who went off to Iraq or people who knew them, some terrorist who had been in Afghanistan and come back and was awaiting trial. And you had a sense of these people who had kind of plunged into this world because it gave them meaning and gave them a sense of importance and power and to some extent, they were in over their heads. It reminded me of a little bit of a case I had covered, a street gang in San Diego. I had interviewed some of these young Mexican American kids who had joined the Tijuana Cartel and found themselves involved in this incredible world of violence and high-level corruption and intrigue in Mexico—starting out just as a street gang.

There was something similar going on the streets of Europe—that people who were starting out as common criminals were going to places like Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan and later Syria with the Islamic State and feeling a very dangerous phenomenon that all of a sudden, they felt they were part of— particularly in the Islamic State era—that they were part of the biggest, most powerful gang on the planet. And one of the things I think I learned was that while some jihadis very much knew about and understood the religious and political ideas involved, increasingly you saw a lot of people for whom the religion was a veneer. I think particularly during the years of the Islamic State [ISIS], you had more and more people who radicalised in superficial ways, and a lot of it was about the adrenaline and the violence. I remember another French intelligence official talking to me about someone who had been arrested when he came back from Syria early in the last decade and saying to his interrogators, "I'm not interested in Islam—I'm interested in jihad," which shows a profound ignorance of both concepts, that you could separate the two. But it showed you the kind of mentality, the way radicalisation and terrorism evolve, which I think became particularly dangerous.

SG: Most definitely. So, perhaps we could say that the difference between al-Qaeda and ISIS — one of the differences is that ISIS dumbed it down, effectively. They made it more simplistic for people to join, that it didn't have to be a battle with that ideological rigor that al-Qaeda so much had focused on. But it was more the propensity to violence and misogyny which ultimately fuelled ISIS and its foot soldiers, of which many had come from Europe.

SR: I think that's right, and I think that they dumbed it down and they speeded it up, because the propaganda was so slick and so high-tech and so sort of geared to a young audience—being bombarded by slick slogans and images and choreographed violence, where if you remember,

al-Qaeda was much more lengthy and long-winded, and people like Zawahiri and others would put out these tapes where they went on and on and on, and the Islamic State was much slicker about connecting and enticing young people. I remember an Italian police commander saying to me, "When we listen to these young men on the intercepts, they talk about bin Laden as kind of this sage, but who really interests them is someone like Zarqawi in Iraq who's a hands-on killer on video." And there was something to that.

But I think you're right, dumbing it down and speeding it up. Some of my best sources are and have been law enforcement and counter-terrorism officials of Muslim descent, and I remember one of them saying to me, you have people showing up in Syria—people who all lived on the same block, say, in a European city—and rushed there, and they're posing in Armani t-shirts with AK-47s saying they're with the Islamic State. And they weren't even, he said, radicalised—which is interesting, right? Because the Islamic State was the most radical group of all, you could argue, in terms of the savagery and the intensity of what they did and declaration of the caliphate. Yet you had this new sort of form of radicalisation, where you had, again, criminals who didn't change that much in their lifestyle, but decided to join this army. So, it was an interesting evolution to watch, which had begun with al-Qaeda. The Madrid attacks had a component to that: there were a number of quickly radicalised drug traffickers there where you could see the harbingers already with al-Qaeda, but I think the Islamic State kind of took that phenomenon and amped it up.

SG: Well ISIS certainly presented themselves as an alternative ideologically-light version to al-Qaeda, but they, perhaps, as you said, they speeded the whole process up, and that perhaps galvanised their ability to, in many ways, come to the ascendancy when it came to jihadist terrorism. One group that I'd like to talk about, which I know you've researched very heavily, is the Pakistani terrorist outfit called the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), "the Army of the Pure," that were behind the Mumbai siege attacks some ten years ago. In fact, the 10-year anniversary had passed on November 26, 2021. You researched this group, you researched the attack—I'd be very interested to take you back to that period, and have you explain why that attack was so significant, and its importance for terrorism and perhaps what we've learned from that subsequently.

SR: It was a very important case, and I think it's one of the most important topics I've looked at in depth. And then for which teaches us a case that is just very rich and teaches us a lot about terrorism, about Lashkar-e-Taiba, about the interplay between Pakistani intelligence and terrorism, about al-Qaeda, about all kinds of issues. So, as I had been covering al-Qaeda through the 2000s, more and more obviously, al-Qaeda operations and training were happening in Pakistan rather than Afghanistan. And there were different cases in which different sources were saying these operations happening in Pakistan are happening with either the passive or the active support or protection of elements of Pakistani intelligence and the Pakistani military, and that's a complicated area, and I was intrigued by it. And then, the Mumbai attacks happened, and they were one of the most spectacular and dangerous attacks because essentially, it was clear that they had been directed from Pakistan, and they could have caused conflict between two nuclear-armed countries, India and Pakistan. And they had such an impact, and they lasted for three days on television and put this group Lashkar-e-Taiba on the map.

And then a year later, an American was arrested: David Coleman Headley from Chicago, where I'm from—he had been based in Chicago. And he turned out to have been this figure who had served as a scout for Lashkar and was central to the attacks because he had done the very important reconnaissance in Mumbai, taking advantage of the fact that he had an American passport and had taken steps to erase his connections to Pakistan, though he was half Pakistani-American.

And he had also been a spy—he had been working simultaneously plotting these attacks for Lashkar-e-Taiba and the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence service.

And I really decided to dig into his case, because what I learned—and I think a lot of people already suspected this was going on, but for the first time, they had hard evidence in this case—was the symbiosis, the partnership between Lashkar-e-Taiba

and Pakistani intelligence, of the extent to which Lashkar-e-Taiba was a group, which shared many of the ideologies of al-Qaeda, and sometimes cooperated with and sometimes was a rival, but was very much part of this mouvance where you had all these dangerous international jihadi groups. But it was a loyal instrument and had been created by the Pakistani intelligence. And it had these incredible camps that functioned in the early years out in the open and had storefront recruiting centres in Pakistani cities, and had developed this fearsome machine of training and plotting, which both was dangerous in itself because of the kind of attacks and plots it was trying to carry out in places like Australia and obviously the Mumbai attacks and some plotting in other places, but also because many people who joined Lashkar then would go on into other groups like al-Qaeda.

And the more I learned about this group, the more astounded I was, as there was hard evidence in this case—in the case of David Coleman Headley, based on his confessions and his communications and all kinds of supporting evidence—that the Mumbai attacks had been carried out by Lashkar-e-Taiba with the direction of Pakistani intelligence, which had helped Lashkar design an attack which very specifically not only went after India, but went after jihadi targets, the global jihad—that is Americans, Britons, and there was a Jewish target as well. So, it really went out of its way…at the same time that Pakistan was taking all this aid and was supposedly an ally of the US and the West and the War on Terrorism, it was playing this double game. And this case was incontrovertible proof of it, in which it was supporting terrorism against the West.

There was a lot of debate back and forth about the extent to which this was all of the ISI, or some of the ISI, how high up it went. And obviously I think there were elements of the ISI that may have been working loyally with Western counter-terrorism forces and going after al-Qaeda and things like that. But I think the proof is that ten years later, we know—in fact, the US indicted in Chicago a major in the ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence] for his direct role in that plot, who's never been arrested, and many of the other masterminds have not been arrested—really, justice has not been done in that case. And I think ten years later, that is proof of how sinister and how scary that alliance between Lashkar and Pakistani intelligence is, and to some extent, makes us wonder about the connections and the role of Pakistani intelligence in the other kinds of terrorism that have prospered in Pakistan for so long.

SG: Well, that's absolutely chilling, what you're describing. You're looking at one of the most audacious terrorist attacks that we've seen. In many ways, people talk about the Paris Marauding Attacks of 2015, but it was preceded by what we saw in Mumbai, with multiple locations being targeted by gunmen, who were rampaging across hotels, Jewish cultural centres, railway stations. And you said that justice has not been done, because several of the key perpetrators involved in the attack, in plotting it, have not been held accountable. Why did you feel that has not happened ten years later, and why is there perhaps not enough pressure to try and make, say, the Pakistani authorities hold those accountable that were behind the attack?

SR: It's a fascinating question. And you and I have talked about it. And I've talked about it with many other people in counter-terrorism in India and Europe and the US. And it's really remarkable. I think what happened was that the US definitely made a statement by indicting an [Pakistani] intelligence officer in that attack and indicting some of the top people in Lashkar and making it clear to Pakistan that the West now knew what was going on, so to speak. But there always seemed to be a reason not to push too hard. I almost think there may have been a trade-off in that Lashkar, there was pressure on Lashkar not to repeat another attack like this, something of this dimension, right. And that hasn't happened, though, it's caused all kinds of problems all over, including in Afghanistan. But for whatever reason, and I think a lot of it had to do with this lingering policy, this precept in the United States that we can't push Pakistan too hard, because it might be destabilising, which I think is, probably erroneous, I can't see why, turning over some of the name suspects in this group that killed 166 people, including American citizens, to the United States for justice, or actually going after them in Pakistan is going to bring down the Pakistani government. But for whatever reason, and I assume a lot of it also has to do with ongoing worries in the West about Pakistan's nuclear armament and who has control of it, and whether extremists could get access to it. For whatever reason, there has always been this trade off, or this sort of restraint on the part of the West to push Pakistan to do things like this. There's always this sense "oh, we need Pakistan for help in Afghanistan," which I think obviously turned out to be not true, or Pakistan was not helpful in Afghanistan.

The other thing I think that case taught me was I spent, in the years right after 9/11, a lot of time trying to understand some of the stateless aspects of a group like al-Qaeda that could be so dangerous and function, rise, and have such an impact sort of on its own and understand that phenomenon. But what I started to realise, especially after covering Mumbai was that the ultimate danger here are groups like Lashkar and others, and that you always have to look for the role of the state in these cases, because I don't think, Lashkar and other groups would be as powerful as they are, unless they have either active support, as happened with the ISI, or passive support, as has happened in other places, where governments are weak, and allow them to have sanctuaries. But that is something that I think — and it was interesting, because it kind of brought me back to my coverage of Iran and Hezbollah from years before and Latin America, that just realising that, as you said, Mumbai was such a sophisticated attack with all this planning, with all this technical help from elements of the Pakistani military, and including sort of maritime help and getting the boats there, you had 10 gunmen who have never set foot in, in in Mumbai and so they were guided through this high tech way on the phone the whole time, with real time, sort of command centre, and that was why it was such a devastating attack. And it shows you the danger of state sponsored terrorism, and the impunity in this case of state sponsored terrorism. So that was another of the big lessons I took away from reporting on this case.

SG: Well, your research was absolutely essential to uncovering that attack, and also the wider implications to the Lashkar-e-Taiba's role, not just in terrorism in South Asia, but globally, its ties to plot in Europe, and the relationship with al-Qaeda as well. In fact, without your research, I think we would have been far more in the dark, as to what the group has done and what potentially it could do in the future. Another thing, Sebastian, that I'd like to ask you about, because this is something else that you've been trying to, to focus on, and also illuminate others on is, as we are talking about anniversaries of terrorism, we have also passed the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the September 11 attacks, which still remain perhaps the most devastating for terrorism, globally, and the consequences, and there was often this talk about the role of Saudi Arabia, and we know that 15 out of the 19 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia. What have we learned subsequently about the connections to Saudi Arabia? Because I know you've been researching this for quite a while.

SR: Yeah, I obviously, as I said, having covered 9/11— but I had covered aspects of it from Europe and I had, you know, the plot that had taken place in my coverage area. But I was also very focused on some of the other events in subsequent years. But I had always sort of remained interested, as many of us were in 9/11. And a couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to return to the case and look at one of — as much as we've learned about 9/11, and about terrorism and the past 20 years — to look at one of the still secret areas, which was, that my colleague, Tim Golden, and I at ProPublica, we had a chance to get access exclusively to the secret investigation that the FBI had pursued for years into the question of whether there had been a Saudi support network for the al-Qaeda hijackers in the United States. And this had always been extremely, delicate to the extent that, for example, when we reported this case, and we reported it in the New York Times Sunday magazine, it was for the first time that the name of the operation, the investigation, was mentioned, it was called Operation Encore. And so, it gave me a chance with all this knowledge I had, and all these sources to dig back into this. And a couple things as you said, Osama bin Laden was Saudi, 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi and I think there's no doubt we have learned that the context for 9/11 was Saudi Arabia, like Pakistan, played a great role in helping these networks develop around the world because of the way it fomented all over the world, the Wahhabi brand, fundamentalist brand of Islam, because there was so much support to extremist and even terrorist groups from people connected to the Saudi government or from Saudi donors, it's kind of this game where they were trying to keep al-Qaeda, which obviously was an enemy of the kingdom at bay, but had there been specific ties between Saudi officials and the hijackers? And if so, how high did they go?

And so, we dug into the investigation which had dug into this and had continued until 2016 or 2017 and had been a great point of contention within the U.S. government, right. These were FBI agents, mainly in San Diego, and New York, and some NYPD officers who remained focused on this, and went after some clearly suspicious things. And I think what we found was that there really was not absolutely overwhelming, but strong circumstantial evidence and very tantalising leads that suggested that several figures connected to the Saudi government, a Saudi diplomat/imam in Los Angeles, and a Saudi guy who was believed to be an intelligence operative at San Diego had played a role — a crucial, compartmentalised, but important role. If you remember, the first two of the hijackers were sent out to the United States, Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, are sort of tried-and-true jihadis who had been in been in combat and whatnot, and are trusted by bin Laden and the others, but are also particularly unsuited to the west. They barely speak English, they really haven't functioned in the West at all, unlike some of the figures that come later, like Muhammad Atta.

And so, they come to California, and they meet up, supposedly accidentally with this figure, Omar al-Bayoumi, this guy in San Diego and they meet him in Los Angeles, and they go to live with him under very suspicious circumstances, he helps them find an apartment in his apartment complex. And a lot of stuff happened. Without getting into too many of the details with it, what I think Operation Encore did was find more and more evidence that there had been this network that was treated with great sort of secrecy and delicacy by the US government. And I can't say we found a smoking gun or that the FBI found a smoking gun, but what we did find was a sense that the Saudi government and the U.S. government, to some extent, had done their best to keep this under wraps, and not to give this the attention it deserved. And it was kind of a tragic conclusion we came to because it is possible that these may have been very isolated figures who are who are helping in an innocent or naive way or a way in which they didn't know that what was going on, but that the evidence suggested that it was more than that. And because it wasn't investigated when it should have been, we remain with this mystery, and we remain with this sense that there are important things about the Saudi role, and again, no one is suggesting that it went all the way up to the top but that there were a lot of people within the Saudi diplomatic corps, for example, in the United States, this case reveals who had alarming and direct connections to people I'm involved in

terrorism and extremism.

So that was a fascinating case. A frustrating one in some ways, but I think it was important that we focused on it because the main avenue where the truth may come out is this lawsuit that is now going on where, as you know, the 9/11 victims in the United States have mounted a major lawsuit against Saudi Arabia. And that is where some of these leads that these investigators had developed are being kind of aired and played out. And gradually documents are starting to come out, and information that the US government had is starting to come out. And it's understandable, of course, what people in the US government would tell us was, number one, there was smoke, but there always wasn't, there wasn't necessarily fire. The evidence wasn't that overwhelming. And what others would tell us was, well, there may have been fire, but there was always a need for Saudi Arabia to help on other things. And I felt that was, again, that was an important story to tell in that just looking at terrorism as like this abstraction, sort of trying to get at this question of accountability. And I think in this case, you know, that is an important area to focus on whether it's in this case, or in the case of Mumbai.

SG: Absolutely. And if we look at the role of Saudi Arabia, tied to the 9/11 attacks, another dynamic, again, that is so important for 2021 is the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is in many ways was why we went to Afghanistan in the first place, because of the September 11 attacks. What is your take Sebastian, on what is happening in Afghanistan? And are you worried that you could actually start seeing terrorism re-emerge from there that could have global ramifications? And I guess tying it into your work, do you envisage yourself being more busy and writing stories about Afghanistan in the future?

SR: I should say to start with it, that I'm not as much of an expert on Afghanistan itself as I am on other issues, obviously, I have worked on a lot of issues related to it. But I don't have as in depth and understanding of Afghanistan as other places. So, I do want to give that caveat. But I do think I have focused a lot on Pakistan, and the role of ISI and Lashkar and in these issues. And I think what's clear about Afghanistan, and it kind of surprised me that it hasn't been more central in the debate is that part of the double game of Pakistan and part of its dark side as an ally, has been that it was not helpful in Afghanistan, and that a lot of what has happened in Afghanistan has been, essentially, the fault of Pakistan and the fact that it's supported all these groups that were so active and that debilitated the effort by the U.S. and the West to bring stability to Afghanistan. That's clear, I think, from the activities of the Haqqani Network, which U.S. generals have said in congressional hearings was an arm of the ISI and from Lashkar-e-Taiba was, which was extremely active in Afghanistan, and obviously, the Taliban itself.

And this was the catastrophe we saw in Afghanistan. And this ignominious departure, I think, was a result partly of never having called Pakistan to account and reined in Pakistan's malign activity in Afghanistan, and now we are paying the price. I mean, I think it's the debate, and I know people who think that it was that we needed to get, counter-terrorism experts with my respect, who felt that we needed to get out of there. There are others who felt well, we could have left, and I think this may be what, what would have been a more reasonable solution, to leave at least a small forest, without any illusions of turning Afghanistan into some kind of beacon of stability or democracy, but left enough of a presence to maintain, to prevent what has happened now. And so, am I worried? I am. I don't know how rapid it will be, and how dramatic but I do think you have people running Afghanistan including some of the key ministries, who are, people who have been involved directly involved in terror, terrorism, like people in the Haqqani Network.

So, I can't imagine that there won't be some resurgence of groups and individuals using it as a sanctuary, using it as a place to project plots and attacks on other places. How brazen and how direct it will be, I think, remains to be seen, because if it really becomes a platform for major attacks against the West, you know, that's going to, I think, going to require, you know, a strong and instructive response from the West. So, I'm interested to see if that will happen, or if it will be not unlike the way Lashkar has been since Mumbai, in that it has caused all kinds of problems, but it has not done another attack, like Mumbai. But I think Afghanistan is a tragic story, because it's not like it was a mystery. People were saying for years that we know that this could happen. They've been pinpointing the reason. And one of the big reasons was this pernicious presence and undermining by Pakistani forces of what we were trying to do in Afghanistan. So, I think it may well generate new issues for us to look at.

SG: Unfortunately, so. The Biden administration has cited China as one of the reasons why this had to be a reprioritization of U.S. foreign policy, especially with the dynamic of great power competition. And you've been writing a lot about China, and its global role, and its activities. Talk to me more about what you've been researching in the last year.

SR: So, I think anyone who covers national security issues, there's a range of themes that one can focus on, and I have covered quite a few, right, whether it's Latin America, whether it's drug trafficking, whether it's migration, at an international level, terrorism, intelligence. But obviously, in recent years, more and more people who I talked to about other things, were talking to me about China, and the rise of China and the increasing aggressiveness of China, especially on sort of the espionage and intelligence front, in the United States and around the world. And during the pandemic, I was pulled into a team that looked very in depth at the rise of the pandemic, and the outbreak and response of the CDC in the United States and other things. But my particular focus was on the international aspects. And part of that was on the whole relationship with China. And what the what happened with the outbreak, why there wasn't more cooperation, why there wasn't more information sooner from China and why that delay really made the pandemic worse than it otherwise would have been. That. I think it seems clear that had the outbreak happened in Denmark or in Ghana, that there would have been much more information out there more quickly, and a much more robust response that would have, I think, ameliorated it. So, I think in covering that I kind of started to realise that the immense power of China the immense the difficulties in that relationship, all the work that had been done by U.S. authorities to kind of create a partnership where if something like this happened, there would be a response, and it didn't happen, right. Because China, the power dynamic in China was to shut this down, to keep it secret, not to cooperate, for whatever reason. Whether COVID started in a lab, or whether it started by natural means, the fact that there was a cover up, and there was a restriction of information was clear.

And that kind of focused me more just on looking at issues as the US government has shifted towards this big geopolitical issue of looking at China, and particularly, the activities of the Chinese state, around the world and in the U.S. And one of the first cases we looked at was very revelatory and concerning, which was something called Operation Foxconn, which there had been an indictment of Chinese officials in New York, about this, and what it was kind of a window into this planetary effort, which so many things that China's involved in our planetary in which you had many cases in the United States and other places, where teams of Chinese law enforcement were going around the world pursuing fugitives. Some of them were people involved in corruption, some of them were dissidents, some of whom were sort of relatively minor figures caught up in provincial political conflicts, who were wanted. And using all these illegal means to bring them back, right.

You could almost describe them as soft rendition. You had cases in the United States where teams of up to 20 people, a mix of Chinese police officers and prosecutors, and hired muscle, and people who had relatives back in China in jail, so they were pressed into working as spies, and American private detectives who were hired either knowingly or unknowingly to help, which would relentlessly, stalk, track down, pressure, and try and bring people back, illegally. You know, clandestine activity sort of under the nose of U.S. law enforcement.

So, this was real, this was a remarkable sort of eye opening case, because the more I studied it, the more I saw that this this kind of thing was going on in the United States and Canada, in Europe, in Latin America, and it just kind of showed the reach of the Chinese security forces and Chinese intelligence and this kind of battle in the shadows that is happening between China and the U.S., as the regime in Beijing, I think in recent years, has become increasingly sort of assertive and aggressive and brazen. And the U.S. government, in particular, has decided that it needs to resist that. But I think what is remarkable is now that the Biden administration has taken over there really has been no change in the China policy and the perception of China as a threat, which we've seen, with things like the recent decision to help Australia arm itself with nuclear submarines. So, I think this is just one of the big issues of the moment. And as much as I'm, you know, interested in other things, it is something that is important, difficult to understand, complex, and which I've been trying to, as I have other issues during the course of my career, trying to dig into and understand well, with all the nuances and caveats and ambiguities that come with an issue like this and try and dig deep by looking at particular cases and examples like the one I just described to you, to try and shed light on some of these bigger geopolitical questions.

SG: Do you envisage having more stories to write on, without divulging any of your current research? Is this something that you see as a long-term area that you will be focusing on? And perhaps, if you could also just tie that into where you see the potential fault lines heading between the United States and China? And if it would bring in other countries, you mentioned Australia, there's often this talk about the Quad, which involves Australia, the US, Japan and India. How do you see this unfolding in the next year?

SR: I mean, I think it certainly will be something I will continue to cover again, because it is such a challenging, relatively new, and complex issue for me. And because so many people I talk to and know are focusing on it in security forces and intelligence services around the world. And because it is, by nature, planetary, right, I mean, what is important about this, and why I think it is so urgent, is that we are talking about, there really isn't a place in the world that isn't a theatre in this in this emerging clash between China and the US and as you said, some of the other key countries. I mean, India, obviously, is going to be a crucial player in this because of its size and its geopolitical role and as being part of the quad. I think Australia has been the frontline of the West that's closest to China, where the regime in Beijing has been one of the places where it's been most aggressive, that'll be another place where there will be a lot going on.

And I think what is happening with China, which I think there's some comparisons to say, the Russians, but the strategy I think of the Chinese regime is to divide the West as much as possible the same way Russia has. So, for example, in a place like Europe, it may be easier for China to exert pressure in some of the smaller countries in particular. But also in other places, like, a place I'm very familiar with: Latin America. I was kind of surprised and interested to see how much influence China has developed in Latin America. So, I think you're going to see multiple fronts, which is something that is a slow-motion conflict, in a lot of ways, but obviously could speed up.

And then some of these issues, which are, just can't be ignored, like the plight of the Uyghurs and what U.S. has described as a genocide, there's going to be more and more pressure on the international community, to respond and to do something about this. I mean, obviously, it's complicated, because we're talking about this huge country, and we're not condemning the entire country, it's the regime, and it is a country with a huge diaspora and it is a country, and this is unlike the Cold War, where we are, — 'we', that is the US and the Western, world —to some extent, are economically intertwined. So, we kind of depend on each other.

And so, it's a kind of unique and fascinating conflict in that sense. And there are all these different fronts where things can play out, but I think there has been a reluctance in some quarters in the United States, I think, partly because of economic reasons and others to sort of confront this and to take on some of these issues of Chinese influence and this kind of exportation of things like repression and censorship, right? I mean, you have, people in the National Basketball Association (NBA) who criticise China and immediately there's financial retaliation against them, or Hollywood changing its content so as not to upset the Chinese government in its depictions of certain issues. So, these things are worrisome, right? Because there are things that are that that affect the quality of our democracy and I mean, one of the things I've tried to do, as I've done all along, is to in the different areas that I've covered, there are a number of people, Asian American experts I talk to, and experts who I try and learn from first hand, because they speak the language and they understand the culture. And I think that perspective is vital to cover this kind of thing carefully and accurately.

SG: Well, it's going to be very interesting to read your research as you continue to cover these angles. I think I'm also curious to see what happens with the Beijing Winter Olympics, if that's going to be a potential diplomatic flashpoint, especially as there's talk about some countries boycotting it, or there being a form of a boycott. So that could perhaps ratchet up tensions further.

SR: I think you're right. That was exactly what I had in mind, that there are going to be some moments soon, where there's going to be a lot of pressure which is going to build because governments are going to have to make decisions about issues like that and in the context of Taiwan and the Uyghurs and some of these other pressing questions. So, I think you're right, I think there are going to be some moments where there's going to be, sort of inevitably, an escalation of tension and pressure.

SG: One thing I'd like to end on Sebastian, which I spoke about in the introduction, is that you are a very prominent author of several books. Some are based on fiction. But it's clear that a lot of what you've written has real life experiences and scenarios, and they're all fascinating to read. And they cover so many different topics, as well, in many areas that you have in fact, been researching: Latin America, terrorism. Where does the role of fiction blur into reality? And where are the separation lines that exist? And how easy has that actually been in all your books that you've written?

SR: I've always been interested in writing fiction. And I have had the chance as I was covering different issues around the world. I've covered so many sort of tragic, fascinating stories, learned so much about secret worlds, in different places, met all kinds of interesting and rich characters and I have always wanted to write about them in fiction. I enjoyed writing journalism about them, and

I've had a chance at the places I've worked, to write in a way that I think is evocative, satisfying and even can be literary. But there's a limit to what you can write about these kinds of things when you have to worry about facts and sources and all the all the constraints of responsible journalism. I think fiction has been something of a release. I particularly like international crime fiction and I think that's what my books are. Because I think there's something about that genre, which has a structure, which is entertaining at one level, but which allows you to explore larger issues as well. One of my books is very much about the Mexican border and borders in general, it also happens in the triple border area in South America. And I look at questions of drug trafficking and corruption, and crime and the challenges and the pressures that people face when they're in worlds that are so dominated by corruption and intrigue, it's hard to tell who's on which side and where someone's personal code becomes maybe the most important thing because everything is so lawless and treacherous.

I have really enjoyed writing fiction, because it gives me a chance to take readers on a journey, sort of geographically to places that I think are fascinating and, and colourful, and also to try and describe some of the things going around the world that I've been able to develop an understanding of. And it's interesting that you asked about the lines and how they blur. I mean, I try to take a lot of different elements that I've covered, whether it's a specific case or a specific person or place and meld them into a larger story. So, I don't just take one journalism story and sort of change the names and make it into a novel. My novels sort of dig into this mind, this wealth of knowledge and experience I have. And it is fiction. So, I feel somewhat liberated. But on the other hand, it's funny because even in writing fiction I try — one of the things I really strive for — is to be authentic and realistic.

So, some of these stories are dramatic and exciting, and they move around the world, but almost everything I write from the small details and the way people talk and the way people move in the way, like, to some of the larger political work are very much based on things I've known to be true, and that I understand reasonably well. And so, it's funny how, even in the world of fiction, some of the journalistic rigour still comes into play. And I'm like, well, would that really happen? Is that feasible? Is it realistic? And I enjoy doing that. And that's the kind of fiction I like to read, or I like to see and there is some sense of connection to reality. And I think that's, hopefully what good fiction like this does, is both entertain, but also help people explain and understand these worlds that otherwise are difficult to comprehend. So, I've really enjoyed it I'm and I do my best to combine it with a day job, so to speak. And it's been very enriching and exhilarating.

SG: Well, it's been very enriching talking to you today and just fascinating to get your perspectives, your journalistic rigour, on so many important geopolitical, global security issues. And you are one of the finest investigative journalists that I have come across, and it's so important what you have shared with us today, so thank you again for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive, Sebastian.

SR: Well, thank you Sajjan, I think you are someone who is understanding of these issues, you know, I greatly respect and admire, and I have learned a great deal talking to you and reading your work, so it's a privilege to be on this programme with you and I really appreciate it.

SG: Well, thank you for those kind words and we look forward to having you back in the future.

Sebastian Rotella's bio

Sebastian Rotella is a senior and award-winning investigative journalist at ProPublica, where he covers international security issues including terrorism, intelligence, organised crime, human rights, and migration. His documentary 'A Perfect Terrorist', which focused on the Mumbai siege terrorist attacks, was nominated for an Emmy and received an Overseas Press Club Award. He is the author of Twilight on the Line: Underworlds and Politics at the U.S.-Mexican Border as well as three novels.

Episode 5 - Clint Watts and Disinformation Warfare, January 2022

Key Reflections

- **Russia's interests in counter-terrorism, geopolitics, the Arab Spring, and espionage all converged as part of a 'disinformation fusion centre' to malign as well as spread propaganda and disinformation.**
- **The Kremlin's synergy is unique as there is connectivity between their intelligence services and cyber community, creating an ecosystem using oligarchs, expats, and influential foreigners as extensions of power.**
- **Russia's current campaign against Ukraine is deliberately less noisy in the information space compared to before, but troop mobilisation on the border suggests a much more direct and hostile intent.**
- **Russia dominates the disinformation output, whereas China is more advanced in the use of artificial intelligence and synthetic media. Globally, Russia seeks to degrade, China opts to usurp.**
- **The battlespace is divided up based on language and platform, and China wants to expand its influence internationally. China will likely overtake Russia in a few years.**
- **China is operating at four levels: technology infrastructure, social media applications, global content, and control of the internet and media environment.**

Transcript:

SG - Dr. Sajjan Gohel

CW - Clint Watts

SG: Hello, and welcome to DEEP dive brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Clint Watts, a Distinguished Research Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and Non-Resident Fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy. Clint previously served in the U.S. Army as well as the FBI, supporting the U.S. Special Operations Command and Intelligence Community. His research and writing focuses on terrorism, counter-terrorism, social media influence, and disinformation warfare campaigns by state actors. Clint's work has led to him testifying before four different U.S. Senate committees. Clint is the author of *Messing With The Enemy: Surviving in a Social Media World of Hackers, Terrorists, Russians and Fake News*. His writing has appeared in a range of publications including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs,* and *Foreign Policy*, as well as being a national security contributor for *NBC News* and *MSNBC*.

Clint Watts Thank you for being part of NATO DEEP Dive

CW: Thanks for having me.

SG: It's a pleasure. One thing I'd like to start with is to take you back actually to when we first met, which was in Tbilisi, Georgia, back in 2007. Now we'd gone for a conference on counter-terrorism. But one of the important segways that emerged from that trip was the relevance and prevalence of Russia, and just how much of an impact Russia was having on Georgia. Back then, much of Georgian territory had come under occupation by forces that were seen as loyal to the Kremlin and that has increased over time. I'd be curious to get your opinion as to when you thought Russia was not just important geo-strategically but was actually impacting on the sovereignty of countries and the agenda that was being orchestrated by the Putin regime.

CW: It's a fascinating transition because we were there in Tbilisi, with all of these random counter-terrorism, like, reps from different countries that oftentimes didn't get along with each other. So, when I think back about it, like we were there, right before Tbilisi became kind of an epicentre of a different conflict, right? It was another location right on the frontlines of the new emerging Russia. And what struck me was, I would say, around 2010 to 2012, Putin and the Kremlin, were making a decision for how to achieve what they want, which essentially was to take back, really regain the Russian populations in their near abroad that they lost that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, but also to do their version of reset with the United States, but also use that as a way to undermine NATO, and they recognise the value of NATO.

So, in that, probably about the time I saw you was the first time I started considering this with regards to Russia, and they were popping up in different places, in the extremist environment because of Chechnya. You know, they had foreign fighters and there was kind of this legend going around everywhere: "Chechens in Afghanistan," "Chechens in Iraq," and these sorts of things. So, their interest was piquing and they saw it, I think, in the late 2000s moving into the 2010s, as a bridge to parts of the United States and the West that they want to fight counter-terrorism too. Separately, they started to realise the advantages and a build-up sort of fashion of the information space. And they'd always understood the information space better than the West does.

The West takes that for granted. We tend to say, "oh, you know, free information in the environment and the marketplace of ideas and best ideas always went out, you just give it oxygen and it grows." Whereas the Soviet Union, transitioning into Russia, which is Vladimir Putin, and then Putin's kind of right-hand man for the information space of managed democracy, Vladislav Surkov, recognised the opportunities of the internet in a new way. And I think that really came to them during the Arab Spring. They did not like the instability, they were witnessing the breakup of some of their old allies, but at the same point, they saw a mob descend, without any leadership really, to a place of consequence in several different countries, whether it be Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and create mass instability. And they recognised the power of that information environment, and they sought to move towards it.

Separately, they had always done the espionage part, so hacking and delving, going after people's secrets, following their opponents, any sort of defectors. So, they understood that part. So, what they were able to do is take lessons learned from the social media space and the information space, at the same point, identify their objectives very clearly. So, one was to align in counter-terrorism with the West, so it would seem like it's kind of an us against them. Separately, they knew they could come back to active measures, which was to win through the force of politics, rather than the politics of force inside these countries.

And so, we came onto them in January 2014, which was the first time we stumbled into them in

the online environment, that was around the conflict in Syria, where they were impersonating accounts across the landscape of particular Americans and American accounts that look like and talk like Americans. And then we happen to stay on that trail, and they use those same accounts to go after the US election. So, I think what's remarkable is they understood that the only thing worse than no information, like the Soviet era, is too much information, that you can really flood the zone, that you could do all of this remotely, that a strategy that they had that failed, active measures during the Cold War, was now possible and can be successful in the post-Cold War world, due to the information environment.

And so, when I look at their goals, undermining NATO: they've achieved that. Sewing chaos in democracies and democratic institutions: absolute success. Carving out and regaining battlespace, or actual ground in countries of the former Soviet Union, whether that be Ukraine or with allies, like Syria, or in Libya: success. Now whether the cost-benefit calculation is correct, I think is debatable, but what I do recognise is that they have a very deliberate plan, they know how to execute it, and I think that's what we see unfolding up to this very day in Ukraine.

SG: So, you've touched upon a lot of important areas which seem to intersect. We're talking about Russia's interests in counter-terrorism, geo-politics, then the aspect of the Arab Spring, as well as that old element that was a carryover from the days of the Soviet Union, which was espionage. And then you've got the advent of new media technology. So, are we saying that all of these basically converged in a very convenient way for the Russians and they developed a strategy in exploiting it to the maximum to further their own agenda whilst also undermining that of the West? In particular, NATO, the U.S., European Union?

CW: I think that's absolutely correct. It's the convergence of several things that they were doing. And sometimes I'll refer to it as a 'disinformation fusion centre' as a way to think about it. But I think the principal part to always remember is that they are information led in terms of their national power. They don't have a strong hand to play diplomatically, but they don't toss it away, they use it to reinforce their information campaigns. Militarily, still very strong, one to one, but not strong enough against NATO. And economically very limited, both due to mostly being an extraction economy or a criminal economy in the cyberspace, and not really being able to lever in a way to put themselves in a position that like China might be able to. And that's partly because their system is kind of just organised crime running a state, that's how it collectively operates.

So, when you look at what they did in the information space, they took, okay, how do we compromise targets? You think back 30 years ago, you break into their house, you steal their letters, you dump them to the newspaper. Then they elevated that in the 2000s, okay, now you hack into someone's account, you take their secrets, or you plant some secrets, you malign them, so you're just trading targets. Step one. What's the next step? Okay, let's take it to the next level, which is let's use non-stop walls propaganda to amplify that which we've already seeded. And so that's layering and then okay, what's the next thing? Well, let's go into foreign audiences and create personas that look like and talk like the target audience, so that they're more trusted, to amplify our propaganda and to sew more disinformation around that what we did in a compromising fashion in a cyber-attack, which is essentially what they did through WikiLeaks and DC leaks and around a lot of the elections.

And then I think the fourth layer is, what's our goal? And they really had it, which was, can we go into western democracies and elevate people to positions of power, help boost politicians or take

down opponents, in certain cases, such that there's a more pro-Russian view across the board. And we see a larger retraction in the West. Simultaneously pursuing devolution essentially, go after alliances, NATO, can we break it up? Individually, any of the NATO countries vis-a-vis Russia's struggle? So, if we can do that, that's a success from Vladimir Putin's perspective. The other is the European Union. And then third, which I think oftentimes gets forgotten is, can we even create chaos and break up inside individual countries like pitting Scotland against the greater United Kingdom, or Catalan, like, can we do this inside Spain? Or can we push people and just nudge them such that they're so tied up in internal chaos that they can't possibly worry about Russia? So, I think what's remarkable is they iteratively kind of built on this. The first foray was Ukraine, the next one was Syria, then it was the elections, Brexit, U.S., France, Germany. They have been on a very linear trajectory, in my mind, with the information led approach, and I don't see it stopping, I think it's unfolding today in Ukraine.

SG: This linear trajectory that you mentioned, in some ways, you've, you've kind of answered it, but I'm just curious to get more clarity on it, because you talked about the fusion centre that Russia has created. We know that many countries, historically, even currently, are always interested to influence and shape the agendas of nations and regions. Is there anything specifically unique about Russia's campaign system that we really need to highlight and bring to greater attention? Because I often find that for those that watch it, it's very apparent, but it doesn't necessarily get the global attention that it really does need to.

CW: There are some aspects of it that are unique to Russia in ways that other countries can't replicate. One, it's the tie-in of their intelligence services with their cyber community, hackers, coders, things like that, and the tie-in of their intelligence community with information outlets. I think that's what is interesting. They have a way of sort of building out this ecosystem in the overt, semi-covert, and covert space in such a way that it's very effective. And then that next layer is they tie in contracting, which is not that different—it is different, but it's not entirely different—from defence contracting in Western countries. But, using cut-outs, oligarchs as extensions of power, I think that's the second aspect, which is not just like hiring a company to do something but literally saying oligarchic you know, whether it's [Yevgeny] Prigozhin, [Konstantin] Malofeyev or others, "you pursue your interest, and at the same time, pursue my interest." And it's a cost-effective way to expand Putin's influence around the world without having to deploy massive armies the way the U.S. would or the way NATO would. And so, they get a lot of strategic advantage in that. There are some weaknesses with control, but in general, it's a benefit to both parties.

I think the last part is the way they use their own Russian emigre, that have gone abroad and also the way they use foreign influencers to their advantage. On the first part, Russia has greater strength where there are more Russian citizens abroad, Germany being the top amongst those in the West. But I think in the former Soviet states, that's what you see unfold in Crimea and Donbass. Second, they hire, equip, train—working at the party and sort of people level—agents of influence, who either wittingly or unwittingly are doing the work for Russia inside the audiences of the West. And so, Russia today, for example, inside the U.S. on election night, 2016, they had three hosts, it was Larry King, former CNN, very well known, Ed Schultz, former MSNBC, and Jesse Ventura, one of the world's top conspiracy theorists. They're able to draw an audience. And so, that's an American, talking about how bad America is on a Russian channel. That's impressive that they know how to think that through. So, I think if anything, it's the way they know how to conduct the art, and then layer that with technology. They also have some weaknesses, vis-a-vis China and some other countries, that they'll never be able to reach the maximum potential of their system. But at the same point, they wield it impressively well.

SG: It's very interesting, the aspect that you brought up in terms of how Russia today had recruited several well-known personalities from the US and the Jesse Ventura example stood out because you're looking at someone for, I remember growing up, used to be a wrestler in [then] WWF and then I think was governor of Minnesota.

CW: Yes.

SG: So, they certainly know, I guess, the aspects of pop culture dynamics that could be utilised from within the US and utilise that for their strategic messaging. Do you think that the purpose of this is to distract countries from Russia? Or is it to cripple these countries through strategic messaging? Or is it a combination of both?

CW: It's both. One is to restate the view of Russia abroad. And that's absolutely worked in the case of the United States. I mean, the whole idea that Russia was concerned about American gun rights, but they have no gun rights in Russia, or Russia's worried about free speech on RT in the U.S. But if you're a journalist, you might fall out of a balcony in Moscow. This doesn't make any sense, right? But yet, Americans will use that as justification to watch things like RT, or to consume, Russian state propaganda. So, yeah, it's just kind of strange. So that part, I think, is very successful. I also just find it interesting because when I go out and talk to people, they will ask me the question: "How did Russia figure out how to get into the American audience space?" Well, they hired a bunch of Americans, like it's not rocket science, really. It's not like some advanced strategy to go, "hey, I want to build audience, how would I do that?" "Well, I hire people with audience inside that country." And I think any business would do that, they're trying to achieve the same, the same objective.

What I appreciate about the Russian system—I don't like it— is it's well thought out, it's very simple in its Daily Execution, its synergy is kind of natural, and they don't sweat mistakes. So, like, if they mess up something and it doesn't work, they'll abandon it, whereas in the West, we would have an investigation at Parliament or Capitol Hill in the U.S. to figure out who made this terrible message, right? Russians would just brush it off and come right back the next day. And the military, the intelligence services, the information services, the diplomats are all in on the game and reinforce each other without having a lot of meetings. So, if we did it in the U.S., U.K. environment, it would be like 19 meetings and everyone would have to approve the message., because the message is like groupthink, it's very boring, it goes out super lame. Russia is the inverse. Here are five general things we're going to talk about, in between, do what you want, everyone's got a little element of freedom.

In the end, we're all marching to the same goal. So, help each other out and we'll kind of get there. And you'll see that when diplomats walk out— [Sergey] Lavrov is amazing, he'll walk out and repeat something that had just been posted on social media. And they're not having big coordination meetings and overly bureaucratic, sort of dogma, they just kind of go out and, and execute. And so, I find that remarkable. And that's why they achieve effects with even dumb or very weak messages, it's just due to their deliberate commitment to using information in a very strategic way.

SG: In a very warped way, it seems as if they've understood our technology better than we do, and

are using it mercilessly to their advantage, and they're not crippled down by the layers of bureaucracy that our countries in the West are having to deal with.

CW: That's right, they almost operate like a new media start-up with their mindset. And they're doing things they would never allow at home. So, they have a very smart and nuanced approach to these things.

SG: Well, you spoke about Ukraine a few times, we're now into the early part of 2022. Where do you see things going in Ukraine? There is this talk and concern of Russia's disinformation campaign, but also a military campaign? Is it something we need to be concerned about is the threat of a military campaign genuine? Or is this part of the psychological operations that the Kremlin are trying to create?

CW: I can see Ukraine both ways. I'm more concerned now than I was last year. And so, my reasons for that is the last I think of spring summer, when they mobilised on the border. It felt like an exercise to really test NATO resolve and see what we would do in the west to counter them or whether we would react or not. They were very noisy in the information space. Meaning that they were telegraphing a lot of their activities, they were doing a lot of placements and amplification inside Ukraine. So that was interesting to watch. And it kind of felt like a giant feint, to a degree, to see what they could get. This time feels different. They're trying to be a lot less noisy in the information, social media space. They are being pretty deliberate about their demands, even if they are ridiculous, Putin is, making demands he knows the West will never agree to which just stall time to see if any concessions can be made, short of war, why not take them. But the mobilisations on the border, I was reading, right before I jumped on here, I was reading that the military mercenary groups inside Russia were doing recruitment, some of the mercenaries thought they were going to be going back to Africa, instead, they got told they're going to Ukraine. Which means that's like a different kind of recruitment, it's next level, contract or cut out, paramilitary kind of stuff. I think this is pretty serious. And I, I'm watching every day just like everyone else.

The middle mark that I've heard for when Russia will invade is the third week of January, if they're going to do it. I don't know if that's true and I have no special information, by the way, but kind of bracketing or using a little Bayesian analysis, that seems like the window in there if they're going to execute, and the pickup of the rhetoric, the sort of information space, it seems totally possible. And I think, also, this is consistent with the general strategy vis-a-vis the United States and the West, which is when, when a Democrat like Obama or Biden are in office, challenge him with military force, and if they block, move and take it. When the Republicans, like Trump, are in there, look to negotiate and try and get Crimea for free or Donbass for free, maybe they'll— the West— will just give it up. So, I think it's an interesting, cyclical strategy we can look at. I just don't know; it seems that everyone thinks that Russia, if they were doing, they would take what they want, but I just don't know that the costs are there yet. And maybe the Russians don't know either, at least at this point.

SG: It seems as if they are judging on a day-to-day basis, how the West is reacting and in terms of relations of how that is happening, reacting to them based on whether they feel confident and emboldened or whether they are feeling deterred. Is there anything in your opinion that the West needs to be doing to deter this Russian aggression, that's not happening? What are the smart options that are perhaps being considered and what are the ones that are not being implemented as yet?

CW: Well, I think the traditional ones of sanctions are all there. That's the U.S. drumbeat "we will sanction you." There's always more and more sanctions, right, and so that's there. I think the things that are not being answered are one: how does Europe get de-coupled from energy with Russia, meaning energy resources, things like pipelines, how gas flows, how do these countries stand on their own? They need Russia economically to some degree. And so that's not being addressed so that gives Putin an edge, where he can still push and pull, and everyone wants to play in between things.

The second is the information space and the information space as it relates to populations in the West advocating for Russia's position. You see that in the US on one of our cable channels, Tucker Carlson is basically calling for the U.S. not to oppose Russia, which is unheard of like that's a crazy viewpoint. You're having a lot of domestic angst across western countries and inside the United States about why are we opposing Russia anymore? Do we still need NATO? You know, these sorts of things. So, I think that's a second element of it.

And the third is the West, and in particular, the U.S. is in a weak position militarily as they've tried to remove themselves from foreign battlefields, in Afghanistan, or Iraq. And because of that, any notion of war using military force fields is almost off the table, which puts the U.S. in a tremendously weak position in Ukraine, because would we actually go and fight for Ukraine? You know, will the NATO alliance show up on scale? Would we use air power? So, it's just strange to watch, because I think Putin knows all these things and he just continues to test resolve, and then looks and says, "Do I take these sanctions and invade? What's my cost benefit analysis?" And I think that's what the deciding factor is because the West seems to only have one trick in its reservoir now, and that's to do some sort of economic penalties.

SG: Well, I guess time will tell, unfortunately, as we get eerily close to that time that you mentioned, where perhaps a decision will have to be reached. And one hopes that Russia doesn't go beyond the precipice and cross the Rubicon to make an ill-fated decision that will have long-term consequences in the region. So, it's a very worrying situation that has emerged, and one that unfortunately keeps raising its head now and again, as in when the Kremlin seems motivated to instigate those tensions.

Clint, another thing that you have been looking at in great detail has been the role of China—its growth, its world importance. And you've also been looking at Chinese influence campaigns. I'd be curious to get your perspective on that— does that differ in terms of strategy to Russia? And what is ultimately the goal of what China is trying to achieve?

CW: Yes, so my least favourite phrase right now is "China is stealing Russia's playbook." They are not doing that in the information space—they learn from it, they will take a technique or two, but they are doing something much more next level that has not reached its peak performance, and so it's not quite as effective yet, but will change how we think about influence over time.

In terms of influence, the Chinese are operating at four levels: infrastructure, and things like Huawei. The second would be in terms of applications—think of TikTok and the growth of all of these applications around the world. Third is content—so they are massively expanding their content

around the world and trying to use all the Western social media platforms to change narratives. They're not successful yet, but they're trying to do it. And then the fourth is control—they can control their own internet, their own media environment, they control that of a lot of the countries that they are now highly invested in. And that is something Russia cannot do.

One addition to that, I would say, is on the technology front, is their ability to use things like artificial intelligence, synthetic media—off the charts compared to what you see Russia doing. So, Russia seeks to degrade, China seeks to replace. And by that, I mean, if I could sum it up, it would be, Russia goes around the world telling everybody, "You suck, you suck, you suck." China goes around the world telling everybody, "We're great, we're great, we're great." And that's a superior position to be in over time. This is everything from private sector media buys in foreign countries, deploying bots in a very similar way but with synthetic media on top, it's advancing their One Belt, One Road initiative around the world through media outlets. We've discovered, just in terms of their social media influencers they're deploying, which, until recently, were not as effective as the Russian influencers, I would say now are more effective just due to their volume. We've encountered more than 200 of them, they speak more than two dozen languages and have tens of millions of followers on Western social media platforms, sometimes labelled as Chinese state media, sometimes not.

And then the last part, which is the most recent, which is buying Western influencers. So going into Western countries, like the UK, the US, paying individuals to say things—the CCP once said—by people that look like and talk like the target audience, that's that thing that Russia was able to do. And so, when you put this all together, and you look at the growth of their social media accounts in number and type, the growth in terms of their communications in volume, they will surpass Russia, because they can also do things like establish the parameters around what apps people use, what infrastructure they use, and that is game-changing in terms of influence over time.

SG: You spoke about influencers and platforms that China's using—are there specific examples that you could give, just so that people perhaps are aware of what is going on which they may not necessarily be always cognizant to, that it could be tied to an information campaign orchestrated by another country?

CW: Sure. So, I think the way to think about it is, the battlespace is divided up based on language and platform. And so, one space in the information warfare world is inside China, on Chinese apps, in the Chinese language, and they own that space. And the US and the West are not even present there—we can barely even see it. The second is how they message to their Chinese diaspora on any and all applications from traditional to new social media across the board, in a very unified way. And that's very heavy all around the world because there's Chinese immigrants in all of these countries, Western democracies and others throughout Southeast Asia. But that can occur on some local platforms or traditional media, or it can also be on things like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, all of the main channels

And then separately, it's expanding into non-Chinese language influence, which we've seen them do in two dozen languages on mostly Facebook, but we've seen them on Facebook, Telegram, Instagram, YouTube—all of the main major platforms with video, they're on all of them, essentially, at this point. They don't have as much reach, but they're growing, and they're doing some things that are more sophisticated than other countries. So, I think that's kind of a way to think about what they're doing. And they're absolutely putting a lot of deliberate effort and resources into achieving

their goal.

SG: If you were going to be pushed to give an answer, and this is maybe an unfair question, in terms of both Russia and China's information and influence campaigns, who do you think is currently more effective? Or is it that you can't really draw that separation as yet as to who is more effective, who is less effective, because in some ways, the agendas are still different, as you were outlining?

CW: I would say in terms of information output per minute, it's still Russia—they're just better at achieving their goals with less. However, I would estimate it will only be maybe two years, if that, before China overtakes them. And the reason is, China is deploying worldwide in ways that Russia just cannot do—they don't have the resources or money. And so, I think the second part of that, why China will overtake them is, even if pound for pound, investment dollar to influence, Russia is still doing better per capita, the volume is so much higher coming out of China that it will overwhelm whatever Russia achieves, meaning that China will be able to influence and employ technology, money, economic power, and information in places that Russia can never even reach or get to. So, I think that's what the differential is, in that space is that China will overpower. And they're increasingly having the ability to rewrite history about how people see China and also China's space in the world. They seek to replace the Western system of democracy. Russia knows they never could do that and will always fight around the edges.

SG: Fascinating perspective on both Russia and China. To try and pivot both dynamics to another topic that I know we've spoken of in the past is Afghanistan. We have seen that the West has departed from Afghanistan. And there seems to be a strong interest and desire for both Russia and China to have influence inside the country with the now Taliban regime.

So, Clint, I'm curious to get your perspective on Afghanistan, and then perhaps also where you feel that Russia and China can be involved. How would you feel the situation will unravel there? Are you worried about the counter-terrorism dynamic? And are you also worried about the potential role of countries like Russia and China and what they could do in Afghanistan?

CW: Afghanistan's end is where I and most people that have worked or researched Afghanistan, thought it would end—which is a stable democracy would never ultimately be there, its stability would always feed extremism, the US would not be able to sustain a century of democratic reform efforts. And it would have to end someday, and probably should have ended seven or eight years ago to some degree and would have ended with the same result.

So that part I don't find surprising—the only surprise is that it took that long.

I think the second surprise is how poorly the US undertook the end—meaning that we've been working for years—the US and its allies, the UK—to basically let Afghanistan go. It was not a defeat—we absolutely destroyed al Qaeda there, we could kill the Taliban and its most extreme elements, day in and day out forever. But it comes down to, what is really the threat in the extremist space. And it's always been about mitigating the threat—you can't squelch all extremism forever by instituting a perfectly run democracy in a landlocked country that has hundreds of years of challenges in front of it. I was shocked just how poorly it unfolded. And I think that's because the US tends to stick to this timeline talk all the time—they did this in Syria, about red lines and chemical

weapons and timelines for withdrawal. And when you do that, you're signalling to your adversary what your intentions are, such that they start to undertake manoeuvres separately. So, it did not have to end as poorly as it did. I think that's what is sad about it—it could have been a more managed transition, and one that allowed the US to leave

Separately, in terms of the humanitarian disaster now and everything that's going on, it's going to be awful. It's the equivalent of governance inflation, meaning not only were we sending billions and billions and billions of dollars into a country that had never seen that kind of money flowing into it, we altered the construct of the culture and society in such ways that people had to either choose to be with us or with the Taliban, or with us or with the extremists. And that will unravel and unfold in the coming months and years…there will be basically a general reset, I think, to the year 2000.

In terms of the future, I find it interesting because I hear a lot of people say they will retaliate against the US for how things went down. I don't know that that's the case—the Taliban will not. I think the strangest part of it all is the US will end up negotiating and working with the Taliban to suppress groups like the Islamic State in Khorasan, and that will be a very weird vibe, but not unprecedented either in our national security history.

SG: I think in Afghanistan, as the saying goes, there are many shades of grey, it's never black and white. And you often find that now the people running the country are principally led by the Haqqani Network, which are a proscribed terrorist group, and Sirajuddin Haqqani, its leader, who's the interior minister of the Taliban regime, he is actually on the FBI's Most Wanted list and is seen as a very close ally of al-Qaeda. Do you have concerns that Afghanistan could once again become a cesspool for extremists in the same way that Syria and Iraq had under ISIS, and in some ways what Afghanistan was in the 1990s? Or do you think the conditions now are different?

CW: I think there's one difference, which is the element of extremism in countries closer to Afghanistan that have a stake, and that's Russia and China. If you look at the foreign fighter flows more recently into Syria, the two countries that seem to supply an increasing number per capita were Russia and China. They both have worries about extremism, and they both have stakes, just in terms of borders, but regionally in Afghanistan. And China has economic interest. Russia has sort of legacy interest. So, they, I don't think, will allow extremism to crop up because it's more likely they'll be targeted more regionally in China or Russia, than the idea of going to the United States and doing a 9/11 attack.

Separately, I don't want to say there's no risk, there's absolutely going to be an extremely safe haven of one form or another that is based in Afghanistan-Pakistan, there always has been, I think there always will be as long as I'm alive. And occasionally, there will be threats to the West that emerge from that. And it will be more severe, it will be more likely, I think, just based on immigration patterns and travel patterns that will happen in the EU and the UK in particular. But it doesn't mean the US won't be. So, I would not be surprised at all if Americans or American targets, American companies that are in the region—South Asia, Middle East—are again vulnerable to terrorism, and that the plot connects back to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. So, none of this surprises me, but I also think it's going to be kind of a steady state status quo, unless there's a major triggering event. Because the US is kind of pulled back in the world. I think, for extremists, it's hard to argue that continuing to attack the US is always the best strategy, unless you just want to get your name out, kind of globally and into the public.

SG: I'm a historian, and you used the term "cyclical" earlier—I often find that when it comes to Afghanistan, these dynamics have an odd way of repeating themselves, even though the extremists perhaps may have learned from some experiences that they couldn't defeat the United States. They also get a sense of being emboldened—that because the West has departed, and in their minds retreated, that this could perhaps lead to an opportunity to exploit tensions regionally. And then those regional dynamics expand transnationally.

I think the other dynamic will be, as you mentioned, Pakistan. What happens in Afghanistan is very much interlinked in Pakistan and vice versa. So perhaps, if Pakistan ends up having its own problems of extremism, which it seems to be going through right now, with extremist groups suddenly becoming influential politically inside Pakistan, that can then have a knock-on effect inside Afghanistan, and of course, it could then spread far wider. So, I guess it's something that we will just have to keep watching, because this could evolve quite quickly. Or do you think that this is more of a slow burn, in terms of the problems that could emerge?

CW: I think it's a slow burn, in part, because of COVID. The world is not functioning quite in the way that it normally would. It does in some parts of the world, not in the West in the same way. I also think there has to be a reason to mobilise versus the West. So, there's a bit of a tumult right now, they're fighting each other locally to a degree, Taliban versus the remnants of the Islamic State. Same in the Middle East, Syria/Iraq context, there's still lots of local battling going on, but a lot of the Western presence has left, and the Russian presence is still there to a degree. So, I'm not sure which direction it will go, I feel like it's in a transition period. It doesn't mean that they won't all mount an attack on the US. I'm just not sure that the US would respond in the same way today that it did on 9/11/2001.

SG: Interesting. You also spoke about the pandemic, perhaps acting in some ways as a stumbling block for terrorism to proliferate too quickly. So, I guess we can be thankful to the pandemic for some reasons! Talk to me about how the pandemic has impacted on extremism globally. In particular, do you think that that has brought out elements of radicalisation and extremism in terms of different ideological beliefs, including the far-right, that we had perhaps seen before to an extent, but they became much more prescient during the last two years, especially during the pandemic? Or was this a problem just bubbling beneath the surface waiting to implode?

CW: I think the far-right has been a ten-year trajectory. And we saw it in the context of Russia in terms of disinfo[rmation] and influence activities. They don't command the far-right, but they're the connective tissue between lots of groups in the online space. The leader of the white supremacist group in the United States, The Base is a guy named Nazzaro—he lives in St. Petersburg, Russia. The Nordic front in Sweden, two of their bombers had trained inside Russia. So, this has been a pretty steady growth in terms of these connections. But I also think it speaks to what is maybe the greatest threat to modern democracy, which is this authoritarian strain that is white, male, and predominantly Christian, if religious at all. And that is seen as domestic extremism in each of these countries but is also interlocked in ways that are highly similar to the jihadist extremism we saw a decade ago. Separately, elections are what oftentimes bring those domestic actors together. J.M. Berger always talks about that in states, election years are for domestic extremists, and historical or key dates and monuments are for international extremists. And that's kind of a great way to think about it. We're going into a midterm election next year.

This was all compounded or brought into a different sort of way with the idea of a stolen election that was not. The "Big Lie" is referred to here in the United States and the insurrection on January 6, combined with COVID lockdowns and vaccine mandates, kind of two additional elements. Layered under that was the George Floyd protest and racial justice protest, which very much was about identity. It was Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, about white supremacy or not white supremacy. And so, when you combine all this together, it brought audiences with different primary objectives together across a lot of secondary objectives, meaning that anti-government views collided around the pandemic in ways that had never happened before. And they oftentimes coincided with far-right extremist groups inside the United States. I think over the horizon, it really just depends on how the next six months works out with the Omicron variant and the pandemic. In terms of the lockdowns, already you're seeing major resistance and pushback inside the US to any additional lockdowns or mandates, and we're not really having it. And I think in the UK, it probably sounds like it's similar as well.

They're not going to lock down again…the pandemic kind of rages on. And I really, I think it will come down to how severe are the infections and hospitalisations around Omicron and what that forces public health officials and elected leaders to do in terms of controls. By and large, though, what you're seeing happen now is very similar to what happens when an extremist leader dies in other spaces…when people are pushed off the mainstream social media platforms, they have to coalesce in forums and fringe sort of communication networks. And that slows down the pace of their recruitment, their fundraising, their mobilisations to a degree. And so, there's been a little bit of a depressor on their activity in recent days. That doesn't mean that that won't kick back up in a very intense fashion come next summer.

SG: Do you feel that the anti-vaxxer movement can become an extremist movement? In the sense that right now, it's mostly focused on, sometimes, protests, a lot of it is online campaigning, but can it go actually violent? Can it go, in ways that perhaps we were not anticipating, that it could become more mobilised? Is this a new form of extremism that may trouble us in 2022?

CW: I don't think it'll be the same as white supremacist or anti-government groups, just because they don't mobilise it quite the same way. I would say that the one phenomenon we've seen is the sort of evaporation of the QAnon movement has led to the acceleration of the anti-vax or anti-mask mandate movement. And it's a lot of the same people, but this is their new cause célèbre to organise around. I think the issue is the scale—the violence is correlated, I'd say 1%, that's just a ballpark figure. For every 100 people that show up, there's 1% that are ready to mobilise to violence and are willing to do it. I don't know that the protest movements that we've seen so far have reached that boiling point. There are coincidental incidences of attacks or violence at vaccine distribution points. What I do worry, though, is the sort of cascading terrorism phenomenon that can happen, which we saw with ISIS and al-Qaeda, is that one person executes an attack from one of these anti-vax or anti-mandate movements, and this kicks off at chain reaction of other people copying that, which we've seen during the ISIS era a lot. That's kind of where my concern is, I think, for 2022.

SG: Well, on that sobering note, I think it's perhaps a time to reflect on everything that you've laid out, Clint, because you've discussed so many important aspects that are relevant to the work that we do when it comes to the role of NATO, as well as the impact it has on our daily lives as well with the role of certain state actors and the extremist forces that sometimes they use and manipulate for their own strategic and nefarious agendas. I'm really grateful and appreciative once again for you joining us on NATO DEEP Dive. Thank you so much for spending the time with us.

CW: Thanks for having me.

SG: It's a pleasure, and we hope to have you again.

Clint Watt's bio

Clint Watts is currently the General Manager at the Microsoft Threat Analysis Centre and a national security contributor for MSNBC. Clint previously served in the U.S. army as well as the FBI, supporting the U.S. Special Operations Command and Intelligence Community. Clint has testified before several different U.S. Senate committees and is the author of Messing with the Enemy: Surviving in a Social Media World of Hackers, Terrorists, Russians and Fake News.

Episode 6 - Bruce Riedel and the Proxy Wars, January 2022

Key Reflections

- **The Taliban victory in Afghanistan has given an enormous boost to the morale of terrorists throughout the region.**
- **The role of ISKP in Afghanistan is very murky as it is not a monolithic organisation and has ties to Taliban factions. These include the Haqqani Network who also have a long association with al-Qaeda.**
- **The Pakistani military's strategic support for the Taliban in Afghanistan strengthens the forces of terrorism that threaten the very nature of the Pakistani state.**
- **Iran has aspirations to be the dominant player in both the Persian Gulf and the Middle East.**
- **Backed by Iran, the Houthis in Yemen are a very well organised, disciplined organisation and have advanced their strategic interests in Yemen against Saudi Arabia.**
- **The combination of location, leadership, and success in counter-terrorism has made Jordan a key and stable ally against al-Qaeda and ISIS.**

Transcript:

SG - Dr. Sajjan Gohel

BR - Bruce Riedel

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel.

In this episode, we speak to Bruce Riedel, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and director of the Brookings Intelligence Project and Centre for 21st Century Security and Intelligence. In addition, Bruce serves as a senior fellow in the Centre for Middle East Policy. He retired in 2006 after 30 years of service at the Central Intelligence Agency and is a recipient of both the Intelligence Medal of Merit and the Distinguished Intelligence Career Medal. Bruce served as a senior advisor on South Asia and the Middle East to four U.S. presidents as part of the National Security Council. He was also Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for the Near East and South Asia at the Pentagon and a senior advisor to NATO. Bruce is the author of several books including *The Search for al Qaeda*, *Deadly Embrace*, Avoiding *Armageddon*, *JFK's Forgotten Crisis*, and *Kings and Presidents*.

Bruce Riedel, welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

BR: It's a pleasure to be here with you.

SG: And we're honoured to have you with us.

There are so many things that have been taking place in the region of Asia, the Middle East—and you are an expert on both South Asia and the Middle East itself, so to get your perspectives on a lot of the key geopolitical security related issues is going to be very important for our discussion. If we can start with Afghanistan: we are witnessing a country that is now going into a humanitarian crisis, the Taliban takeover has been completed, and yet there is still so much insecurity inside the country. If we could track back a little, could anything have been done differently in order to either prevent the Taliban takeover, or to perhaps have had some kind of power sharing arrangement as some people had hoped or were wanting to achieve?

BR: The crisis in Afghanistan, which is now heading in the direction of a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions, was entirely preventable. We had in place, at the beginning of 2021, a sustainable force posture in Afghanistan. 3000 plus American troops, another 7000 or so NATO troops, contractors, airpower. The Afghan urban areas were very much under the control of the Afghan government. The rural areas were contested in many places, and in some places controlled by the Taliban. The Pakistanis were providing the Taliban with support, as they have for the last 20 years. The number of casualties among the foreign forces, especially American forces, had been low for more than five years, long before the Taliban announced that they were no longer to fire on American forces.

This was all a sustainable operation. It was not under significant public criticism in the United States. There were no demonstrations against the war. This is entirely a product of a bad decision to move forward with an evacuation and withdrawal that was not necessary, that was not required. And that was, in the long run, deeply unpopular in the United States, and marked the point at which President Joe Biden's popular approval ratings in the United States dipped significantly, so that he is now the unpopular American president. It all could have been prevented. Unfortunately, that's not the world we live in now, and we have to cope with the reality of the disaster that is facing us in Afghanistan.

SG: Well, before we go to how we cope with this new environment in Afghanistan, or the environment that we are now having to become accustomed to, let me ask you about the role of Zalmay Khalilzad, who was the Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation. Was he in an impossible position, or some critics say, was in many ways the architect to the problems that have emerged? Where do you stand on this situation?

BR: I think he was a poor choice for the job of negotiating. He is widely disliked among Afghans. He had no support within the Afghan government, which felt that he had marginalised them in the process. He had negotiated the terrible deal that the Trump administration made, in which it promised to leave in return for vague promises from the Taliban that they would break their relations with al-Qaeda—promises they never fulfilled. I think it was very curious, and a big mistake, that the Biden administration kept in place a political appointee who had a long track record of working only for Republican presidents. It's a mystery to me, in some ways, as to why Zalmay Khalilzad was kept on. He now clearly has been booted out and is trying hard to salvage his reputation. I think the administration recognised in retrospect that they made a mistake.

SG: And his legacy will be felt in Afghanistan for perhaps generations to come as a result of what's

transpired from Doha.

BR: Yes, the Taliban are deeply entrenched. They don't face any significant resistance, except from even more extreme jihadist elements, like the Islamic State in Khorasan. Remnants of the Afghan national government and National Army have, for all intents and purposes, been swept from the field. And the Taliban are now clearly in charge, along with their Pakistani backers.

SG: In terms of dealing with the Taliban, what are our options? Or is it that there are no options, and we cannot deal with them? How do we pursue this very odd situation, uncomfortable situation, and frightening situation in 2022?

BR: It is very difficult, and you're right, a frightening situation. It seems to me our first priority has to be to try to get aid to the Afghan people. The Afghan people have been dependent upon outside sources of assistance for decades now. If that means we have to have some kind of dialogue with the Taliban, then I think the imperative here has to be the humanitarian one, particularly this winter. We don't have much time. Winter is descending upon Afghanistan. And we know that the conditions are deteriorating and could deteriorate very grievously. I think that should be our priority.

SG: One of the challenges tied to this is that you have the Haqqani network that has effectively taken over Afghanistan under the guise of the Taliban, and the head of the Taliban's refugee ministry is Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani, who is the uncle of Sirajuddin Haqqani. How does one deal with the Haqqanis? Because there are some in, say, the Biden administration, who believe that you can separate the two, but in many ways they seem very much fused and attached to each other. And it's worth reminding everybody that the Haqqanis are a proscribed terrorist group, who have killed hundreds of U.S. soldiers as well as thousands of Afghans—men, women, and children. Is there any way of dealing with Afghanistan without the Haqqanis?

BR: We should also bear in mind that the Haqqani Network has a long association with al-Qaeda, with the leadership of al-Qaeda in South Asia. That is one of the reasons, among the others that you mentioned, that it is a proscribed terrorist organisation. I don't see much chance that you're going to be able to split the Haqqanis off from the Taliban; I think the two are deeply entrenched together. I don't see much chance that we're going to split the al-Qaeda network off from the Taliban or the Haqqanis. I'm not an expert in the legal procedures, which determine who you can talk to and who you can't talk to. A lot of what we need to do in Afghanistan, we're probably going to have to do through the Pakistanis, who, after all, have excellent contacts with all of these groups, and who are not a proscribed state-sponsor of terrorism. Although in many ways, they certainly qualify for that position. I think we probably have to work through the Pakistanis, through the international community. But the notion that we're somehow going to be able to put a good Taliban in charge of Afghanistan, I think, is a fantasy.

SG: So, we need to dismiss that narrative that somehow there are moderate elements within the Taliban that we could see eye to eye with. I know there was a lot of hope in Mullah Baradar, who was in many ways leading the negotiations for the Taliban in Doha. But he seems to have become isolated, ironically, by the Haqqanis themselves. So, our options have become severely limited in Afghanistan as well. You mentioned, Bruce, about al-Qaeda. Has al-Qaeda now got the ability to reconstitute and replenish now that their allies, the Haqqanis, control Afghanistan? Do you see al-Qaeda then becoming more ambitious in 2022? Where do you see them fitting in now when it

comes to the threat of transnational terrorism?

BR: Well, the good news is that beginning in 2009, under President Obama, the United States, and many of our allies, focused relentlessly on going after the infrastructure of al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The mechanism for doing so was primarily the drones. And they were very, very effective. In 2006, al-Qaeda had been fully regenerated back to where it had been in 2001. Ten years later, that was no longer the case. The question, which you've just posed is, of course, the key one: can they regenerate again, now that they're no longer under the surveillance and pressure of American forces operating in Afghanistan? That's a function of many variables, some of which are under our control, but most of which are not under our control.

And the most important fact is we no longer have any surveillance mechanisms to know what's going on in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We cannot fly drone missions in Afghanistan. The Taliban won't let us do that. Whether the Pakistanis will tolerate some in their territory remains to be seen. From what Prime Minister Imran Khan has said, I think it's highly doubtful. We don't have any boots on the ground. We have no human sources. The good news is the CIA was able to evacuate many of its supporters and informants out of Afghanistan. That's good for them. The bad news is that means we don't have any informants and contacts on the ground in Afghanistan again. We are essentially flying blind in Afghanistan and much of Pakistan today. So, if al-Qaeda does regenerate, we will find out about it, I think—only too late.

SG: That sends a chill down my spine. It is a deeply perturbing scenario that could then unfold. What about the over-the-horizon capability? Is that not viable? Or is that, as you were mentioning, contingent on neighbours such as countries like Pakistan?

BR: It's entirely contingent on neighbours. And we know that we're not going to get support. The Iranians are not going to let us fly drones over their territory to monitor western Afghanistan, the Taliban are not going to allow drones in their territory at all, and I think if the Pakistanis allow any, it'll be under very high strictures that limit their effectiveness. Over-the-horizon is often referred to in the intelligence community as "over the rainbow." And I think that tells you everything you need to know.

SG: Yes, I think that certainly does provide full perspective of what the intelligence community must be thinking about it. If we look at the other group in Afghanistan, Bruce, ISKP—the ISIS affiliate, the Khorasan faction—there are some beliefs based on U.S. estimates that they potentially have the capability of launching transnational attacks. There are some others that feel that they are more localised, that they don't have the same ambitions as ISIS core have had. And there's also a perspective that in many ways, they have a very murky relationship with the Taliban and the Haqqanis themselves, because nothing in Afghanistan is ever black and white. What is your take on ISKP?

BR: I think your last point is exactly right: this is all very murky. And I suspect that ISIS-KP is not a monolithic organisation. I suspect it is composed of various different groups, who have a generalised commitment to the ISIS notion of creating a caliphate, but who are far from being in a command-and-control relationship. Some will work with the Taliban; some will work against the Taliban. Some will focus on regional issues, and probably there will be some who, in time, start to focus on going after Western targets outside of South Asia. How successful it will be in doing that is hard to

say.

The world has changed a lot in 20 years. The capacity for terrorist jihad organisations to operate freely in the West is not the same as it was when Osama bin Laden and the Hamburg clique were operating in the United States in 2001, thank God. But we should have no illusions. Defence is critical but allowing these groups to have large staging areas to train, recruit, practice—like Afghanistan—we know from history puts us at a severe disadvantage when it comes to fighting.

SG: So that's just another additional challenge that we're going to have to face on top of everything else that is occurring. You have mentioned several times in our discussions about Pakistan. So, let's look at that a little further in depth. What can we say about the role of Pakistan in the region? Are they still potentially going to be an ally in name, but will question marks still remain about their role? The fact that President Biden has still not spoken to Prime Minister Imran Khan as yet—does that matter? The fact that it seems Pakistan's military worked with the Taliban to enable their takeover of Afghanistan in 2021—what can we say about the role of Pakistan and where that's heading in 2022?

BR: I think the single issue that worries me the most in the current global environment is whether or not the Pakistani army, particularly the officer corps, and particularly those officers associated with the intelligence department, ISI, come away from Afghanistan with a sense of victory in jubilation. After all, a very convincing case can be made that the Pakistani army has now defeated two superpowers in the course of the last several decades—first the Soviets, and now the Americans. Will that sense of enthusiasm that they've done it again—will they now start turning their attention to enemy number one, which is India. And will they look to increase tensions in Kashmir and elsewhere to try to put pressure on the Indians to compel the withdrawal of Indian forces from the Kashmir Valley. It's too soon to say whether that's going to be the case, but I'm very concerned about that.

In that environment, is Imran Khan going to be a hedge, is he going to be a constraint on them? Imran Khan is all over the map on these issues in the course of his career, but most recently, since he became prime minister, he's been very closely associated with the Pakistani army. That's not a reason for ignoring him. If we can talk to Vladimir Putin, we can certainly talk to Imran Khan. That doesn't mean we're going to agree. There are going to be many things we disagree on. But it's very, very important to engage the Pakistanis on these issues. Pakistan is the fourth largest country in the world in terms of population. It has the fastest growing nuclear arsenal in the world. It is China's number one ally. This is a very, very important country in its own right. Leave aside Afghanistan. Pakistan should be considered one of the most important countries in the world for the United States to engage with. Iran, in many ways, is a Pakistan wanna-be—it doesn't have nuclear weapons yet, it doesn't have delivery systems, it doesn't have a working military-to-military relationship with China. This is a country that we need to pay much more attention to, and that starts with a phone call from the president to Imran Khan.

SG: Is Imran Khan ultimately the main power in Pakistan, or does it remain the fact that the military under the leadership currently of General Bajwa, he is in fact the real authority and the decision-maker? How do you see that military civilian relationship?

BR: Pakistan has a very complex military civilian relationship, and a lot depends on the issue.

Issues of national security are the prerogative of the military and General Bajwa. Many of the issues of domestic interest, economic interest, are much more in the civilians' hands. It's a complex, evolving situation. What I think we can say is that Imran Khan understands very well how much he needs General Bajwa's support and is very careful to keep the general happy on national security issues.

SG: We know that Pakistan, as you were mentioning, has supported various different extremist groups in Afghanistan, which has resulted in the instability of the country. But those same forces have bedfellows in Pakistan itself. Do you see that the goal of Pakistan's strategic depth strategy in Afghanistan can conversely result in extremist forces gaining a foothold inside Pakistan and destabilising the country?

BR: Yes, in many ways, Pakistan's victory in Afghanistan strengthens the forces of jihadism that threaten the very nature of the Pakistani state and threaten the Pakistani army. The Pakistani army, though, has become more and more adept over the last decade in controlling these elements. It's not perfect. They don't have them under 100 percent control, but they have corralled many of them and moved them in the direction that the Pakistani army wants them to be there. It also allows them to have a bit of a stick to hit the civilians with from time to time by saying, "We have to accommodate these people, we have to listen to their interests." So, it's a very complex phenomenon. Is it under full control? No, by no means. Is it as out of control as it was five years ago? No. It's under much more control than it was, say, in 2014, 2015.

SG: So, the fact that it is under more control, does that, in other ways raise more concerns that one needs Pakistan to exercise that control in clamping down on these extremist groups that can actually create further instability in the region?

BR: Well, this is the beauty of the Pakistani system, they can always say to their western interlocutors, "if you don't deal with me, you'll have to deal with that crazy guy with the beard." We've seen this phenomenon for a long, long time. I think we have to recognise that you don't have to have a beard to be an Islamic jihadist terrorist. And we now know, from excellent new reporting in Afghanistan, that the Taliban had extensively penetrated the Afghan urban areas by sending in recruiting individuals who didn't look like they were the Taliban, they looked like they were the moderates, but that was all a deception.

The United States and its allies have a new opening with Pakistan, which we should seize. For the last 40 years, our policy towards Pakistan has been very much constrained by our need to support our allies in Afghanistan. First, the Mujahideen in the 1980s and then the Afghan government after 2000. And the only way we could support them was through supply lines through Pakistan. That meant the Pakistanis had tremendous leverage over everything we wanted to do. And they could use that leverage whenever they wanted to. That leverage is gone. We don't need Karachi anymore, to fuel ISAF forces in Herat, or Kabul. We don't need Karachi to get arms to the Mujahideen anymore. We are free of that constraint. And that allows us to develop a Pakistan policy, which is Pakistan focused rather than Afghan focused. And that's what I would hope the administration and our allies would focus on in the future.

SG: Well time will see as to how that unfolds in 2022. You said earlier that Iran is wanting to be a

kind of 'wannabe Pakistan' to use your term. What is happening in terms of Iran right now? What are their main strategic objectives, agendas, and in that, what poses a concern for global security?

BR: Well, Iran has aspirations to be the dominant player. And not just in the Persian Gulf, but in the Middle East writ large. And it has done a great job of achieving that status. Iran is the dominant player in Lebanon, and increasingly in Syria. It has a very important role in Iraq. And it now has a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula, in northern Yemen, with its partner, the Houthis. This is a remarkably successful foreign policy for the Iranians. A lot of their success is of course, a derivative of major mistakes made by the United States and its allies. The toehold in the Arabian Peninsula is a direct result of the Saudi intervention in the Yemeni civil war in 2015 The Iranians had very little connection with the Houthis then. That has now changed dramatically in Iran's favour. Iran is now able, through the Houthis, to fire missiles at Riyadh and other Saudi cities, seemingly with impunity, certainly with impunity for Iran itself. Iranians had some setbacks in Iraq in the last year, but I think they're far from being removed as a major player in that area. Iran has achieved a measure of influence in four Arab capitals, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Sunnah. That would be the envy of any previous Iranian government, including the Shahs.

SG: Well, they seem to have extended their reach, quite significantly, based on what you're saying, if we perhaps could break down two of those particular areas. One you were talking about Yemen. So, you've written extensively about this. How do you see the situation continuing to unfold there? And also, the proxy nature of the different actors in the area, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, what concerns you? And what could have wider implications?

BR: Well, the difference between the proxies in Yemen is that the Iranians picked the winner, and the Saudis picked a bunch of losers. The Houthis are a very well organised, disciplined organisation. They are serial human rights abusers, but they have succeeded in securing for themselves, the mantle of being the nationalist patriotic defenders, of Yemeni, of Yemen, against Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is very unpopular and has been very unpopular in Yemen for decades, after all parts of Yemen were taken over by Saudi Arabia in the 1930s. That is still resented, particularly in the North. The Houthis have successfully made themselves the patriotic faction; the Saudis have connected themselves with elements which are highly unpopular, or highly problematic, like the Southern Secessionist grouping, who basically want to recreate the Old People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

The Iranians have largely had this cake put in their lap by the mistakes of the Saudis, but they've been smart to quickly grab hold of it and take hold of it. The Houthis are not a puppet of the Iranians. They're not under the Iranians control. But they have very similar interests. And both the Iranians and, to a certain degree, the Houthis, have an interest in keeping the war going. After all, they're winning. It's costing the Yemeni people a horrendous price. But it's not costing the Iranians hardly anything. And it's not costing the Houthis very much either. It's to some extent in their interest to keep this war going indefinitely, certainly it is in Tehran's interest to keep it going indefinitely.

SG: In terms of this war continuing to drag on, where does the al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), sit within this melee and this disaster?

BR: It's very hard to tell. Because of the Saudi blockade of Yemen, there's very little media reporting from on the ground in Yemen, about the war in general, and especially about the activities of

al-Qaeda. We have every reason to believe it's still there. But how much pressure is it under? It's very hard to tell from the outside. I think that the US intelligence community has a better handle on these issues, it should, but this is a constant worry and a constant danger. And another reason to want to bring the war to an end: so that the various parts of Yemen can focus on their own internal security and keeping groups like al-Qaeda locked up as much as possible.

SG: Again, another situation that I think tragically, we'll probably start seeing the impact of at a wider level, in the next many months to come. The other thing Bruce that you mentioned was Iran's role in Iraq and that they've had significant influence. Do you see that becoming more extended? More visible than it perhaps already is? And does that then impact on the US troops that are acting in an advisory capacity in Iraq itself?

BR: Iran has enormous advantages in Iraq. It has historical connections. It has religious connections with the majority Shi'ite community in Iraq. It has long demographic connections. There are many Iranian Arabs, who would feel just at home in Karbala as they do in Khuzestan in Iran. A lot of those things we can't really affect. One thing we can do, though, is to encourage our Arab allies to play a balancing role in Baghdad. Jordan, King Abdullah, has been doing this for quite some time. We're now seeing the Egyptians more and more engaged in doing the same thing. We've seen some preliminary indications that the Saudis have finally realised that ignoring the moderate elements in Baghdad only strengthens the hands of the Iranians. They're not there as much as they should be yet, but the Biden administration and our allies should all be encouraging the Jordanians, the Egyptians, the Saudis, the Emiratis, to be a player, be a factor on the ground in Baghdad, to balance and offset the Iranians. It will never be 100%, this is always going to be an ongoing battle, but we need our Arab allies on the ground helping us in doing this. They, in the end, have the advantages that we don't have demography, of ethnic, religious ties. We need their help. Some of them have gotten that for a long time, like the Jordanians, some of them are only now beginning to realise the importance of doing this.

SG: Speaking of our Arab allies, and in particular, Jordan, for as long as I've known you, you've always impressed upon me the fact that Jordan is a very important partner, and ally. And you always placed a lot of emphasis on it, and I can say from that it, it certainly led to my work with the Jordanians, and they were actually a critical component in helping to produce NATO's counter-terrorism reference curriculum. Why is Jordan so important? Why does it have this, this role to play?

BR: Well as any retail agent, real estate agent will tell you, it's location, location, location. Jordan sits at the crossroads of the Middle East, are bordered to the north by Syria and Lebanon just beyond, a border to the east by Iraq, with Iran beyond that, bordered to the west by Israel and the Palestinian territories, and to the south, by Saudi Arabia, and across the Gulf of Aqaba, Egypt. If Jordan is unstable, the whole region will be unstable. If Jordan is stable, it doesn't guarantee regional stability. But it does make it much easier to operate from there. The second reason, of course, is leadership. The Jordanians have been fortunate to have two leaders in the last 75 years, King Hussein and now his son, King Abdullah, who have been quite good at understanding the politics around them, at making a poor, water deprived, resource deprived country, a success story. And the combination of location, leadership, and success has made Jordan really a pivot upon which not just the United States, but the West in general, depends for success. And the Jordanian intelligence service in particular is among the finest in the world and have done an awful lot to help us in the battle with al-Qaeda and other extremist organisations.

SG: Very much so including ISIS. Where does ISIS sit now, in 2022? Are they potentially capable of a comeback in the Middle East like al Qaeda in Afghanistan/Pakistan? You also have a lot of those detainee camps of ISIS fighters, the separate camps housing their wives and children, whose children have now become teenagers, and potentially become quite radicalised. Do we see the potential of ISIS 2.0? Or is that already happening and unfolding, and it's just not getting the attention that it needs to?

BR: The United States and our NATO partners and others are very successful in driving ISIS out of the urban areas, and most of the rural areas of Syria or Iraq in the last decade, it's quite an accomplishment. In the process, the fallacy of the ISIS strategy, that they could build a caliphate today has been exposed. But they're not gone. And you're right, there's, there's many of them still in, in camps, their families, they're undoubtedly sympathisers, whether they will be able to reconstitute or not remains to be seen.

Certainly, one thing is true. And that is that the Taliban victory in Afghanistan has given an enormous boost to the morale of jihadists throughout the region, even jihadists who don't think the Taliban are extreme enough, like ISIS in Khorasan, still feel a boost in their morale, and seeing the United States and NATO humiliated in Afghanistan, driven out of the area, and an Islamist government, now fully in charge in Kabul. That morale boost is an intangible factor, but it's one that there's nothing we can do about, it's a fact now, it's happened. And its reverberations are going to be with us for some time to come.

SG: Do you feel that tying this all in, the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, that it's almost like one of those pivotal moments of the consequences we perhaps can predict to an extent, but we don't necessarily know the full ramifications. But if we go by, for example, the suicide bombing on the US Marine barracks in Lebanon in the 1980s, which in some ways al-Qaeda got some inspiration from, even though it was from a different group sponsored by Iran. And then the Soviet departure from Afghanistan. That what has now transpired in Afghanistan, in 2020, could act as the next platform for a new generation of transnational terrorists, who are very much emboldened by what the Taliban have done, as you said, may not necessarily be in a total agreement ideologically, but it will motivate them, and that will present a new challenge for counter-terrorism globally.

BR: Very much so. Afghanistan is a landlocked country, in the middle of Asia. It is remote from London and Washington. But it is a fact that events in Afghanistan in the last 40 years have had truly global impact. The victory of the Mujahideen over the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan was part of the process that led to the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union, the liberation of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, etc. The end of the Cold War, and the origins of the end of the Cold War are, in many places, but one of the most important was the defeat of the Soviet Red Army in Afghanistan. Fast forward to 2001. The attack on the United States of September 11 was organised and staged out of Afghanistan. Without that base of operations, literally, al-Qaeda probably could not have carried out an operation of that magnitude. Again, the 9/11 attack led to a dramatic change in the global environment, the revamping of the American national security bureaucracy, the creation of whole new agencies like the Department of Homeland Security, the National Counter-Terrorism Centre, NATO's focus on counter-terrorism. Again, events in Afghanistan have had a disproportionate effect on the world twice in our lifetimes already. And I think 2021 will in time be seen as having a third disproportionate effect. We don't know what that is yet. It's certainly a morale booster for international terrorism. We'll see if it's more than that. If it turns into a tangible boost in their capacities, and capabilities.

SG: We'll have to watch this space yet again, there's so many key aspects that you've talked about today, Bruce, a real tour de force of South Asia and the Middle East. One final question is that we often hear that great power competition is now becoming the priority and that focus on South Asia and in the Middle East is dissipating and other strategic priorities are gaining ground and in particular, the dimension of China. Where do you see China fitting in when it comes to Afghanistan, Pakistan, as well as the Middle East. Because it seems like they have got a renewed impetus of having a foothold and influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as in the Middle East?

BR: Well, China has been a major player in Pakistan since the 1960s. Really, in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian War of 1962, China and Pakistan found a natural alliance between the two of them. China has an enormous presence in Pakistan today, and is building an even larger presence, including a deep-water port on the Gulf of Oman, at Gwadar. It has been instrumental in the development of the Pakistani nuclear programme. Pakistan probably got its first nuclear material for a bomb from the Chinese. The defeat of the Americans and NATO in Afghanistan will only underscore that China is now the superpower in at least part of South Asia today, and that the Americans are no longer a player on the ground. Will China in time seek more influence in the Persian Gulf itself? I think that's highly likely; China is still very dependent on imported Persian Gulf Oil, unlike ourselves. And with that interdependence, the Chinese are bound to play a larger role. How that will manifest itself in particular is hard to say at this point. The Chinese don't look to be all that interested in creating bases, although they've created some, one in Djibouti, for example, we'll see. Great power competition is undoubtedly going to be a more important factor than it has been for the last 30 years, when the United States really didn't have a rival. It has a rival now in China, but that should not come at the exclusion of dealing with the perennial, deep rooted, terrorist threats that we face in the Middle East. And that will continue to be a source of great anxiety for American national security planners.

SG: Well, then, that anxiety is going to have ramifications, I think, not just with the US, but across the NATO alliance as well. With that in mind, Bruce, we can conclude, knowing that there are so many different challenges, but it is so good to have you providing context and perspective on them. And we are very grateful that you were able to provide the time to discuss this. So, thank you again, so much for appearing on NATO DEEP Dive.

BR: Thank you for inviting me and it's been great to catch up, Sajjan. So, let's stay in touch.

Bruce Riedel's bio

Bruce Riedel is a non-resident senior fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. He retired in 2006 after over three decades of service with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and has served as a senior advisor on South Asia and the Middle East to four U.S. presidents in the staff of the National Security Council at the White House. He was also a Senior Advisor at NATO, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for the Near East and South Asia at the Pentagon, and author of several books, including Avoiding Armageddon: America, India, and Pakistan to the Brink and Back.

Episode 7 - Edmund Fitton-Brown and Monitoring Terrorists, February 2022

Key Reflections

- **The global terrorist threat in non-conflict zones is comparatively low due to counter-terrorism cooperation and the pandemic, which has limited people's travel. However, it is important to avoid complacency.**
- **The threats in conflict zones remain at serious levels, and affiliates of ISIS and al-Qaeda are able to exploit safe havens in conflict zones, which could lead to the regeneration of their operational capabilities.**
- **The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is ominous for the international community and potentially beneficial for al-Qaeda who have adopted a mode of strategic patience and are growing in confidence.**
- **The Haqqani Network is committed to the strategic interests of the Taliban, but it has the operational and tactical autonomy to pursue its own strategic objectives.**
- **Al-Qaeda is embedded in conflict zones and getting involved in various regional and local conflicts such as in the Sahel and western parts of Africa.**
- **The camps and prisons in north-eastern Syria for ISIS fighters and their families are not strong or well-fortified. Prison breakouts serve as an important propaganda tool for ISIS.**

Transcript:

SG - Dr. Sajjan Gohel

EFB - Edmund Fitton-Brown

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Edmund Fitton-Brown who is the Coordinator of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team. His remit focuses on the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, as well as associated individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities. Edmund previously served as the British Ambassador to Yemen and has had postings in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kuwait, Italy, and Finland.

Please note, this podcast was recorded just prior to the U.S. military counter-terrorism operation in Syria that resulted in the death of ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, which occurred on 3 February 2022

Edmund Fitton-Brown, we are most fortunate to have you join us for NATO DEEP Dive, thank you very much.

EFB: Most, most welcome. Good to be here.

SG: It's a pleasure for us to have you. You're the coordinator of the UN analytical support and

sanctions monitoring team, which concerns ISIS, al-Qaeda, the Taliban. Although I appreciate no two days are ever going to be the same in your work, what does an average day entail for you?

EFB: Well, it's changed a little bit, because of the pandemic, as I guess has been true for so many people and their work. If you'd asked me this question, before the pandemic, I would have said, well, a typical day in New York as opposed to a typical day overseas. And, you know, be sort of 50/50 as to whether I would be in New York or overseas. Nowadays, we're not travelling as much. We're travelling more now than we were during the worst of the pandemic, but there was a prolonged period when it was very difficult to travel as you can imagine.

So, I'll take that question as assuming that it's a normal day in New York. And a normal day in New York would involve a combination of duties. These days, of course, much of it online, but again, in pre-COVID times, more of it in person, I would be dealing, of course, with a certain amount of office work as everybody does, I would be managing my in-tray, which does take some time. But in terms of the more proactive side of the work, I would be attending committee meetings in the United Nations. And that would be perhaps meetings, which are our committees, the 1267 or the 1988 committees dealing with ISIL [ISIS] and al-Qaeda, or with the Taliban, or sometimes other committees or other UN fora. There are a lot of wider counter-terrorist fora in the UN, which I am involved in.

I would be having contact with some of the member state delegates here in New York. And that might be on relatively technical matters, like for example, a proposal for somebody to be added or removed from the sanctions list or a proposal to make an amendment to somebody's list entry on the sanctions list. Or it might be focused more on threat assessment, and it might be with some authorised briefer or some visitor to New York, who was able to talk to us about that member states perspective on the threat from ISIL, al-Qaeda, or the Taliban.

SG: Well, it just shows what a diverse array of things you have to deal with. And certainly, it's clear that none of it is very mundane, it seems to be always keeping you active and having to focus on literally things as they're unfolding globally.

EFB: Yes, that's true. And I probably should say that as coordinator of the team, of course, some of my work is also to do with just helping to coordinate and manage the affairs of my fellow experts, the other members of the team, there are 10 of us in total, and I'm obviously the focal point who helps the others to interact with the UN or reinforces some of the work that they do with their own interlocutors.

SG: And in terms of the global security challenges in 2022, what do you expect is going to take up most of your time?

EFB: Yes, it's a great question. 2022, I think, is going to be interesting from a number of points of view. But perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of it is where are we on the debate on the relative significance of counter-terrorism to other challenges and threats? And, you know, this has been coming for a while. I think probably because of the success that member states have had in the field of counter-terrorism, relative success, you know, of course, there's a lot of bad stuff still out there. But compared to the days of 9/11, or the days of large-scale attacks in Europe, at the

moment, we believe that the threat level in most non-conflict zones around the world — I mean most countries which are in a reasonably good state of prosperity and law and order — that threat is lower than it used to be.

And so that has led to some people saying “well, perhaps ISIL and al-Qaeda have been defeated; perhaps we don’t need to do all this counter-terrorism any longer,” and that can lead to the sort of the “bring the troops home narrative,” it can lead to the sort of “oh that problem is over there, it’s not over here” narrative. And we want to caution against that. I mean, I’m not a Cassandra saying that it’s all about terrorism, and they’re out there, and they’re waiting to attack us again. I fully recognise that state resources are finite, I recognise that there are other priorities that member states have to deal with. And I don’t even claim that counter-terrorism is the most important priority that member states have to deal with. I’m perfectly open to arguments about geostrategic threats or about climate change or about goodness knows the pandemic has helped to put everything in some form of perspective for us.

But what I would argue is that there’s a reason why the threat is low at the moment, it’s partly the pandemic, the pandemic has sort of muffled the threat, it’s limited people’s travel, its limited people gathering together, so there are fewer targets. And of course, when we get to a more normalised phase of dealing with the pandemic, we should expect that to some degree, that sort of muffling of the threat will lift off and the threat will increase somewhat.

But the main point is that the defeat of the so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria was a major blow to ISIL and it reduced ISIL’s capability. And al-Qaeda also has been under constant counter-terrorism pressure and that’s reduced al-Qaeda’s capability. But this has all been achieved through the application of hard work. Member states’ counter-terrorism agencies working closely together, and their law enforcement agencies working closely together, improved international cooperation in a whole range of relevant areas have helped us to reduce the threat in non-conflict zones. If we stop doing that, then that threat will reassert itself because the intent is clearly still there, we see plenty of evidence of that intent.

And of course, the other point that we try to make in all of the reports that we publish, is that the problem in conflict zones is as serious as — perhaps more serious — than it’s ever been. And you can’t simply draw a line between the two and say, well, that’s over there and this is over here. What goes on in the conflict zone, ultimately will not stay in the conflict zone. And if affiliates of ISIL and al-Qaeda are able to exploit safe haven in conflict zones, over a prolonged period, that will inevitably lead to the regeneration of their international, directed, operational capability.

SG: Well, let’s look at that potential regeneration that you’re cautioning everyone about because it is important, as you said, that in conflict zones, in places where there’s insecurity, it’s also where terrorism could potentially breed and we’re at a critical juncture with al-Qaeda in terms of its future direction. There’s been much discussion that they could return to Afghanistan, but then there’s also the perspective that they’ve already been in Afghanistan and its fighters, the affiliated group, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, has been embedded with the Taliban. What do you think al-Qaeda’s goals are? Are they wanting to rebuild, reconstitute, lay low? Or are there concerning signs that perhaps with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan that those ambitions that were once there for a much wider transnational objective could return?

EFB: I think the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is very ominous for the future ambitions and threat from al-Qaeda. I mean, ominous, from, from the point of view of the international community, not ominous for al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda are, of course, delighted about the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. And yes, I think, you know, you raise a really important point. The story over the last few years, has been more about ISIL, particularly over the last sort of seven/eight years, where ISIL rather eclipsed al-Qaeda and achieved things which al-Qaeda had not achieved.

But al-Qaeda was in a sort of mode of strategic patience. It was looking to embed in conflict zones and to keep its narrative alive and, ultimately, to pose an international threat again, in the future. There's no question that al-Qaeda has not renounced any of its previous ambitions. It's still immensely proud of 9/11 as the largest terrorist attack, the most strategically successful terrorist attack that's ever happened. And, of course, many of the attacks that it then mounted over the following decade or so, this is still very much who al-Qaeda is. And what they had done was that they had dismissed the ISIL experiment as premature and reckless. And they were, of course, very pleased when ISIL was militarily defeated during the period of 2017 through 2019. And they celebrated it loudly and said "we told you so" effectively. So, what they're saying is that "our way is better, we will achieve all this and more, but we are patient in, in our, in our approach to achieving it."

And so, al-Qaeda had become a beast that largely lived in the conflict zones where it was embedding and getting involved in various regional and local conflicts. You know, one good example of that has been the al-Qaeda affiliated coalition, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), which is sort of, essentially Mali based in the Sahel in sort of the western part of Africa. And its whole approach has been to be a party to the various conflicts that exist in that part of the world, and gradually asserting its ideological importance and influence in that area. And, you know, we can see that over time we've seen coup d'état in Mali now, coup d'état in Burkina Faso, these are not directly related to the activities of JNIM, but what you have is weak jurisdictions in which it's possible for an al-Qaeda affiliate like that, very intelligently to exploit the divisions that exist, and gradually to grow stronger and more influential.

SG: It really does show how matters can proliferate globally. You mentioned at the start of your previous point the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan is very ominous for the international community as it could potentially further the ambitions of al-Qaeda primarily because the two remain allies. We seem to be in a situation where everything pivots to what may now unfold in the evolving situation in Afghanistan?

EFB: Now, then we come to the Afghanistan point that you raised, and you have this sudden change in Afghanistan. The Taliban and al-Qaeda, as you've pointed out, as we've said, are close allies, organically linked with each other, there's intermarriage between the groups, there's a very, very strong fellow feeling between the groups. And the Taliban have made no indications that they intend to suppress al-Qaeda, they're supposed to under the Doha agreement, they're supposed to ensure that Afghan soil is never again used for international terrorist purposes. And what the Taliban is essentially saying is, you know, "you can leave it to us, don't worry, there won't be a problem, we will make sure that nothing of that kind happens," but they are unwilling to take any kind of coercive action against al-Qaeda. And of course, we immediately saw people like Amin ul-Haq, who is one of our sanctioned individuals, returning to his home in Nangarhar as soon as the Taliban took over.

There's a kind of confidence about al-Qaeda in being in Afghanistan now. They have one of their

closest allies in Sirajuddin Haqqani, the head of the Haqqani Network, one of the deputy leaders of the Taliban, and now the de facto interior minister of Afghanistan. So, they have a lot of top cover in Afghanistan now. That doesn't mean to say that they will mount an attack, at least not in the near future, apart from anything else, they actually don't currently have that capability. But they can now confidently regroup in Afghanistan, recruit, raise funds, train, I would expect to see people move back to Afghanistan.

At the moment Ayman al-Zawahiri, we believe, is in Afghanistan. We only have proof of life for him up until early last year. And there's another statement that's issued from him recently, but it's hard to know exactly what his current status is. We believe that he is unwell, but alive, still the leader of al-Qaeda, but not able to lead it in a very dynamic way. And we think that al-Qaeda will probably face a succession challenge fairly soon, when Zawahiri either dies or becomes too infirm to continue to lead al-Qaeda. We think that Saif al-Adel would be the successor to Ayman al-Zawahiri. And whereas before the summer, we thought that Saif al-Adel faced something of a dilemma over where he would base himself if he took over as the leader of al-Qaeda, we think that he would very likely go to Afghanistan in present circumstances.

The one other thing I'll just add on this is that the example of Afghanistan is also an inspiration to al-Qaeda and to a lesser extent, of course, ISIL and affiliated groups around the world. ISIL affiliated groups don't like it, because they don't like to see the rival brand doing well and they don't like the Taliban because they consider the Taliban to be Godless nationalists. But even so, if you are essentially a sort of Salafi jihadi, who would love to have some sort of similar success in your arena to the one that the Taliban have had as a jihadi group in Afghanistan, then you would be somewhat inspired by what has happened, and the arena where that is most obviously troubling, is in Somalia, where al-Qaeda, excuse me, where al-Shabaab, which of course is an affiliate of al-Qaeda, al-Shabaab has loudly and repeatedly celebrated what's happened in Afghanistan, and definitely sees a parallel with its own ambitions for increased power in Somalia.

SG: Well, you provided very important perspectives about how the Afghanistan dynamic has much wider ramifications and the examples you gave in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as in Mali, and then also in the Horn of Africa with Somalia, that raises a lot of concerns. There was something else also that you mentioned that I thought was so telling, in that you brought up the name of Amin ul-Haq, who was effectively like an intermediary for the Taliban and al-Qaeda during the 1990s. He was a friend of bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. And you mentioned the al-Qaeda leader, the current al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri is believed to be back now in Afghanistan, albeit perhaps with some health issues. I guess the thing I was curious about when you said that he is then being protected by elements such as the Haqqani Network. Sirajuddin Haqqani who is the Interior Minister in the Taliban regime, is the Haqqani Network critical to Ayman al-Zawahiri's well-being in Afghanistan? as well as extending a wider to al-Qaeda and then potentially for the future to affiliated groups if they want to return to Afghanistan? So, I guess that is a two-part question, is Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan, and is this very much down to the Haqqani Network?

EFB: Well, so the first thing I would say is that there's no suggestion that Ayman al-Zawahiri has himself returned to Afghanistan, we don't think his status has changed since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. We've always said that he was in the Afghan-Pakistan border area. We have always believed that he's been in Afghanistan itself, but positioned in such a way that he was inaccessible, unlikely to be found or targeted, and able to move or escape if necessary. So, we don't think that has changed.

The question of who provides that assistance to him, that coverage, yes, we have always said that the Haqqani Network is the most important liaison point within the Taliban with al-Qaeda. And it makes sense that they have a role in securing Ayman al-Zawahiri, but I don't know in detail, again, this is one of those things that is a remarkable thing that Zawahiri has survived as long as he has given that he's the leader of such a notorious group, and that he was a leadership figure even at the time of 9/11. So, you know, he must be one of the biggest targets for counter-terrorism around the world. So, there's been a need to keep him safe. And I think, you know, Afghanistan is complex. You've got within Afghanistan, even within the Taliban, you have a number of different groups and factions. The Haqqani Network, obviously, being one of the most important and certainly the most important with regard to al-Qaeda. But how they actually manage the interface with Zawahiri and keeping him safe, we don't know, and I guess that's a fairly well-kept secret.

SG: Yes, and it's one thing that's always been curious about al-Zawahiri is that his ability to keep himself safe seems to be of paramount importance, whereas other al- Qaeda leaders, Osama bin Laden, Ramzi bin al-Shibh, Tawfiq bin Attash, Abu Zubaydah, they were all found in urban centres inside Pakistan. But it's interesting that you say that, with al-Zawahiri, he, for some reason, always wanted to keep himself in that border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which there have been attempts to eliminate him in drone operations or other means, but he seems to have always been able to withstand any counter-terrorism operation. And maybe it's only going to be age and ill health that ultimately will see his demise.

EFB: At the moment, it looks that way. Yes, I mean, and of course, because of this importance of staying safe, it means that messaging comes through in a very disjointed way. And you know, you see a message, you don't know exactly when it was made, sometimes there's a clue in it, you may remember that there was some messaging around Myanmar, which, at the time when it came out, and this is quite a while ago now, a year or so, it almost added to speculation about whether Zawahiri was either ill or dead, because it made no reference to recent changes in Myanmar and it could, it seemed, although it wasn't specifically dated, the footage appeared to date it to be two or three years old and that made people think, well, if that's the best they can do to sort of show his leadership, then they've got a real problem.

Then more recently, of course, as I said, we've certainly seen proof of life as recent as January 2021. So, we believe he's alive, but of course, he has a number of well-known medical complaints, including a heart complaint. And he's having to exist in what must be physically quite difficult circumstances and stressful circumstances and of course, during COVID, he would have been at an extraordinarily high risk if he were to catch COVID. So, we've tended to see his mortality as being much more likely medical than kinetic.

SG: Absolutely. I have to ask this pedantic question, but what other health issues does he actually have?

EFB: I mean I couldn't give you a full breakdown. I believe he's diabetic, but I think there's enough there with his age and with his heart complaint, to indicate somebody who is fragile.

SG: Absolutely. If we pivot to one of the other terrorist groups in Afghanistan, and that is the Islam-

ic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), they are an ISIS affiliate. And there seems to be much debate about this group, because on the one hand, they've definitely fought and clashed with elements of the Taliban and there is the perspective, they're sworn enemies. But there also seems to be another school of thinking, which suggests that on occasions, there's even been a degree of cooperation, because they are both ethnic Pashtun groups with tribal ties and connections. So, effectively, you could have cooperation one day, and then a bloodbath the next day. But it never seems very clear in understanding this Taliban-ISKP dynamic. Where do you stand on it?

EFB: Yes, and I think that's a very well framed question and it's an important one. The monitoring team has reported on this. And I think the reports I would particularly highlight would be the report that we published in, I think it was May of 2020. And that was on the Taliban and Afghanistan. And then additional comments that we made in the report published in January of 2021, which was a 1267 report on ISIL and al-Qaeda, obviously ISIL Khorasan [IS-KP] features in both of these, because it's relevant to the Afghanistan reporting, and it's also relevant to the global ISIL/al-Qaeda reporting, so we sort of covered it in both.

And in those earlier reports, we had some indications from member states of a very complex and sort of nuanced relationship between the Taliban and ISIL Khorasan. I mean, first of all, you're absolutely right, in what you've said first of all, about the clashes between the two. I don't think there's any doubt that there is a strategic enmity between ISIL-K [IS-KP] and the Taliban. And certainly ISIL-K has killed members of the Taliban, since the Taliban has taken control in Afghanistan, and the Taliban has conducted operations against ISIL-K in which ISIL-K have also lost personnel. So, it is very important to say that there is a genuine rivalry or enmity between the groups.

But why do I say it's complicated? Well, first of all, before the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, there was an element of a multi-sided conflict going on in Afghanistan, where the Taliban were rivals with ISIL-K, but they were both enemies of the government of Afghanistan and its international allies. And so, in a way, the Taliban benefited from ISIL-K operations that weakened the government of Afghanistan. And so that then, I think, as we covered in some of our earlier reports, led to question marks over some of the ISIL-K claims of responsibility for operations in Afghanistan at that time, because the Taliban had a highly developed capability to mount attacks, but it also had a political sensitivity of not wanting to be associated with civilian casualties. And ISIL-K had a limited operational capability, but no such qualms about killing civilians. And so, there were some attacks that took place during that period, which bore the operational hallmarks of a sophisticated terrorist group, a group with the capabilities of the Haqqani Network. And then they were claimed by ISIL-K, and we said in some of those reports that we were not satisfied that those were ISIL-K attacks and that they might have been Haqqani Network attacks, which then suited the Taliban to allow ISIL-K to claim. And of course, that's one of the features of the Haqqani Network—its operational autonomy. It's part of the Taliban, it's committed to the strategic interests of the Taliban, but it has the operational autonomy, tactical autonomy to pursue Taliban strategic objectives by whatever means it judges to be necessary. So that was one aspect of this complexity.

Another aspect was that there was some shift in the nature of ISIL-K or the emphasis of ISIL-K, which took place broadly over the period 2019-2020. And that was where it moved from being a ground holding franchise, primarily based in Nangarhar province in eastern Afghanistan, and with some presence elsewhere, and it lost that territory. It had sort of an outpost in Jowzjan province that was suppressed in 2018. Then in late 2019, it suffered severe defeats in Nangarhar province. Some of the ISIL-K people spilled over into Kunar Province, and then they were pretty badly hammered in Kunar province as well in early 2020, during the winter, very, very harsh climatic condi-

tions. And all of that left ISIL-K reduced in numbers and also unable to hold territory, unable to sort of pursue its objectives in the way that it had been doing up until then, and there was also some leadership attrition.

Then we saw the emergence of this new leader: Shahab al-Muhajir is the name by which he's most widely known, Sanaullah is his given name that we have listed him under in the 1267 committee. Now, Shahab al-Muhajir had apparently been the leader of the ISIL-K's attack cell or attack operations in Kabul, before he became the overall leader of ISIL-K. And ISIL-K shifted towards an emphasis on these urban attacks and particularly attacks in Kabul. And Shahab al-Muhajir, we've had reports from a number of member states, is himself a former member of the Haqqani Network. And it begs the question of, did that shift of emphasis of ISIL-K also serve some strategic objective of the Taliban? Again, I can't give a clear answer to this question, but these are important factors that we ultimately, over time, will need to bottom out. The other thing I think that is clearly true, and I think widely accepted, because member states are divided on this, some see more of a possible overlap between the Haqqani Network and ISIL-K, and some don't see it. But what most agree on is that there are a lot of guns for hire in Afghanistan, there are a lot of people who are essentially fighters or terrorist technicians, and they will work for whoever will pay them. And we certainly understood that there were some people who, at different times, worked for the Haqqani Network and worked for ISIL-K.

SG: It's quite incredible; the murky hand of the Haqqani Network seems to touch so many different facets of extremism and terrorism and violence inside of Afghanistan. Does ISKP, in your assessment, take direction and guidance from ISIS core in Syria, or is there a separation, and it's more just a franchise that may have a degree of ideological and tactical similarity?

EFB: It certainly does take an element of both guidance and support and even, I can allude to some instances of elements of command and control from ISIL core, but you're right, it is a rather distinct affiliate of ISIL. And of course, this is an interesting feature of ISIL globally is that people who have been inspired by the ISIL message and then pledged allegiance often carry a very strong local flavour, and in some cases, ISIL core has not wanted to be associated with them. Best example of that, of course, was Abubakar Shekau and Boko Haram—Shekau's attempts to court the favour of ISIL core were actually rebuffed. But then there are many other cases where those pledges of allegiance have been accepted. And I think this was ISIL core recognising that as it was losing militarily in Iraq and Syria, it had to try to secure its legacy by making sure that there were that there was a sort of global caliphate, the caliphate of the mind, or the online caliphate—there's various different ways that it's been described—that would keep things going.

And, of course, a lot of what keeps ISIL's message going at a time when it's not able to mount significant attacks, particularly in non-conflict zones, a lot of it is based on the propaganda, the very sort of slick and sophisticated propaganda operation that ISIL has, and that itself feeds off the operations that are carried out in the most active affiliates. So, ISIL-K is a good example of that. The non-Shekau part of Boko Haram that became ISIL-West Africa Province, another good example of that. The very striking activities by the so-called Central Africa Province, which is operating in northern Mozambique, the attack on the town of Palma in March and April of 2021.

So, in that respect, we acknowledge that ISIL core has loosened the reins and delegated a lot of authority for these franchises, these affiliates to just do their best. ISIL core has offered a structure for this as well, they've offered a sort of a hub and bespoke structure, so that some of the more

developed affiliates serve as, if you like, outlying core support for some of the less developed what we might call the spokes in those regions. And so, examples of that would include, to the degree that I saw has a presence in the Maldives, it's linked to the hub in Afghanistan rather than directly to ISIL core in Iraq or Syria.

So, coming back to ISIL-K—ISIL-K is very much a local manifestation in the first instance. It's not primarily populated with people who have previously been in Iraq or Syria. It's primarily Afghan and Pakistani. And the vast majority of the foreign terrorist fighters in ISIL-K are Pakistani. And of course, we can also make the obvious point about the border tribes and the fact that sometimes there's a slight blurring even there, that these are these sort of border tribal people in some cases, who would not necessarily specifically identify as which side of the border that they come from. But throughout its iterations, it's been interesting to see that ISIL-K has remained locally led, and primarily the biggest feeder group to ISIL-K has been the Pakistani Taliban, the TTP. And even after the fall of who was in Syria in 2019, when people talked a lot about the likely relocation of people from Iraq and Syria…actually, the numbers that have relocated from Iraq and Syria to Afghanistan are very low; very few people have done that. And those that have come have not taken over the leadership of the group; the leadership of the group is still solidly Afghan/Pakistani. And of course, Dr. Shahab al-Muhajir himself is an Afghan, an Afghan national. So that by way of saying that it's got a very strong local flavour, and also, it's the hub of the, if you like, South Asian network of ISIL.

Nevertheless, in the appointment of leaders of ISIL-K, certainly in several cases over the last few years, has been only made with the approval, the imprimatur of ISIL core. And ISIL core also provides some finance to ISIL-K, so there is an element of dependency and an element of authority there. And it's an interesting question, of course, when you look at the ISIL-K approach to the Taliban since the change last year, ISIL-K clearly wanted to make a big statement of attacking the Taliban, they wanted to make a big statement of saying we are ISIL, and we expect to win, we expect that our ideology, our message will prevail. And in doing so, of course, they take a considerable risk, because ISIL-K is quite small, and the Taliban is very large, and now, of course, has the resources of a state at its disposal. So, it's interesting to ask oneself, was there a debate within ISIL-K between those who are mindful of the responsibility to lead the South Asian network and those who are primarily concerned with Afghanistan? Were there people saying, "Don't antagonise the Taliban, don't make it more likely that the Taliban will wipe you out?" Because that would also wipe out an important function of ISIL globally. And I don't know what that debate was, and I don't know where it came out. But what we can say is that ISIL-K has adopted a remarkably confrontational approach.

SG: Well, it just demonstrates again how complicated the situation has become with the role of the ISIS franchise in Afghanistan, and you spoke about ISIS core, or ISIL core. In your assessment, where are we at with ISIS core now in Syria, because there was this very disturbing incident recently, where you had ISIS fighters trying to free ISIS prisoners from Hasakah in northeast Syria from a prison being run to house them. And it was a very bold and brazen attempt. And it seems that some several hundred may have actually managed to escape. Are we seeing signs of ISIS renewal? Or is this just an isolated moment?

EFB: Well, it's an important moment, but, I think, not a watershed. First of all, it's important to say that the precariousness of the holding arrangements in north-eastern Syria, both of the displaced persons camps, and of the prisons, like this one that was attacked…these are not strong, well-established facilities. In many cases, the facilities are somewhat improvised. And, of course, they're under sort of a local management. And that brings obvious jurisdictional issues. The government

of Syria and the government of Turkey would both have a lot to say about the legitimacy of those facilities. But the practical reality is that those, both the displaced persons and the prisoners, are being managed by the local authorities there, primarily Kurdish, known as the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Forces.

So, the monitoring team said in a number of our previous reports that these holding arrangements were precarious, and that it was to be expected that there would be jailbreaks and that there would be escapes and people leaving the camps. And so, I was not at all surprised by this incident. This is something that was very, very well-predicted and expected. So, we're not saying that this is ISIL coming, demonstrating some unexpected capability—it was ISIL getting its act together, and deciding to go through with something that had been threatening to do for a long time. The main visible threat or the main sort of public threat was made by the ISIL spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi, who in several of his recent communiques had emphasised jailbreaks as being one of the big things that ISIL had to do. And there's been this long-standing—going way back to when Baghdadi was still the head of ISIL—this emphasis on "we must free our imprisoned brothers and sisters." So, this has been in the making for a long time.

And, of course, the number of small breakout incidents that have taken place before this, although nothing on this scale before. But of course, there have been things on this scale outside the core area. There was a huge breakout in the DRC not so very long ago. So, this is a really well-established modus operandi that we've seen in a number of places around the world. I think the attraction of a jailbreak is that it's very unsettling for whoever the jail or prison authorities are. And for that country, it's sort of a massive statement of weakness and failure when a big jailbreak takes place. And of course, it creates chaos, because you then have an operation of trying to suppress the operation itself, trying to mop up the people who've escaped, and some of them, of course, inevitably do get away and do re-join terrorist groups.

SG: Do the jail breaks then also serve another purpose, in that it helps to restore ISIS's notoriety and provide it with the oxygen of publicity that it often seeks?

EFB: It's great propaganda for ISIL. ISIL lives off its propaganda these days, because it can't achieve all that much, particularly in non-conflict zones. It doesn't get many headlines anymore these days, but something like this does get in headlines. And so, you can see the calculation that they were making, which was…the inhibition for them in mounting an ambitious jailbreak in north-eastern Syria is that they don't have a very advanced capability to absorb people who get out because they don't control territory any longer. And they also have only a limited capability to move people on and get them away to some safe haven. And so, if you get hundreds of people coming out, then inevitably, most of them will be either recaptured or killed. So that was one of the things that ISIL had to take into consideration in making its calculations over this. But they obviously concluded it was worth it anyway and that the pluses outweighed the minuses. Now, of course, they have lost people…recaptured or killed, a lot of people killed. But of course, they've also killed quite a few of the people who were managing the facility, the prison guards. And so, it's been quite a blow for the SDF as well. And I think ISIL will see this as having been a net success for them.

But I don't think it speaks to an ISIL resurgence in Syria or, indeed, in Iraq. What we can say about the trajectory of ISIL operations in Iraq and Syria is that they remain active in both countries, at a slightly lower general level of activity than that was the case a couple of years ago. But they do re-

main active, they have a lot of people in Iraq and Syria, and their intention is to resurge in the longer term. But the calculation they make is that that resurgence will eventually be facilitated by the political difficulties that exist in different ways in both countries. So, I don't think we can say that this incident says ISIL is back. I think ISIL is still in that phase of consolidation, before any possible future resurgence.

SG: To that point, then, how does one deal with the camps that exist in Syria, say, for example, like al-Hol, which, in many ways has become almost like a mini city, or small town even, which has grown exponentially in the last few years? It wasn't meant to be permanent, but it effectively has been, and where you had children of ISIS fighters' families, who have now become young adults and potentially radicalised—what can be done? Is there anything that can be done? Or is this just going to continue to have this kind of continuation without any resolution?

EFB: Well, it's an extremely important issue, and it's one on which the UN is very much engaged in providing as much assistance and also as much thought leadership as it can to help deal with an issue, which is a very serious issue, as you say. I think people underestimate the size of al-Hol. And I mean, obviously, we shouldn't forget there are other camps as well, but al-Hol is rightly highlighted as being by far the largest. And this is an issue from a number of points of view. I mean…I think implicitly there, you've talked about the security issue of children growing into adults in horribly unsuitable circumstances. And what does that mean for the way that a person like that then views the rest of their life?

But it's really important to take the humanitarian dimension of this as well, because this is, in the end, al-Hol is a displaced persons camp, it is not a prison. And it's very, very troubling that you have people in sort of a jurisdictional limbo like this. It is not clear what is going to happen to the people in that camp, ultimately. And the one thing I think that we're all clear must not happen is that this must not just be allowed to be just a limbo indefinitely. So that comes to your question of what can be done, what is being done? And there's the legal point here, of course, again…whatever is done has to be done both with the right humanitarian and human rights motivations and riders but also, fundamentally, legally, you have to process people legally according to due process. And a good deal has already been done.

So, I don't want to say that this is an issue that has been left to fester completely unaddressed—that would not be true. You were talking about the significant rise in the population of al-Hol, and yes, it did; it rose massively, especially in the immediate aftermath of the fall of Baghouz in March 2019. A lot of people moved from the territory that was previously held by the so-called caliphate and then found themselves in al-Hol camp, and it went massively over its intended capacity. And it's still well over its intended capacity, but the population of the camp has reduced steadily over the last year or so. So, something is being done to deal with it.

There have been a lot of repatriations that have taken place. These have been encouraged and supported by the UN, but some member states have been particularly active in this. Kazakhstan is an example of a member state that has been particularly proactive about bringing back family members from al-Hol and resettling in Kazakhstan. So work is being done on this, then you have other issues like enforcement issues within the camp. One of the most troubling things about al-Hol is that it's very, very hard for the officials who administer the camp even to go inside it because of the kind of atmosphere of intimidation that exists inside the camp. And not everybody is in a hurry to bring back people who either have or have had their nationality. And then there may

be issues over separating mothers from children, the issue of establishing the parentage of children. And once you overlay these issues with one another, and then add to that the complexity of COVID, which creates an additional practical difficulty in repatriation programmes. And then the fact that the question arises of, how do you get to al-Hol? How do you actually manage a consular interface with a place that is in sort of a jurisdictional limbo, in a part of Syria that is not controlled by the Syrian government? All of these things make it very difficult to address this issue. So yes, something is being done about it, but if you reframe your question to say, is enough being done quickly enough, then my answer is definitely not.

SG: Well, it's important what you're saying as to what is being done. And of course, this is going to be an ongoing challenge. And I can only just again express my appreciation for how much time you spent in talking to us, because I know how hard pressed you are. And I'm very grateful that you could provide such an important perspective on a variety of counter-terrorism issues, and also demonstrating the challenges that exist in 2022. So, thank you again so much for being with us today.

EFB: Thanks, Sajjan, it's been a great pleasure.

SG: And we look forward to having you again.

EFB: Me too.

Edmund Fitton-Brown's bio

Edmund Fitton-Brown is currently a Senior Advisor to the Counter Extremism Project. He is the former coordinator of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, serving as the UN's principal authority on the global threat posed by ISIS and Al-Qaida. Prior to that he was the UK's Ambassador for Yemen from 2015 to 2017.

Episode 8 - Jessica Davis and Financing Terror, February 2022

Key Reflections

- **Terrorist financing needs to be seen from the organisational/group level as well as the operational cell and individual levels.**
- **If one can limit or control the amount of money that a terrorist organisation has access to, one can limit the scope and scale of their terrorist activity. This is a constant battle.**
- **Terrorists have exploited the pandemic for fundraising activities including selling fake personal protective equipment (PPE) online in an effort to raise money.**
- **Some terrorist groups have several different and overlapping areas of money management because they are generating revenues from a variety of different sources.**
- **There are many barriers to the effective terrorist use of cryptocurrency. Currently, it is being used more for extremism financing, the foundational precursor from which terrorism develops.**
- **The Taliban and other groups that operate within Afghanistan's borders are all looking for ways to raise money off the Afghan economy. That includes narcotics production, drug trafficking, and taxation.**

Transcript:

SG - Dr. Sajjan Gohel

JD - Jessica Davis

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Jessica Davis, the President of Insight Threat Intelligence, and President of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies. Jessica had an 18-year career in the Canadian government, with senior roles at Canada's financial intelligence unit, FINTRAC and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Jessica is the author of *Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberations Wars to Global Terrorism and the Islamic State*, as well as *Illicit Money: Terrorist Financing in the 21st Century*.

Jessica Davis, thank you for being here on NATO Deep Dive.

JD: Thanks so much for having me.

SG: You've written extensively on terrorism financing. What interests you about this? And what got you focused on it in the first place?

JD: I think my foray into terrorist financing came about a bit circuitously. So, I was actually working at Global Affairs, Canada, when I saw a job advertisement for our Financial Intelligence Unit

FINTRAC. And there was a lot that really intrigued me about financial intelligence. I think, first of all, I don't think I'd really heard about it before. And I had already done a fair bit of work in the intelligence field. And this was really something quite a bit different. So, most of my work previously had been with the Canadian Armed Forces, exploiting other kinds of intelligence, like signals intelligence, or human intelligence. So, when I heard about this thing, financial intelligence, it really piqued my interest.

So, I applied for that job and went over to FINTRAC, and the world of terrorist financing opened for me. I had been interested in terrorism writ large for some time, I've done a fair bit of research in terms of women's participation in terrorist activity. But this whole terrorist financing thing was really new to me. And I was immediately thrown into the deep end in terms of analysing transactions and trying to figure out what the so what of all the financial intelligence was. So, that was how I got my start in it. And as my knowledge of financial intelligence and terrorist financing deepened, I began to realise how integral it is in terms of our understanding of terrorism, because fundamentally terrorist organisations need money to sustain themselves. Everything that they do costs money. And the same thing is true for terrorist cells, and even to a certain extent for lone actors.

So, as my knowledge of terrorist financing and Financial Intelligence deepened, I came to see how integral, it really is to our understanding. And, you know, from a counter terrorist financing perspective, it really becomes a question of, if you can limit or control the amount of money that a terrorist organisation has access to, you can really limit the scope and scale of their terrorist activity, which is fundamentally what we're all trying to do in terms of counter-terrorism.

SG: Very interesting. And you mentioned about the role of women in terrorism. So, I want to touch upon that a little later, because we've increasingly seen women playing an important role with terrorist groups, including in terms of providing support, which entails financial support and fundraising as well. If we were going to break down how terrorists use their funds, what would you categorise as being their main purposes, obviously, terrorism, but in terms of what areas of terrorism are they principally focusing on? Or does it vary depending on the group and its ideological motivation?

JD: I would say that it doesn't necessarily vary depending on the group. But it does vary depending on the level of terrorism that we're talking about. So, when I conduct terrorist financing analysis, I think about terrorism in three different ways. So, I think about it from the organisational level, so the group level, and then I also think about it operationally, so from the cell or the individual level, because these are the sort of three levels of actors that we see in the terrorism space. We could also probably extend that analysis to talk about extremist movements. And I've done that in some of my more recent work, but it is of a kind with, with the group or organisational level analysis.

So, when we break it down that way, there are some variations in terms of how terrorists use their money. So, at the group or movement level, we're really talking about uses for things in terms of propaganda, creation, and dissemination. Recruitment activities, depending on where the group is and if they control territory or seek to control territory, they may be involved in using money for state building projects, things like paying salaries, bribery to public officials. And then there's also their actual terrorist activity, so planning and executing attacks, either in the area where they're operating or abroad. Again, depending very much on what kind of organisation or group that we're talking about.

From the cell and individual level, they're using money for much more tactical things. So, they're doing things like procuring material for improvised explosive devices, they're spending money on operational security, this can be things like burner cell phones, or even safe houses. Sometimes they'll use some of their money for basic subsistence, because sometimes terrorist projects necessitate that their members remove themselves from other ways of making money, so they'll have to sort of figure out how to pay their day to day living expenses, etc.

So, those are the main areas where we see terrorists using money. And it's basically all of the things you can conceive of that they're trying to do in terms of advancing their terrorist project.

SG: So again, you've provided very important insight and breakdown in terms of how these different purposes of terrorism funding can serve various groups. In some ways, I almost feel that we don't talk about it nearly enough, but terrorists, of course, need to manage their funds to achieve their goals. You mentioned the cells and their specific purposes, but do terrorist groups, for example, do they have a financial manager or even a committee to manage funds and how well controlled is that.

JD: You're very right, when you talk about this being an under studied or under examined area. In my research, every terrorist group and every terrorist plot that I've looked at has some sort of money management structure. Now, these vary significantly across groups and across the kind of activities that we're talking about. Some groups will have entire committees established, this tends to be groups that have—the more elaborate committees tend to be from groups that aspire to a state or bigger project—state building or bigger projects. And they'll often have really elaborate financial structures, sometimes far exceeding their actual financial activity. So, they'll have three or four different managers for the same thing, when it's really just a very small amount of money coming in. But it's part of developing this organisational structure to seem like they're bigger and more important than they actually are. Sometimes they actually need those kinds of structures.

So, when we talk about the Islamic State, they had a number of different and overlapping areas of money management and different people involved in that. And they needed it because they were generating revenues from a variety of different sources. And they were spending money in a wide variety of different ways. So, depending on the group structure and objectives, this shapes what kind of committee or financial management structures are in place.

When we talk about cells and individuals, so that more operational level actor, this is where I think it gets quite interesting, and probably one of the even more understudied areas of that overall financial management piece. Because every cell that I've looked at, and every operational attack and plot that I've looked at, has had somebody involved in figuring out how much the activities would cost and establishing a budget and financial controls around that. One of my favourite examples is the thwarted terrorist attack in Canada, the Toronto 18 plot, I did a really detailed analysis of that plot for a book that came out this year, analysing the plot. And it was such an interesting example because first of all, it was disrupted, so we have a fair bit of court information that sort of flushes out the financial management practises. And the level of detail that the individuals involved went into in terms of managing their funds and allocating their funds and how they stored it was really interesting.

So, a couple of interesting examples from that was they had a fairly detailed analysis about what their improvised explosive devices would cost, and they also allocated money to operational security measures. So, they established essentially a cover story for their purchase of fertilisers, calling themselves student farmers—they had T-shirts and business cards printed up—so all of this falls into that overall logistical and operational structure and the financial management for that plot. And this is consistent across a number of different plots and attacks that I've looked at.

The only exception to this that I would say is for your very small-scale lone actor attacks, the financial management piece tends to be, obviously, super simple; it reflects the scope and scale of the activity that we're talking about. So, if we're talking about a very improvised, for instance, stabbing attack, then the financial activities involved in that, and financial management is going to be really minimal. I would say, though, that there are plenty of examples where it's not non-existent. You know, there's purchases of specific knives and even settling of affairs beforehand that are all important aspects of the financial management of these plots.

SG: Has the pandemic hindered or ironically, aided terrorist groups' ability to fund their activities, because you just explained all the different processes and the myriad of terrorism funding and the goals and the objectives? The pandemic, as we know, has affected everybody in every form of work, and life, and process. In terms of terrorist groups, does that also then impact on their ability to procure funding for their own nefarious purposes?

JD: This is such an interesting question and I think one that we don't have great data on yet. So, what I'll do instead of giving you a firm answer is I'll walk you through some of the factors that I think are involved in figuring out what's happening on the terrorist financing front during the pandemic. First of all, I think the pandemic has had the effect of, obviously reducing people's ability to travel and join terrorist groups, but also to a certain extent perpetrating attacks, there are very few—there have been fewer events where there's a potential for mass casualties, with lockdowns and things like that. So, terrorist targets have been reduced during the pandemic.

Terrorists have also exploited the pandemic for fundraising activities. There's a couple of interesting examples of terrorist groups selling fake personal protective equipment (PPE) online as an effort to raise money, basically a low-level fraud. And I also think that there's probably a number of people out there who, were not for the pandemic, might have tried to engage in terrorist activity. But given pandemic restrictions, and all of the complexities that are now involved in international travel and, organising and all that kind of thing, instead, they might be giving money to terrorist organisations or even cells. So, there's different ways that the pandemic can affect the terrorist financing piece.

I would also say, though, that I think preliminary data suggests that terrorism levels during the pandemic have actually decreased. There are a number of really good reasons for this. I've mentioned a couple of them: the lockdowns, the complexities involved in organising really anything in the pandemic. And this may have also reduced terrorist groups' ability to raise funds from their supporters. So, there are a number of different factors. I'm not entirely convinced which way this is going. I think that some of the factors might be—the scope of the factors is very difficult to estimate at this point. But it'll be a very interesting thing to watch over the next couple of years.

SG: Absolutely. One thing that is potentially pandemic proof and has existed across numerous

pandemics in many centuries has been the Hawala system, which is the informal banking system that is used in various parts of the world. Does that remain a popular method for moving funds for both operational and organisational terrorist activity?

JD: Absolutely, Hawala remains one of the ways that terrorists move money for their activities. The thing that I found in my research was that when we look at concrete evidence of organisational and operational funding for terrorist groups, and cells, and individuals, that a lot of that fundraising and fund movement activity was actually happening through the formal banking system. So, I think that there's been a lot of concern about those more informal channels that you talked about, so Hawala Hundi, and that concern was particularly notable after 9/11, when there was a very little understanding about what the system's entailed, and probably limited ability to really understand how to gain access to those systems. But realistically, when we're talking about terrorist groups, and individuals trying to conduct attacks, a lot of that activity is happening through the formal financial sector because that's what's being used in the countries where they're conducting a lot of their attacks. So, a lot of fund movement mechanisms can be determined by where terrorists are operating and where they want to conduct their activity.

So, if they want to conduct terrorist attacks in the United States, they're going to use the kind of banking system that's prevalent there. If they're doing it in the Congo, they're going to use whatever sort of financial system is present there. So, it's really about that geographic and financial landscape that helps us figure out what are the methods of fund movement that terrorists are going to use.

SG: So, geography is key. Increasingly, we hear that cryptocurrency is being used to fund terrorism. Now this is something that is relatively new, but for what specific purposes are they used for terrorism? And is this something that perhaps is a warning of what will be the main primary use for terrorism funding? Or is that too early to speculate?

JD: I have really mixed views on the issue of cryptocurrency and terrorism. I've been asked this question for a number of years now, and I think that my answer remains fairly consistent. I think that there's a lot of hype around terrorist use of cryptocurrency, because it is absolutely something that criminals find very attractive. But for terrorists, there's more barriers to entry and in a lot of cases, it's more hassle than it's worth, when it's just as easy to move cash or move money through a money service business, like Western Union. Those are probably the easiest ways to move money for most terrorists, including through banks.

Cryptocurrency, though, can be useful. But again, I think a lot of it is really determined by the area where they're operating. So, as societies adopt cryptocurrency, more and more, I think 2021 saw the real mainstreaming of cryptocurrency, we will see more adoption by terrorists. There are some benefits to it: it's a little bit more anonymous than—well, I guess that's even difficult to say, I wouldn't say that it's even more anonymous than most things because sending a transaction through banks is quite anonymous, unless you're triggering suspicious transaction reporting.

So, there are a number of uses there. There's also the issue of extremism financing, which I consider to be a bit separate from terrorism, extremism being more of the foundational precursor or background conditions from which terrorism develops. And when we talk about extremist financing, particularly today, I think about it more in the sense of, particularly, U.S. extremism, or white

nationalist, neo-Nazi extremism, perhaps extremist propagandists, or extremist ideologues who haven't transitioned to terrorism, they haven't actually crossed that sort of legal threshold towards committing attacks or inciting attacks, but they're absolutely spreading extremist propaganda and encouraging people to adopt extremist mindsets. This is where we see a lot of cryptocurrency adoption. And there are a couple of reasons for that.

The first one is that there's a natural tendency for a lot of extremist groups today to shy away from the formal financial system—it's sort of an integral part of their ideology to move away from the state and to adopt things that might hasten the downfall of the formal financial system or the established financial system. So, cryptocurrencies fit that bill, depending on your worldview, to a certain extent. And then I also think that there are some people, some of these extremists, who have personally profited from increases in prices in things like Bitcoin. So, there are sort of these Bitcoin promoters or cryptocurrency promoters, who are operating almost like a multi-level marketing scheme, in terms of hyping the use of cryptocurrencies, because they personally profit from it. They also tend to accept donations in cryptocurrencies. But it's really quite a complicated space, where I'm not entirely convinced that the adoption of cryptocurrency in the extremist landscape is just about security or privacy.

SG: It's, I guess, a tool or a method that is still developing and unravelling. And will, over time, perhaps provide more insight on this. We're hearing in Afghanistan, for example, that people are increasingly using cryptocurrency as a means to survive, as Afghanistan's economy tethers on the brink of collapse. Can you see a situation where, for example, the Taliban will avail of cryptocurrency in Afghanistan, if they haven't done so already?

JD: Crypto and Afghanistan is a really interesting space. I think that 2021 with that mainstreaming of cryptocurrency has probably for the first time, the preconditions for the adoption of crypto in a country that's now ruled by what many people consider to be a terrorist organisation, could be a way to avoid sanctions, it could be a way to circumvent the formal financial system in Afghanistan, which the Taliban now controls. So, I think that there's a lot of promise there. But I also think that there's an awful lot of hype, because it's not clear to me how effectively the average Afghan can use cryptocurrency to buy their basic daily necessities. It might be a useful thing for people as it becomes more—if it becomes more adopted—on a wide scale. This might be a viable sort of parallel economy that can develop, which I think there's pros and cons to that in terms of avoiding the Taliban economy, it makes it a little bit more difficult for them to tax and extort people.

But on the flip side, and this is sort of something that's intrinsic in the question that you asked, this could be something that the Taliban themselves decide to make use of, they could, for instance, largely abandon their national currency and instead, move towards cryptocurrency. We've seen other countries trying to do that. I think that's still an experimental project at this stage. But these are all things that we need to sort of be thinking about and considering in terms of Afghanistan and sanctions, and all of those, and really economic collapse at this point.

SG: Absolutely. And sticking with Afghanistan for a moment, we know that Taliban factions have made much of their money through narcotics and drug trafficking, traditionally, from heroin, but also increasingly from methamphetamines. How do you believe, based on the situation in Afghanistan, that we could start seeing a proliferation of narcotics for the funding of the Taliban? You mentioned that some see it as a terrorist group, we know that they've been involved in criminal enterprise, and we know that terrorism and criminal enterprise sometimes collaborate as bedfellows.

But you see that drug trafficking could potentially be a major growth earner for the Taliban during these times in Afghanistan?

JD: Yeah, that's something that I'm quite confident that we are seeing and will see more of as the next couple of years unfold. The reality is that groups like the Taliban, and even other groups that operate within Afghanistan's borders, are all looking for ways to raise money off the Afghan economy. That economy includes narcotics production, drug trafficking, etc. So, these are all natural ways that terrorist groups will be exploiting the Afghan economy. The nuance and the details of how and what that looks like, I think, are what's kind of interesting to me. Depending on what kind of region in Afghanistan we're talking about, the Taliban is either directly involved in the production of some of these drugs, or they're just taxing the shipment routes. So, the scope and scale of that involvement really depends regionally. And the same is true for things like ISIL-Khorasan Province. They're more likely to be involved in the taxation of that activity, since they're not really holding all that much territory at the moment. But again, that can shift pretty quickly. So, this is definitely a place where we're going to see more financing, for both the Taliban and ISIL-KP and also other groups that operate regionally.

SG: You mentioned ISKP, the ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan. It's interesting to talk about ISIS itself. Back in December 2021, Ahmed Abdullahi—a Canadian National—he pled guilty in a federal court in the US, admitting that he had conspired with others to provide material support to terrorists engaged in violent activities connected to ISIS in Syria. Is funding for ISIS in the West still going on in a substantive way? What should we be concerned about if that is taking place? And has the situation in Syria, to do with ISIS in particular, has that been overlooked in the last two years because of the pandemic? Are things happening with ISIS and funding that perhaps are not getting the attention they need to?

JD: Yeah, it's quite an interesting one…that's an interesting question, because it really forces us to think about what we see certainly in reporting and media reporting and court cases, but then also to consider what's possible and what's probable. So, in the case that you mentioned, the Abdullahi case, the material support that he was providing was really primarily about travelling to join the Islamic State, and to individuals travelling during the Islamic State. Now, a lot of these cases that we're seeing these days are historical in nature. It's a little bit of the closing of the loop on the ISIS foreign fighter chapter in the West. Hopefully, it stays closed, I hope that that's something that we're done with at this point. But the group still operates, it still has a certain draw for individuals. So, I wouldn't be surprised to continue to see some individuals arrested for this type of support. In fact, we've actually seen some of it, even from Canada in fairly recent years, which doesn't make a tonne of sense to me since the caliphate has been destroyed. But there you have it.

In terms of funding for ISIS from the West, this has always been something that's quite interesting, because the majority of sort of more serious high-level financing activity for ISIS proper, and not just for foreign fighters, has really been done at individuals' own initiatives. So, the group was never really keen to try to get large-scale financing operations going in Western countries. We can contrast this with things like al-Shabaab, who had a fairly robust financing network in North America and probably in other parts of the world as well. ISIS really relied on the local economy for most of their financing and some other activities as well. So that Western support was never really driven by the group itself.

Has that changed? I don't think that it's really changed much in the short-term. There's still a huge question about where ISIS' financial reserves are and whether or not they're able to access them. You know, even recently, we've seen reports of the group having stored or stashed hundreds of millions of dollars. I haven't seen a lot of reliable reporting that indicates where that may be and whether the group has access to it. And I think that there are some contradictory indicators that suggest that the group doesn't have much access to that given they're sort of low-level financing activities that they're doing in Syria at the moment, you know, taxing livestock, some kidnapping for ransom activities. These are sort of rent-seeking activities that a group with 400 million dollars that they could readily access might not choose to do, because they also erode any potential support from local populations.

So that's sort of where we're at. The only caveat that I'll add to that is the issue of ISIS detainees. There is some fairly good evidence that family members of some of those detainees are sending money to the women and largely children that are being detained in Kurdish custody. But this is fairly low-level funding, and I think that most of it is just going for subsistence. There may be small amounts that could be syphoned off to the group for particular activities, but again, this remains a little bit of a black hole in terms of intelligence right now.

SG: Is there a difference in terms of how ISIS was funding itself to, say, al-Qaeda? Because we know that ISIS, in terms of the way operated, tried to be this kind of proto-state, very much physically present, visually, whereas al-Qaeda was just more clandestine, dependent on allies to provide sanctuary and support like the Taliban and some Pakistani terrorist groups. So, were their processes of funding different?

JD: Yeah, there was a lot of variation there between those two groups. I think between all terrorist organisations, you can draw some similarities, but this is an interesting compare and contrast exercise. So, I would say that the majority of ISIS' funding was very much that rent-seeking activity, taxation, extortion, some kidnapping for ransom, obviously oil sales, antiquities—all of the kind of economic activity that was already happening in the area where they were able to control.

Al-Qaeda is a bit different. So, they definitely had some of that initial seed money from bin Laden himself. There were some state sponsors, there were some individual wealthy donors that were involved in it, but because al-Qaeda never really controlled any of that territory, their budget was much more constrained. But at the same time, they were able to dedicate whatever sort of surplus revenues they had to those attacks, and they had a bit more of that outward looking desire to attack outside of their immediate area of operations.

So, I would say that they're quite different in terms of their funding methods. When I think about ISIS, I think more about groups like al-Shabaab and Hezbollah in terms of territorial control and scope of finances. So, when we talk about ISIS, we've often heard the refrain that the group had unprecedented wealth. And I'm not convinced that that's true. Hezbollah runs right up there with them in terms of the amount of money that they've had access to, and consistently over the course of their existence.

SG: We've had people on this NATO *DEEP Dive* programme talking about Hezbollah and just how well funded they are and how they operate in various parts of the world, including in Europe and also in Latin America. One thing I was curious to get your perspective on, something you

mentioned earlier about the role of women and the work you've done on the role of women in terrorism, is that aspect when it comes to terrorism financing. What role do women play with terrorist funding? And in terms of, does it differ with a specific terrorist group based on its ideology? So, for example, are there women involved in terrorism funding for jihadist groups, for transnational entities, or would they be more prominent in, say, other ideological entities such as the neo-Nazis? Where do you see women fitting in when it comes to terrorism financing?

JD: This is one of those areas where we need to be a little bit…I'm going to be a little bit measured in my response because frankly I'm just not entirely convinced that we have enough data to make a really good assessment about this. When I was doing research for *Illicit Money*, I came across a number of examples of female financial facilitators—more than I found when I was doing research for my book, *Women in Modern Terrorism*. Now, I was asking different questions, for sure, and *Women in Modern Terrorism* really focused on terrorist attacks, particularly suicide bombing, because there's really good data for that, so I could use it to create a baseline for estimating a whole number of different things.

When I was doing this research for *Illicit Money*, it really did seem to me like there was more and more women becoming involved in the financial component of terrorist activity, and more states being aware of it and taking action against it. So, there's a little bit of a data problem there, in the sense that I'm not convinced that this is a new phenomenon, but I think that it might be something that is now newly public. So, it's the kind of thing that, as states have turned their counterterrorism lens on the role of women in terrorist groups, we're now seeing those arrests and those prosecutions of women involved in financial activity.

In terms of whether or not it varies between groups, I think, you know, the vast, vast majority of terrorist groups and ideologies really see women in that subordinate role—well they say they do, anyways. They talk about women being supporters and in the background. When push comes to shove, though, they'll do what's tactically expedient. So, they will encourage women to become suicide bombers, encourage women to conduct terrorist attacks, regardless of what their ideology actually says, because terrorists are, to a certain extent, practical, rational actors. In terms of the financing piece, though, this is probably one of those areas where women have played a bigger role than we think. Some good examples, of course, include Hezbollah and al-Shabaab. But I suspect that women are active in fundraising for a number of groups. And this is only the kind of thing that we're starting to see good information on. So, I suspect that this is one of those areas of research that could really use a good, critical lens to sort of establish that baseline.

SG: In terms of all of this, we then have that other aspect in terms of perhaps trying to stop terrorism funding, and I know you've also dealt with that in great detail, and also this aspect about financial intelligence. Talk to me about this. What is that, and how successful have we been in terms of trying to stop terrorist groups from being able to fund their activities? Is this basically an uphill treadmill, that we find one avenue, close it down, and then the terrorists find an alternative route to utilise? Is this basically an endless cycle of trying to play catch up? Or have we been able to make major headway in stopping terrorism funding?

JD: This is probably my favourite current question: what have we done, what have we achieved in terms of terrorist financing, counter terrorist financing, specifically? So, I have both an academic and an anecdotal answer to this question. So, I would say academically and from a very rigorous research perspective, we have no idea whether counter terrorist financing is working. There have

been no good studies evaluating global policies and practices on this front. And we really just have no data that suggests that these policies and practices have done anything in terms of reducing levels of terrorism. We also don't know if they haven't worked. So, it's really just this black box of counter terrorist financing and its effects on terrorism. I am looking at this question right now for my dissertation, which I'm very excited about.

And, anecdotally, what I would say, based on my practical experience, is that it has worked. But it's really difficult to figure out what parts of counter terrorist financing have worked. I think that we see how it works in terms of some countries experiencing more small-scale, lone actor-style attacks. That could be a terrorist evolutionary response to counter terrorist financing policies and practices—things like the exploitation of financial intelligence, the detailed analysis of terrorist financing, looking for indicators mobilisation—these things may have forced terrorists to adopt those lower complexity, lower scale attacks. This, of course, is not universal. There's a huge amount of variation in terms of levels of terrorism globally, the complexity and scale of attacks globally. But I think that countries that have had better success in implementing counter terrorist financing policies and practices have seen this evolution.

Now what of these policies and practices work? This is really the question, because counter terrorist financing encompasses a range of different activities. There's things like, obviously, the criminalization of terrorist financing, things like military or kinetic strikes against financiers, this is obviously a constrained activity, depending on whether or not there's an armed conflict going on, financial intelligence exploitation I would consider to be part of counter terrorist financing policies and practices, and, of course, global regulations and national level regulations, sanctions, etc. So, the question for me is, what of these policies and practices work? How do they work in combination? And what's sort of the magic combination that gets you to reduce levels of terrorism?

The last thing that I'll say about this is, I don't think that we're really looking for a zero level, or I don't think it's realistic for us to look for a zero level of terrorism. I think that the conditions that lead to terrorist activity are present in every country around the world, there will always be a certain level of discontent and a certain number of people who will decide to take that discontent and engage in terrorist activity to support that. The question for me is how can current counter terrorist financing policies and practices best reduce their ability to conduct attacks, and particularly high-profile, high-lethality, or high-casualty attacks?

SG: Well, I appreciate also that it was a pretty difficult question that I was throwing at you. But again, you provided a lot of nuance and deep perspective on that. One final question I'd like to ask you about, to pivot in a slightly different direction but still in terms of that aspect of financing, is to get your take on the clandestine espionage that goes into funding. Does that operate entirely differently from terrorist groups? Or, for example, when state actors are plotting nefarious activities in other countries, do they use similar funding streams?

JD: This is an interesting one, and I think that it lives somewhere between money laundering and terrorist financing. You know, there's been very little research done on espionage or foreign influence financing— I've done some of the only research on that that I'm aware of. And a lot of it looks a little bit more like money laundering than terrorist financing. So, the use of front companies, perhaps, the use of more elaborate money laundering activities. There's a lot of cash, though, that still happens in the espionage space. But there are some similarities with terrorist financing as well, in terms of it often being a little bit more—sort of there being smaller amounts of money involved. So,

when we talk about money laundering, a lot of money laundering schemes can run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

On the terrorist financing and espionage side of things, we're talking much smaller numbers. And I would say that probably espionage financing is even smaller than terrorist financing in terms of the amount of money that's involved. So, it sort of lives in that weird space between the two of them. But it's really got its own typologies and methodologies as well, because it's really about trying to obscure state payments to, generally, one or a handful of individuals. And sometimes states aren't even all that concerned about hiding those payments, particularly after they've received the information that they want. So, depending on how willing they are to leave a source out to dry, they may take very few efforts to obscure the source of those funds.

SG: Well, we're probably going to have to get you back to talk in more detail about those different dynamics, especially when it comes to the differences between terrorism funding and also then money laundering and the role of state actors, because that's certainly going to be something that will have more relevance in the future.

JD: Absolutely.

SG: But Jessica, thank you so much for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*, and we look forward to having you back again.

JD: Thanks so much. It was a great conversation.

Jessica Davis's bio:

Jessica Davis is the President and Principal Consultant at Insight Threat Intelligence with an expertise in terrorist & illicit financing, indicators of terrorist activity, women in terrorism, and intelligence analysis. She had an 18-year career in the Canadian government, with senior roles at Canada's financial intelligence unit, FINTRAC and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). She is the author of Women in Modern Terrorism: From Liberation Wars to Global Terrorism and the Islamic State as well as Illicit Money: Terrorist Financing in the 21st Century.

Episode 9 - Elisabeth Braw and the Ukraine Crisis, February 2022

Key Reflections

- **Russia's invasion of Ukraine is on a scale that we thought was confined to history in Europe. It was also planned well in advance.**
- **Vladimir Putin has scores to settle originating from the end of the Cold War, and that mindset cannot be changed. Ukraine is a key feature of that.**
- **Putin has become paranoid and isolated. He has reduced the number of people advising him because he doesn't like opposing viewpoints.**
- **The narrative of NATO threatening Russia has always been a red herring, and the irony is now by occupying Ukraine, Russian troops are physically closer to NATO member nations.**
- **Hybrid and grey zone threats have aggressively featured in the Russian strategy against Ukraine. This includes cyber threats and false flag operations, as well as tactics to cripple Ukraine's economy.**
- **Russia needs to be halted in escalating tensions via economic and diplomatic means as well as sanctions and revoking the visas of the family members of leading Russian officials and oligarchs who live in the West.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

EB: Elisabeth Braw

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Elisabeth Braw, who is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where she focuses on defence against emerging national security challenges, such as hybrid and grey zone threats. Concurrently, Elisabeth is a columnist with *Foreign Policy* magazine. She is also the author of *God's Spies: The Stasi's Cold War Espionage Campaign Inside the Church*.

Elisabeth Braw, thank you for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

EB: Thank you for having me.

SG: I wish we were speaking during a more stable and tranquil time globally, discussing scenarios, but on 24 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-fledged invasion of Ukraine from multiple locations. Via the north towards Kyiv, and the south from Crimea. There were also missile barrages and artillery on the northeast, focusing on Kharkiv, and the east targeting Mariupol.

This is an invasion of a peaceful, sovereign, independent nation on a scale that we thought was confined to history in Europe. Was this invasion inevitable? And could it have perhaps been avoided?

EB: In the short term, it could possibly have been avoided. It happened because Vladimir Putin decided that he would like to attack Ukraine, had he not decided that he would like to attack Ukraine, then clearly we will not be facing this tragedy that we are facing now.

I think in the longer term, we have had three decades, more than three decades of phenomenal peace, prosperity, growth, and frankly, an almost exceptional period in European history, indeed, in global history. I don't think it could last. Countries are like people, there are always going to be countries, leaders of countries, who will refuse to get along with other leaders, there will be countries that will refuse to get along with other countries. So, this phenomenal stretch of growth and prosperity and peace that we have had was an anomaly.

We have to remember, it's not just Russia that is behaving in a belligerent fashion, China is doing the same, not yet with an armed invasion of another country, but also refusing to get along, to play according to the rules of the global community. And that is, unfortunately, I think that the way the world always develops, you will have some more peaceful, prosperous periods, but they will be followed by conflict. And we thought, or many people thought, that this time it would be different. No such luck.

SG: No such luck, indeed.

A few days prior to the invasion, Putin told the world effectively that he did not believe that Ukraine should exist as an independent country. He gave what effectively was a 5,000 word rant about Ukraine and Russia and their intertwined histories. Was he effectively warning that there was going to be this invasion that would take place?

EB: Yes, he was warning of an invasion. Even those of us have been paying close attention to him now for years, even those of us who have done that, we didn't think that he would follow through on those threats. We thought that he would do a bit more of sabre rattling, we thought that he would be menacing, and we thought that he would then pull back from the brink, because simply by being menacing, simply by using tools other than military force, you can actually harm a country a great deal and that is what Russia has done to Ukraine. The Ukrainian economy has been suffering quite badly in recent months, investors have left and that is as a result of those Russians and soldiers being massed at the border. Most of us didn't think that Putin would then follow through with a traditional military assault, simply because you can do so much with other means.

Clearly, he feels he has scores to settle, and I think he is so isolated that he may be misjudging the situation, he may be getting more paranoid than he already was. So clearly, from his point of view, this is what he needed to do, I think, not just I think, it's clearly the result of a paranoid understanding of the world. And that's the mistake most of us made, we thought he would act rationally. But if you have developed a paranoid view of the world, you may not act rationally.

SG: It's interesting that you say that he's become paranoid and isolated. There's a belief that during the pandemic, for the last two years, that effectively he cut himself off from physical contact from many people, but that this Ukraine obsession was always there, in the back of his mind. Is it also an issue that he has just been advised very badly, or that people in his inner circle are too scared to advise him?

EB: I think we have all been cut off during the past two years, because we have been forced to work remotely and without regular interaction, not just with our coworkers and colleagues, but also without regular interaction with others. And for a world leader—for the leader of a country—that means fewer opportunities and less interaction with your fellow leaders and that came at exactly the time when there would have needed to be regular interaction between Putin and Western leaders to reassure him in his clearly increasingly paranoid mind that NATO is not an aggressive alliance that Ukraine poses no threat to NATO. COVID removed those opportunities almost completely. And it seems to me made his paranoia even worse.

Then, there is, as you mentioned, the additional thing of his advisors, it seems that he has reduced the number of people, or the number of people advising him have naturally recused themselves, simply because he is somebody who doesn't like to hear a strong opposing viewpoint he seems to like 'yes-men' and so experienced diplomats and other advisors have fallen by the wayside, either removed by him, or neglected, or ignored by him, or realising that their views were no longer of interest. And that's an extremely dangerous situation if it involves any country, but especially if it involves a country as militarily powerful as Russia.

SG: Absolutely, and it's worth pointing out that when it comes to this alleged concern that Putin has about NATO, if you look at a map, for example, NATO nations that border Russia, it's very few. You've got the Baltic states and perhaps a sliver of Kaliningrad, which is also connected through borders with some countries in Eastern Europe, but the the landmass physical connection between NATO and Russia is quite insignificant, and the irony is now by occupying Ukraine, effectively, the borders that Russian troops now occupy, potentially has quadrupled in terms of its connections with NATO. So it's quite clear who is actually the one pushing that aggression towards NATO.

EB: Yes, absolutely. And I think the narrative of NATO threatening Russia has always been a red herring, but clearly a very effective red herring, because the Russian population—the voters of Russia—have not punished Putin or his party for this obsession with NATO, when really one could argue that they should focus much more on domestic Russian issues where reform is desperately needed.

Many of us, including Putin, experienced the Cold War, and he seems to be stuck in this mindset. I'm somebody younger than Putin, but for every single one of us who have any sort of memory of the Cold War, we remember what a standoff it was between the two sides, and how the Soviet Union crumbled without a noise. It was clearly extremely humiliating to the Soviets and especially to the Russians, who then lost many of their fellow Soviet republics because, lo and behold, the fellow Soviet republics were not that keen to be closely involved with Russia anymore. His mind seems to be stuck in that Cold War mentality, when really so much of the rest of the world, including some former Soviet republics, especially the Baltic states, have moved on to a more collaborative world.

But we clearly can't change his mindset, we thought we could even up until the early 2000s. And well later than that, in his early years as president. That was not the case. George W. Bush thought he could do business with him; many other other leaders thought they could. And most recently, Emmanuel Macron thought he could, just a few days ago. It was not to be.

SG: It was not to be. And Putin, when he declared war on Ukraine, he pledged to oversee what he described as demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine. One point here is that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is himself Jewish. So I do find it strange why Putin uses this term of denazification. It's clearly a propaganda tool. But do you think that resonates with people in Russia?

EB: It's so easy to call somebody you don't like a Nazi, so many people do it. And clearly Putin has discovered too, that if you don't agree with somebody you just call him a Nazi. And immediately, instantaneously, his or her reputation is damaged.

And I suppose it does work in the sense that it's easy to portray a country that wants to rid itself of sort of a colonial power almost, it's easy to describe them as belligerent or as neo-Nazis, when all they want is freedom. And I don't think I need to remind anybody who listens to your podcast that when the Baltic States, back in the very final years of the 80s, when they—the few brave Baltic activists who dared to talk about independence—when they did make that case, many Westerners—many people in Western Europe—thought they were a little bit odd, they were too nationalistic and as a result, didn't take them seriously or looked down on them because they were supposed to be happy in the Soviet Union. And now they are happy outside the Soviet Union, they were proven right. But there is this tendency to always look at people who act out of a sort of a nationalist feeling, when in fact all they want is to live in their country in the manner that they decide for themselves.

SG: Absolutely, and the Baltic nations are becoming a key member of not just NATO but of the European Union as well. And they've thrived as you said.

British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, he spoke about and warned about a tidal wave of violence. Are we looking at the dismemberment of Ukraine? If we track back to the fact that we first had the annexation of Crimea, then the instigation of nefarious actors in the Donbass region, primarily in Luhansk and Donetsk, is this the carving up of Ukraine, and will that be an ongoing protracted process?

EB: Ukraine has already been carved up through those two breakaway republics declaring themselves independent, so Ukraine has already lost its territorial integrity. Unfortunately, the loss of those two breakaway republics is the best case scenario at the moment. So, what we are looking at as we speak is Russian aggression against the rest of Ukraine. And let's hope that it doesn't succeed. The Ukrainians are, as far as we can tell, putting up an extremely brave and skilled fight against the Russians. So the Russians, the Russian troops, already involved and those likely to be added are facing more assistance than Putin seems to have calculated would be the case.

And that raises the hopes that Russia will conclude at some point, hopefully, very soon, that it's not

worth losing more blood and treasure on this foolish enterprise and will as a result withdraw. I don't think that would be the case. Putin clearly has scores to settle, and he doesn't hesitate to risk his own citizens' lives to harm Ukraine. But I think the important thing to remember is that Ukraine has already lost parts of its territory and now risks losing even more parts of it.

SG: One aspect that you've written about and spoken about is these notions of hybrid and grey zone threats. This is very relevant and important when it comes to the role of Vladimir Putin and what has now unfolded in Ukraine. Could you talk a little bit more about what hybrid and grey zone threats mean? And then also explain the context of how that has been implemented in the Russian strategy upon Ukraine?

EB: Yes, a hybrid—just like a hybrid car—hybrid warfare is a combination of two different means of aggression, so kinetic and non-kinetic, or above the threshold of armed violence and below the threshold of armed violence. Grey zone aggression, or grey zone warfare—I say grey zone aggression—is the aggression that takes place exclusively below the threshold of armed violence, and that's where we have seen so much innovation in recent years. There has been an explosion of activity in this area simply because there's so much you can do as the aggressor country and so much you can achieve. And the cost is so low because you don't, in most cases, you don't risk any lives, and in most cases, it's also cheap financially speaking. You can engage in cyber aggression, that's a long standing form of grey zone aggression. So is disinformation.

But more recently that the area that has been booming is corporate coercion, as conducted mostly by China. Then there are additional means you can use, for example, the weaponisation of migrants, but the point is that it's very easy to innovate in this area. You just need to find a tool that's available, and then you use it. And it's very hard for the targeted country to respond, because it's not military violence, but it's also not nothing. So how do you respond?

SG: It's very interesting what you're saying, because we've seen this hybrid and grey zone dynamic being implemented with full force against Ukraine. We saw the cyber threats where Ukrainian servers were taken offline, and that was done on multiple occasions. We also saw several false flag operations taking place where it was alleged that the Ukrainians were firing into the areas of Donetsk and Luhansk. And effectively, they were then proved to be actually untrue, and that this was disinformation from the Russian side. There were a lot of efforts to try and dispel and unveil the hybrid and grey zone threats in the hope that that would curtail or reduce the potential of a Russian invasion. But sadly, it seems that maybe Putin got frustrated with the fact that the psychological operation strategy wasn't working, so he didn't care so much anymore, and decided that the full scale invasion was going to take place regardless.

EB: He seems to have been impatient. Earlier this month, in fact, on 15 February, the global insurance body that classifies water, bodies of water in the world according to the risk of sailing through them, elevated the Russian and Ukrainian parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov to its highest risk category, which means that shipping companies face much bigger obstacles, enormous obstacles, if they want to sail into those parts of the Black Sea, the Russian and Ukrainian parts of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, to deliver cargo or pick up cargo. And as we all know, Ukraine has no other ports. Russia has other ports; Ukraine does not.

On top of that, air traffic became so risky that airlines, civilian airlines, stopped flying both on their

own volition and because insurers felt it was no longer wise to insure flights through Ukrainian airspace. So Russia, simply by being menacing, could have cut off Ukraine from a large chunk of its cargo that it depends on every single day, as does every single country. And by also cutting off… by forcing airlines to cut off that traffic to Ukraine. Of course, less cargo is delivered by air than by sea, so that shipping classification really was very important. And all Putin would have needed to do, if he just wanted to weaken Ukraine, would have been for the shipping ban—de-facto ban—to take effect, and Ukraine would have struggled mightily to get the goods it needs. Now he jumped the gun and invaded instead. But that shipping de-facto ban really highlights what you can do in the grey zone and again, you leave the other countries struggling to respond to it. In the case of Ukraine and the shipping, what can Ukraine do if shipping companies and their insurers conclude—wisely conclude—that certain shipping lanes or bodies of water are too dangerous. There's nothing Ukraine can do.

SG: It's very interesting, that dynamic of the grey zone and tying it into the economic crippling of Ukraine. So in terms of—if we stick to the economic dimension for a second—the strategy now seems to be to punish Russia so that it doesn't go further than it already has done. But what effective measures do you think can be taken to directly impede Vladimir Putin? There's a lot of talk about banning Russia from the SWIFT international payment system, which would be quite significant. But do you believe that there is more that can be done, or what do you feel would be the steps needed to stop Russia from escalating tensions?

EB: Two weeks ago, I would have said ban them from the Olympics, but Putin was smart enough to wait after the Olympics, and his athletes won a number of medals for Russia. Now that's too late. And one thing that has happened just in the past few minutes as we speak is that the Champions League final…it has been decided it will be moved from St. Petersburg. And that's one of the things the international community can do. Yes, sports is not exactly as hard hitting as using military force, but we have to remember that athletes and sports…that's an important reputational aspect of any country, and Russia in particular puts a great deal of effort into developing and promoting its athletes. So that's something we can do; we can ban Russian athletes from international competitions, and from playing abroad. That would be a massive hit to a country as athletically ambitious as Russia. Same thing with Russian artists.

Another thing is to highlight the activities Russia conducts in certain countries of the world, including Libya, through its Wagner Group and not just highlight but limit and possibly eliminate…Libya, for example, is a country where the Wagner Group is active, and Russia of course says it's not in Libya; however, the Wagner Group is in Libya. We could shine a light on that and also through concerted efforts force the Wagner Group to leave Libya. So this is clearly not, again, it's not as effective as using military force against Russia. But we should remember that that every step along this way is a chink in Putin's armor.

Then on top of that, I hope the U.K. in particular revokes the visas of the children of the leading officials and oligarchs who are already being sanctioned and who may be sanctioned. They live in the West, enjoy our hospitality—ordinarily, we would not punish children for the sins of the fathers and mothers. But these children benefit from Putin's rule through their parents. And it's thanks to that wealth that they are able to live in our countries. We don't have an obligation to keep posting them. It would put a lot of pressure on Putin if those children and other family members lost their visas, and again, a visa is a country's gift; it's not an offensive act to revoke it or to not issue it. But if those visas were revoked, the business and political elite would, I think, put more pressure on Putin, would put serious pressure on Putin to change his ways, simply because they want their

family members to keep enjoying the lifestyle we have here in the West.

SG: So these are certainly some of the measures that could be taken. There was something very surreal, Elisabeth, that I noticed on the day that Putin announced his war, in that he ended up hosting Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan, who had this trip scheduled ahead of time and somewhat bizarrely didn't cancel it, knowing full well that there was all likelihood of a war taking place. The reason why it was so surreal in many ways is that the last time the Kremlin, then under the Soviet Union, launched an invasion and occupation of another country, that was Afghanistan back in December 1979. And at that point, the West had aligned with Pakistan to work together to rid Afghanistan of the Soviets.

Now, what it seems is that Russia—in terms of not just its military strategy, but also its diplomatic approach—is working with some countries to see if it can show that it still has a degree of legitimacy. So it's like Putin not just calculated and war-gamed the military strategy, but he also calculated the diplomatic approach too, because you have these very odd images of Imran Khan actually shaking hands with Putin, which was something that was not accorded to the French president Emmanuel Macron, or the German chancellor Olaf Scholz. So do you think Russia still has allies and friends that will support it, even though it has taken this occupation and invasion of Ukraine?

EB: It does, Sajjan, you know you are the expert on this, but he has—Vladimir Putin—some, I would say, capital of fondness—fondness capital—among leaders of such countries, and that's what he's able to use now, that capital. And let's see how long those leaders stick with him because clearly, it's not particularly palatable to support a country that invades a smaller neighbour.

SG: No, indeed, absolutely. One last question then, Elisabeth, is where do you think this is going to end? And at what point can we say this is going to reach a conclusion? Do we have to be concerned about the fact that you could see an occupation of other countries take place? Or is Putin seeking to simply end this in Ukraine for the time being?

EB: It seems that he was expecting a swift and decisive victory for Russia. And now in these first hours, as we speak in the first hours that have passed since Russia began this assault, Ukraine has put up a quite impressive resistance, the Ukrainian armed forces and indeed the politicians of the country. So like all wars, this invasion seems to have been based on an assumption of swift victory, humiliation of the other side meaning Ukraine, and then withdrawal. I don't think Putin will get that. He will see his forces bogged down, just like Soviet forces were bogged down in Afghanistan decades ago, which was of course Russia, so the Soviet Union's most humiliating and painful experience to date.

As far as the Western side goes, this is really tricky. What we saw at the end of last year and indeed still now the beginning of 2022—for example, Poland's border with Belarus—is that there are countless moments where the defending side has to decide, do we retaliate? Or do we try to calm the situation? On the Polish border with Belarus, that has meant, that has included a lot of provocation by Belarusian forces—throwing rocks, throwing other…directing other violence against Polish soldiers. And those Polish soldiers have not retaliated, but if even one soldier had reacted improperly or even just made the wrong assessment in that moment, we could have seen a really dangerous escalation.

And the reason I mention that is that the same thing could happen now. Soldiers of course are in a chain of command, but nevertheless, at some point, even a low-ranking commander, a very junior officer on the ground has to decide what needs to be done in that moment, and that's where we could see that miscalculation and as a result, dangerous escalation. And the longer this war or this conflict drags on, the more such opportunities, such risks there are. And that is a risk for Russia, and it's clearly a risk for Ukraine. And what it also means is that even if just one NATO soldier in one of the Baltic states or Poland is somehow harmed, let alone killed, it brings NATO into the equation as well. NATO has said it won't send troops to Ukraine, understandably, because Ukraine is not a NATO member state, but nevertheless, there could be that accidental situation where NATO, NATO's member states would have to respond.

SG: Absolutely. You provided very important perspective for us on this podcast. Most grateful, Elisabeth, that you're able to talk about what has transpired and what is a very sad episode in Europe and will be perhaps infamous in history over the passage of time. And certainly we all think about the Ukrainians and what they're having to now deal with under this occupation. I can say from my own perspective that having worked with the Ukrainian defence academies as part of the NATO Defence Education Enhancement Programme (DEEP), we had long standing relations with the Ukrainians, and we certainly do hope that they can come out of this without having had their lives destroyed. Because that is unfortunately what this occupation and invasion of Ukraine is designed to do. And I'm most grateful again, Elisabeth, for you joining us.

EB: Thank you. I would have said it's a pleasure—it's not a pleasure to discuss this tragedy in Europe. And I think we who are experiencing it now and generations to be born will remember the 24 February 2022. Just like we and subsequent generations will remember September 11th, 2001.

SG: Absolutely, I think that's a very poignant way to end this discussion that we've had. Thank you again Elisabeth, it's been a real pleasure to talk to you, and yes, under sad times, but I'm most glad that we've had that opportunity to discuss this.

EB: Thank you.

Elisabeth Braw's bio

Elisabeth Braw is a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where she focuses on defence against emerging national security challenges, such as hybrid and grey zone threats, and a columnist with Foreign Policy. She is the author of God's Spies: the Stasi's Cold War Espionage Campaign Inside the Church.

Episode 10 - Jane Perlez and China, From Nixon to Putin, March 2022

Key Reflections

- **President Richard Nixon, an ardent anti-communist, sensed an opportunity for the U.S. to pull China away from the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong was receptive because of ensuing border tensions with the Soviets.**
- **Pakistan became the essential go-between and couriers for Mao and Nixon due to having been very friendly with China and the U.S. at that time.**
- **China today represents the legacy of both Mao and Deng Xiaoping. Mao instituted the political thought and political instruction. Deng initiated the unsurpassed economic development.**
- **Xi Jinping has asserted his authority on the Chinese Communist Party both politically and economically. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a cornerstone of both dimensions. For foreign policy, relations with Russia have primary importance.**
- **The resources that China has put into the BRI in Pakistan is not currently paying dividends. The Gwadar Port could still become an important hub for the Chinese navy.**
- **The emerging relationship between China and the Haqqani Network (HQN), who rule Afghanistan as part of the Taliban, is precarious. It remains to be seen if China and the HQN can cooperate on economic and security issues.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

JP: Jane Perlez

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel.In this episode, we speak to Jane Perlez, a long-time foreign correspondent for The New York Times. Jane served as their Beijing Bureau Chief in China until 2019, where she wrote about China's growing role and influence in the world. As part of a group of New York Times reporters, Jane won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for coverage of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Jane also is the co-host and helped produce the podcast series The Great Wager, from NPR & WBUR's Here & Now, which reveals how the connection between the United States and China emerged from an extraordinary encounter 50 years ago between U.S. President Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong, the chairman of China's Communist Party.

Throughout this podcast we will feature clips from Jane's recently released podcast. https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2022/02/07/the-great-wager-podcast

Jane Perlez it's fantastic to have you with us on NATO DEEP Dive.

JP: It's a huge pleasure to be here.

SG: Let's talk about your experiences with China because they cover so many different periods of time, including the Cultural Revolution and then the rise of the current President of China, Xi Jinping. But perhaps, let's touch upon a key moment, that in many ways connects both of those periods, and that is the rapprochement between President Richard Nixon and Mao of China, which took place in the early '70s. And in many ways, was a game changer when it came to the West's interaction with China. And in fact, you have produced a podcast: *The Great Wager* where you look at that. Why is that such an important moment in time, in history, for us to understand?

JP: The main importance of it is that Richard Nixon was one of America's great anti-communists, and he came to the presidency with a changed mind and saw that China and the Soviet Union were two big communist countries, but they were no longer getting along. And he saw a great opportunity for the United States. He was worried that the Soviet Union was gaining parity with the United States on nuclear weapons, and he figured that if he could pull China away from the Soviet Union and bring it to America's side, America would be in the catbird seat.

SG: And what were the key moments, or people, or entities, involved that brought Nixon and Mao together?

JP: Well, there were two, organisers, under the sort of organising principle—there was this big principle that Nixon outlined, and by the way, Mao Zedong was quite open to it too, because he was fed up with the Russians who were bearing down on his border, and there were fights on the Chinese-Soviet Union border between the two militaries. So, Mao was casting around too, and his advisors, one of his advisors, Chen Yi, the Foreign Minister, had said to Mao "play the America card."

So, the key players beyond Nixon and Mao were Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai. And there's a very interesting story about Henry Kissinger. Nixon had been in the Oval Office for just a couple of weeks, and he called in Kissinger, and he said, "I want to do a rapprochement with China, get going." And Kissinger came out of this meeting, and said to his deputy, Haig—General Haig— "he wants to get together with China, he must be crazy." And you know, for our benefit, for our podcast, *The Great Wager*, which is coming out on NPR, we're very lucky we've got tape of Haig saying, "Henry said, 'Nixon must be crazy.'"

SG: In terms of the interactions, themselves, how did that go? Because there's often been some bits and pieces to demonstrate it, some Hollywood movies have also shown what they think took place. But this must have still been a very awkward meeting between the two of them, even if there was a desire to meet.

JP: Well, before the meeting, there was basically three years of hit and miss diplomacy, but very determined diplomacy. And that was one of the reasons that I was interested in looking at Nixon's

effort at rapprochement with China, because I think it shows if you want to do something, you can do it. And it wasn't so easy. In part, it wasn't so easy because Nixon and Kissinger—they did agree, of course, that they were going to do it, Kissinger came around—they had to do it in complete secrecy. So maybe that was an advantage actually. But they had to cast around and find out who would be the intermediary. They just couldn't call up Beijing and say, "hey, I want to come over, Mao how are you doing?"

And the first thing they had to do was to find people who could take the message to Beijing. And they first tried the poles, because that was where the Chinese and the Americans both had embassies. And we're both sort of vaguely talking to each other about very formal matters. I mean, there were just very formal meetings about return of properties, stuff like that. So, the first reach out was Nixon sending his American ambassador in Poland, Walter Stoessel, to talk to the Chinese in Poland. And Stoessel didn't know quite where to find the Chinese. And he basically found them—because these meetings I think were in abeyance—he basically found them at a fashion show.

And the Yugoslav Embassy was having a big fashion show and had invited the whole diplomatic community in Warsaw. This is 1969, and so they were showing Paris fashions in the basement of the Stalin built Cultural Centre in the middle of Warsaw. And towards the end of this fashion show, the Chinese were quite prudish, got up in alarm, they didn't like the sort of scanty clothes and of course, this is still a cultural revolution in China. So, they stalk out. And Stoessel sees that they stalk out and he runs out after them and he catches them on the bottom of the stairs at that big building in Warsaw and says, "My President would like to get together with yours." And that was the first gesture that the Chinese heard about Nixon's interest.

Clip from *The Great Wager.* Find out more: https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2022/02/07/the-great-wager-podcast

SG: That's fascinating. And that's a moment in time that I think is so pivotal to understand the US-China dynamic, which doesn't necessarily get the attention that it needed to. So, I'm really glad that you created a podcast on this.

JP: But I have to say, Sajjan, if I can. So, it didn't work out with Poland. So, you know who it worked out with? It worked out with Pakistan. Pakistan became the essential go-between. Why? Because they were very friendly with Beijing, and they were very friendly with the United States and the most discreet diplomats. I mean, the foreign minister at the time was extremely diligent, discreet, careful, and he managed the whole back and forwards of the carrying of messages between Beijing via Islamabad to Washington. Most of the time, it was Pakistani couriers carrying letters from Zhou Enlai in his suit jacket pocket and flying to Washington giving these letters to the Pakistani ambassador in Washington who would then take them to the White House—No cell phones then.

SG: No, indeed. But what did Pakistan get from bringing Mao and Nixon together?

JP: Well, I guess that's a good question. Maybe they got diplomatic prestige and they were held in very high account in the White House. Nixon and Kissinger, of course, tilted towards Pakistan in

the Pakistan-Indian War. And that caused a lot of fury in Washington, a lot of upset, but I think Pakistan benefited a lot. You would perhaps know more about that than I would?

SG: Well, it's just interesting in the sense that Pakistan had very good relations with both the United States and China during the Cold War. So, it almost made logical sense that they would act as the bridge in connecting the United States and China, and perhaps ironically, it is now Pakistan that is getting pulled in either direction. In the sense that they're having to make a choice as to who they want to align with. And at the moment, it seems to suggest that they are moving or gravitating to China's orbit more than they would be towards the U.S.

JP: Yes, I agree. And, of course, the beauty of the diplomacy—Pakistan's role with Nixon and Mao Zedong, or more accurately, I suppose Kissinger and Zhou Enlai—is that they didn't have to choose. They didn't choose, they were really good friends with both. Kissinger took off as you know, on his secret journey—his advanced journey—to plan Nixon's trip. He took off on that secret trip from Islamabad Airport. And there's a very funny story about that.

Nixon and Kissinger were just totally obsessed with secrecy. And they kept on saying this over and over again to the Pakistanis. And so, the Pakistani Foreign Minister, arranged, basically took his son's car—what was his son's car? His son's car was a mid-1960s VW Bug—woke up his son in the middle of the night, no, actually two thirty in the morning and said, "where are your car keys? I need your VW." The son was totally shocked, gave him the car keys, and the foreign minister drove over to the guest house where Kissinger was staying, in preparation for the secret trip to Beijing, stuffed Kissinger into the VW car and took him to the aeroplane. Kissinger, by the way, was carrying a fedora hat and sunglasses in disguise, even though it was three o'clock in the morning.

SG: Well, I think as you said earlier, there were no forms of modern technology at the time, so you couldn't get someone on their mobile phone taking pictures as to what was going on and uploading it onto social media. So, I wonder how they would have been able to deal with this in today's age.

JP: They wouldn't, I think it would have been very, very difficult to carry off this diplomacy. If you wanted to keep it secret, I think it would be very, very difficult.

SG: Absolutely.

Clip from *The Great Wager.* Find out more: https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2022/02/07/the-great-wager-podcast

SG: Let's track back to one thing you mentioned about the cultural revolution. Now, what's very interesting about this is that you were actually in China, during the Cultural Revolution, and correct me if I'm wrong, but it was around 1967. And you'd gone to some of the major cities of China such as Shanghai, what were your experiences in China during the Cultural Revolution, because very few people outside China actually got a glimpse of what was going on?

JP: Well, I should explain, we were a group of about 50 Australian university students. And for the first time, an Australian university—the Student Union—organised travel trips for students to go overseas. And one of them was to China. So, we were a bunch of undergraduates curious about the world, no particular ideologies at all, just curious about what was going on in China. And basically, we didn't know about the Cultural Revolution, we landed in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, totally unprepared, but of course, fascinated. So, what did we see? We saw enormous demonstrations in the main cities, Shanghai, Nanjing, less so in Beijing, demonstrations in favour of Mao Zedong. We were taken to communes to be shown the socialist way of agriculture. But you could see that the communists had ground to a halt, factories had ground to a halt, the whole place, the whole country, was in total chaos and in a standstill.

And then on our last day, before going back into Hong Kong, several of us snuck into what you might call a self-criticism ceremony in a big stadium. And there must have been tens of thousands of people and four renegades—running dogs of capitalism, as they were then called, I guess they were factory managers—were hauled to the stage with dunce's caps on their heads and pointed at, and yelled at, and then taken out of the stadium. I hate to think what happened to those four people. But that was a very strong and frightening example of the political purges that were going on, presumably across the country, that were going across the country, because years later, we learned that millions of people died in the Cultural Revolution. We did not see that kind of violence ourselves, but you could sense it in many places.

SG: How did people in these major cities react to you and your peers who were there because obviously for them, it was unique to see individuals from, not just say Australia, but from anywhere outside the world?

JP: Great curiosity. I can remember walking on the Bund in Shanghai and being surrounded by a huge group of young Chinese, just sort of looking and wanting me to sign books—little red books—and huge curiosity. Very friendly, no animosity, a lot of intensity by university students who'd been quote unquote, "sent down to the countryside," that meant that the universities were closed and they'd been sent to communes, been sent to factories to either work or take part in the so-called cultural revolution and they would lecture us for a long time on the benefits of Mao's thought. It was sort of mass hysteria in a way.

SG: So, you signed copies of the Red Book?

JP: In Shanghai, on the waterfront.

SG: Well, it's an important part of China's history, and in many ways, laid the seeds for its development. And I think it's also strengthened the role of the Communist Party, even though, as you said, that millions died during the Cultural Revolution itself. Did you ever imagine that it would be a country that you would then end up returning to?

JP: It's interesting you ask. The answer is yes, because that's when I understood—that trip made

me understand—that there was no way that China was going to stay this way. It was a huge country, people were obviously very bright, very hungry for knowledge, very intense. And you could feel that there was just going to be—there was a great burst of—burst of energy is the wrong way to put it, but there was a lot of—I don't think this is just looking back, I think at the time we felt—just a lot of talent, a lot of curiosity about us. And you just knew that something was going to develop out of this.

SG: At that time, Deng Xiaoping had been a key player within the Chinese Communist Party, but he also was purged on several occasions too and it was an interesting dynamic of seeing senior politicians rising and then also being disciplined. And it seems to go back and forth like a pendulum. Is China today, the legacy of Deng Xiaoping, or is it the legacy of Mao, or is there a combination of both of them?

JP: Well, it's a great way to describe it. It's both. I think the legacy of Deng is the incredible, unsurpassed economic development of China. He allowed it to march forward and to open it up to the rest of the world. And maybe the legacy of Mao is the political thought and the political instruction right down to the grassroots of Xi Jinping, who seems to be wanting to make China self-sufficient, and pull it back in some ways from some of the economic interaction with the United States.

But I have to say, I think that the terrible things that happened in the Cultural Revolution, have an impact, even today, through the generations. When I was there, as a correspondent from 2012 to 2019, when I was walking around the streets of a big city and I would see older people in their 50s or 60s, I would sometimes think, I wonder where you were during the Cultural Revolution. I wondered if some of the people that were in the same tea house or cafe with me, had participated in killings or near killings of people during the Cultural Revolution. Or had some of them actually been purged themselves? I think that the Cultural Revolution had such an impact on families that it lives today.

SG: Am I right in thinking that Xi Jinping's own father was purged during the Cultural Revolution?

JP: Yes, he was. And Xi himself was sent down to the countryside as a young youth. And we know so little about how Xi Jinping really thinks, and maybe it's a lot of psychobabble, but I think some experienced China analysts think that Xi Jinping's doubling down on his thought, on the on a big ideological bent, comes from his experiences of choosing to be redder than red to survive in the Cultural Revolution, and then afterwards. That the way for him to survive and for the way for the country to move forward was to be redder than red.

SG: Redder than red. Well, let's look at that, in some ways, because you went back to China, as you said, you always felt you would when you were sent by the New York Times to be the bureau chief in China, which was between 2012 and 2019. What made you want to go back during that time?

JP: Well, I joined The [New York] Times in the '80s and became a foreign correspondent. And I always felt that Asia was becoming—by the 90s, it was clear that Asia was becoming—the up-and-coming region of the world. And I guess, because I originally came from Australia, I was tilted

towards Asia.

And then I got an assignment to Indonesia. And I covered Southeast Asia, from Jakarta, starting in 2001. And from that perch, I could see so clearly that China was the coming power. And I wrote a series of articles in 2004, called China's reach and I, I hope I'm not being too immodest. But I think that was the first series of articles to delineate China's growing economic influence, but with the economic influence also came political influence. And you could see that China was beginning to displace the United States in Asia because the United States was distracted. The aftermath of 9/11 was the most important thing in Washington. And China just was gangbusters in Asia. The United States' predominance was being eclipsed year by year.

SG: Well, your time when you began your stint in China, it coincided—preceded, to some extent—Xi Jinping's emergence as the leader of the Communist Party and President of China. Was his name already doing the rounds, was it expected that he would succeed Hu Jintao?

JP: Well…after Indonesia, I went to Pakistan. So, I was busy looking at the War on Terror from the Pakistan - American point of view. And even though China was very close to Pakistan, I wasn't looking to China so closely. So, Xi Jinping was not a name that I was particularly familiar with, but definitely China Hands were very familiar with him, because when he was vice president—he was chosen as vice president in 2007, I believe—and he became the most travelled vice president of China, I think, ever. I'm not quite sure why, but he went everywhere. He went to Europe, he went to Australia, he went through Asian countries. So, people were getting familiar with this vice president who was going to become president.

And then I'll tell you, Sajjan, there was the most extraordinary lunch in Washington, where you couldn't miss the fact that he was going to be the next president. This was in 2012, I believe, February 2012. Xi Jinping was the designated next leader of China. But he was still vice president. And he came to Washington, sort of an introductory trip, "here, I'm going to be the next leader." And there was a big lunch at the State Department on the seventh floor—I don't know, it must have been 200 people—and the State Department was very gracious because I was going to be the new correspondent. and I was invited. And I had a seat at a table close to the stage. But what I really wanted to say was before the lunch started, there was a lot of mingling. And I have never seen a crowd of Americans…Bob Zelnick, Stapleton Roy, all the big China Hands…they were so pleased about Xi Jinping, they thought that he was going to be like the previous leaders, that the United States was going to be able to do business with this guy. And it turned out to be totally different. So, I think that the expectations of Xi Jinping got smashed in the United States or in Washington, particularly in Washington…met reality pretty quickly.

SG: And then during your period in China, where Xi Jinping began to assert his own position and authority on the Communist Party, how were you observing it? What was coming across to you in terms of what he was trying to do for himself, for the country, and how it was evolving?

JP: Well, I think the clearest way I can explain that is several moves that he made. The first was Belt and Road. He went to Kazakhstan and made a speech at Astana,

I guess it's kind of the political capital of Kazakhstan. And I decided to go along. I mean, it's not like reporters travelling with the American president—when he goes overseas, there's usually a

backup plane, and American reporters can go with the president—I made my own way to Kazakhstan, and I got a pass to get into the theatre, the university theatre where he was presenting his first speech on Belt and Road. So that was a very clear signal that he intended China to become… to spread out across the world and challenge the United States. I mean, it was sort of China's Marshall Plan, if you will, many years later.

Then, hardly missing a beat, Beijing announced the Asia Infrastructure and Investment bank, the AIIB. And they had a very smart and interesting Chinese finance guy, Jin Liqun, head this bank, who was an excellent spokesman for what he wanted to do for the bank. He wanted it to…meet the standards of the other international banks in terms of no corruption, pro-green, etc. And you could see that this was a challenge to the American-backed banks, including the Asia Development Bank based in Manila, the two banks in Washington. So much of a challenge that the United States asked its main allies in Asia—South Korea, Japan and Australia—not to join the bank; it was extraordinary. And it was a failed effort by the United States. Japan didn't join because they were the backers of—I don't believe they joined at first because they were the backers of the ADB. But Australia and South Korea went straight ahead and joined AIIB, just ignored their American partner. So, there were steps like that that made it very clear he was going to be something else.

SG: In terms of the domestic dimension, it seemed that President Xi strengthened his authority inside the country, and that it also comes across that he changed the unwritten rule that seemed to exist in China that had been created in large part by Deng Xiaoping, which was that you serve two terms, and then you move on. And we saw that Xi is actually continuing for at least another term, if not longer. Did that surprise people? Or did that surprise you when you were looking at the situation unfold?

JP: I think it was a major shock. People were just taken aback. One of my indelible memories of covering China was that very moment. And there was a little sort of sneak preview about, I don't know, about 20 minutes before the official announcement was put out by Xinhua, there was some kind of leak that went out on social media. So, I remember calling…let's say a Chinese academic, who was really a proponent of Xi Jinping's foreign policy, was very much a proponent of China challenging the United States. And I called this person up at one of the universities in Beijing. And we were quite friendly, and he was so shocked. He said, "I just can't talk about Jane. I can't talk about it" and hung up. You could hear the shock in his voice. And I think people were really taken aback.

SG: Taken aback, and I guess the other question to this is, have people in China accepted it? Or is it that they have no option but to just accept it and move on?

JP: I think it's the latter. I think there's little choice. But I also think that as long as Xi and the central government can deliver improvement in living standards, that it'll be fine. I think that we perhaps forget, but there's a growing middle class, and they appreciate the growing economy. I mean, I think of people…I'm just thinking of older people, for example, maybe in their 50s, who were extremely poor when they were growing up. In the late 90s, they were able to buy state-owned apartments. Since then, they've accumulated enough money to buy another apartment or two, so they're landlords in their own right. And as long as that kind of capital accumulation can continue, I think he can count on stability.

But we have to remember that there are, what, 600 million Chinese who are still struggling, who are still poor. And there are pockets of opposition to Xi, obviously, from businessmen who've been taken down, from corrupt politicians, he's done an enormous purge of government and the military. But if you read Richard McGregor's book, *Xi Jinping: The Backlash*, and you add up the numbers, there's probably about a universe of, what, five million people who've been affected by these purges, I mean, the people themselves, but also their extended families. And in the big population of China, maybe that's not so much. I spoke to McGregor a couple of weeks ago, and he believes that the opposition to Xi is very muted, that Xi's in the strong position, from what we can see.

SG: Has that muted opposition enabled Xi to assert China's goals when it comes to, for example, say, Hong Kong? Because the arrangement that China had with the United Kingdom to do with the handover seems to now have become irrelevant in terms of how China is approaching the situation there.

JP: Look, I was in Beijing when the protests started in Hong Kong. I think you'd be surprised. I think, from what I could see, most people in China support the absorption of Hong Kong. They think that's China's rightful place, and it should be in the embrace of Beijing. No question.

SG: That's interesting. So, another dynamic, which is coming into play here about China is its relationship with Pakistan and, in return, with Afghanistan. You spent a lot of time in Pakistan, covering the whole dynamic of terrorism and the challenges that were emanating from there. I'd be curious to get your perspective on the China-Pakistan aspect, because we spoke about earlier how Pakistan was such a critical entity in bringing Mao and Nixon together. And effectively now they're being pulled in two directions, that Pakistan is being pulled in two directions, towards the US, towards China. The Pakistanis did not attend President Biden's democracy summit, and the belief is that it had to do with [the idea that they] did not want to upset China. Where do you see the China-Pakistan dynamic developing?

JP: I think it's probably not a straight line. I think that there's some disenchantment in Beijing with the results they can get from the big corridor that they're supposed to be building down to Gwadar. You would know much more about this than I, but I'm not sure that the money that they've put into Belt and Road in Pakistan is paying the dividends that they hoped for. But on the other hand, Beijing does want Pakistan as close as possible. I think Gwadar will become an important port for the Chinese navy. That's very important for them. And I suppose the Chinese will continue to supply Pakistan with military assets. So, I do see China, if you like, definitely winning the tussle for Pakistan. I mean, the United States has been out of Pakistan for quite a while now, so I think China will win that battle. Don't you?

SG: Well, it certainly seems to be the case right now that China have the advantage when it comes to Pakistan. And as you mentioned, the investment that's been going on… time will tell whether those proved to be beneficial to Pakistan. It's unclear as to how that's actually panning out. One, they're having difficulty developing the economic infrastructure projects, partly because of the insecurity in Pakistan, and then the own inconsistencies within Imran Khan's government.

The other dynamic, of course, that comes into play is Pakistan's neighbour, Afghanistan, which is now ruled by the Taliban militia. And in many ways, it does seem that China looks to Pakistan

through Afghanistan, and that China sees a potential opportunity to develop relations with the Taliban that did not exist previously, especially because Afghanistan has much potential in terms of natural resources. China had already made investments in Afghanistan but was never able to do anything with them because of the Taliban insurgency there. Now that the Taliban actually control the country, and in particular, one entity, the Haqqani Network (HQN), which is a proscribed terrorist group globally—Sirajuddin Haqqani is even on the FBI Most Wanted list, and now he's the interior minister of the Taliban—you've got a situation where the Chinese are looking to Pakistan to help deliver a closer relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan. What do you think about that, Jane?

JP: I think what you said sums up the situation, and it's totally extraordinary that the Chinese should be having tea with the Taliban, who are the most radical Muslims you could find on the face of the earth basically, and at the same time, they've locked up a million of them their own Muslims, the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, to repress this very important Muslim minority. But it shows that China is, if nothing else, looking after its geo-political interests, and that the Taliban are willing to go along with it. Because where else are they going to get the hope for economic development? I mean, we know that there's great lithium deposits in Afghanistan. China's got a huge appetite for lithium, and although it might be difficult to get at, Afghanistan's not that far away. It's much closer than Africa for the Chinese. So maybe we'll find the Chinese digging out that lithium sooner than we expected.

SG: I wanted to ask you about that, Jane, to do with the lithium, because it is true that Afghanistan has a massive amount of untapped reserves in lithium. Now, some people feel that it's not going to be that easy for the Chinese to extract it. There are a number of geographical hurdles and practicalities that can't necessarily be resolved. So, some say it could take decades, potentially two decades, for China to extract that lithium if they end up continuing their relationship with the Taliban. I think what's curious, though, is that people in the West, when they look at time, they see it very differently to how China sees time, in that for China, 20 years is not as big a deal as it would be to, say, someone sitting in London or in Washington?

JP: Absolutely, absolutely. So, people in the West are saying it's going to take China two decades to dig out that lithium. I would say halve that, and maybe halve that again. I think the market for electric cars in China is just growing so fast. And look, I'm not a geologist, and I'm not an engineer, but I'm sure there are ways to get this lithium out of the mountains.

SG: Yes. Time will tell whether all our car batteries will end up coming via Afghanistan.

JP: Very interesting question. Can you imagine Afghanistan being a rich country off the back of Chinese mined lithium?

SG: Well unfortunately I can certainly imagine the Haqqani Network making a lot of money from whatever opportunities there are, which will probably be at the expense of ordinary Afghans.

JP: Unfortunately.

SG: One other thing I wanted to ask you, Jane, about is that there were a lot of Western based journalists in China but were asked to leave by the Chinese government. What is the latest situation on that?

JP: Well, I'll just back up for one moment if I can, which is to point out that this was really a reciprocal act by the Chinese. The Trump administration expelled dozens of Chinese journalists who were in the United States on the grounds that they were quote, unquote, "spies." These were journalists with state-run Chinese media, who no doubt did write papers back to the security services saying this and that. But that's part of the bargain, what's so unusual? But the Trump administration decided to, as part of its policy towards China, to expel them. So, the Chinese then turned around and expelled a lot of Western journalists. And that means that Western journalists who were in Beijing or Shanghai, now have to try and cover the country from South Korea or Taiwan, very, very difficult indeed.

And for those Western journalists who are in China, reporting has become tremendously difficult. The harassment by the State Security Services is intense, it was always there, but it's become much more intense. The new factor, and the very disturbing factor, is that Chinese people on the street have become very hostile to Western journalists. And this makes it very difficult to talk to ordinary people. It makes old and trusted sources very nervous, and makes it impossible, almost, for many of these people to talk to Western journalists. So, the atmosphere is extremely worrying.

SG: Why is there that hostility by people in China towards these journalists?

JP: I think that the barrage of state propaganda about the United States in particular, and other countries, being characterised as being hostile to China. The United States is characterised as being a nation in decline. I think this gets through quite intensely. And that is, at the same time, there's enormous propaganda about how great China is. Chinese nationalism is on the rise. It's on the rise on screens, on TV, in schools. It's very intense that China has arrived, China is a great power. That's fine, China is a great power. But I think it's become very intense, and it sounds as though it's become quite intolerant of some other countries—some other competitive countries.

SG: Jane, you said that China has arrived, that it's a great power. And certainly, China has a lot of influence globally. This then ties into the current, huge problem that the West is facing, which is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There is a belief that China could help to stop Putin's war machine from ravaging Ukraine further. Do you think that China can temper Russia's actions? Do you think that China wants to stop this from getting worse?

JP: Well, I have to temper whatever I say with the upfront notion that decision-making at the top of the Chinese government, which is basically Xi Jinping, is a black box. And it's very hard to know whether he would want to—how much he would want to influence Putin. You could say that Xi Jinping and China have benefited a lot from globalisation and the good economic conditions of the last number of years. It's hard to believe that China really likes this instability that the war in Ukraine is causing.

On the other hand, Xi has made very clear he's a big admirer of Putin. Now, whether he says that

just for public relations, that's also hard to know. But he has gone out of his way to say that Putin is my best friend, that he and I "share the same personality." They've met 38 times. So, it's hard to see how he can turn tables even a little bit on Putin.

So, the influence of China on Russia? Look, they both have the same outlook in many ways. They both think that the United States is in decay. They both want to see the United States supplanted as the number one power in the world. They both would like to see the United States out of Europe. So, they have, it would seem, a lot of shared goals. But it is very worrying. And it's obviously a huge change, that China is not neutral in this they say they're neutral, but it's a kind of pseudo-neutrality, and Xi Jinping certainly seems to have Putin's back

SG: Well, Jane, it's been fantastic to have you on *DEEP Dive*. I'm very grateful that you could spend the time talking on so many perspectives to do with China and across several periods and just providing a very rich perspective. I'm most appreciative of you joining us.

JP: Well, I enjoyed it immensely, Sajjan, and it's really great to have caught up with you in person and to exchange views on what are basically quite important questions, I guess.

SG: And hopefully we can talk to you again as to how this continues to unfold.

JP: Definitely. Thank you.

Jane Perlez's bio

Jane Perlez is a long-time foreign correspondent for the New York Times, where she served as the Beijing Bureau Chief until 2019. As part of a group of New York Times Reporters, she won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for coverage of the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. She is the co-host of the podcast series The Great Wager, from NPR and WBUR's Here and Now, and is currently producing the podcast: Face-Off: US Vs China, from Carnegie Corporation at Harvard Kennedy School.

Episode 11 - Aaron Zelin and Understanding Jihadology, March 2022

Key Reflections

- **There is a generational difference in ideological motivation between the terrorists that got involved pre-9/11 versus more of the millennial and Gen Z jihadists that came of age during and after the Arab Spring.**
- **Al-Qaeda are in Afghanistan, adopting a low profile and biding their time. Great power competition could serve as a distraction, enabling jihadist groups and affiliates to grow and expand globally.**
- **Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri created a cut-out within al-Qaeda called al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which could be used to plot attacks regionally, away from Afghanistan.**
- **Tunisian terrorists have been the middlemen within the jihadist movement, making them well-connected and active in multiple theatres of conflict including Afghanistan, Algeria, Bosnia, and Syria.**
- **Tunisians comprised the largest number of ISIS's rank and file. They benefited from the vacuum that emerged in Tunisia after the Arab Spring, which provided the space for extremist groups. This also contributed to instability in Libya.**
- **The convicted Pakistani terrorist Aafia Siddiqui is a huge cause célèbre for global jihadists including al-Qaeda and ISIS. She feeds into the narrative of freeing female prisoners.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

AZ: Dr. Aaron Zelin

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Dr. Aaron Zelin who is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University. Aaron is the author of the book *Your Sons Are At Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad*. He is also the founder of the widely acclaimed and cited website Jihadology.net which is a clearinghouse for primary source content. Aaron's research focuses on transnational terrorist groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighters, online jihadism, and jihadi governance.

Aaron, it's great to have you with us for NATO *DEEP Dive*

AZ: Thanks for having me.

SG: Let's talk about the website that you run, that provides primary source material, *Jihadology*. What is *Jihadology*? And why did you decide to create it?

AZ: Jihadology is essentially a primary source archive for propaganda from groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, their branches, affiliates, key ideologues within the global jihadi movement, as well as any other smaller related groups. I started it back in May 2010. So, it's almost 12 years now, in running. And I created it in the aftermath of concluding my master's thesis at the time, because I was trying to write about and use primary sources in it. And I realised that it wasn't necessarily the easiest thing to find, especially back in the 2008 to 2010 time period. And back then, at least, professors weren't really teaching you how to exploit these documents for research. And I figured, you know, if I was having trouble with this, I'm sure other people were as well within graduate school. Of course, I never thought it would become what it became and how big it is. But now, obviously, many people use it beyond just graduate students. And I enjoy doing it and I'm glad that it's been so useful to so many people in their research over the years.

SG: Well, I can say from my own perspective that it's an essential clearinghouse for my academic research. And without it, I think it would be much harder to be able to conduct the primary [research] material that's needed to understand what terrorist groups are thinking and potentially strategizing. What have been the main challenges to maintain Jihadology? And how has that evolved over time?

AZ: I don't think that there are any large-scale existential types of challenges. But of course, in recent years as a consequence of the proliferation of social media, and certain governments being interested in taking the content down, there was then a greater focus on my website, since it was this stable location that had this huge archive of content going back pretty robustly since 2010, but then also a number of backdated content, going all the way back to the 1980s and 1990s. And therefore, the UK Government in particular wanted to restrict access to it so other people that had extremist proclivities couldn't necessarily exploit it.

I will say that I think it was a low hanging fruit for them to go after my website. In part, because the reason why jihadis online, besides watching or reading the propaganda itself, a lot of it's about the social aspects of the movement, and interaction between one another and camaraderie, and meeting one another and talking about these different issues. Whereas my website never provided anything like that, since it's just a static site, it's not a forum like they used to use back in the day or Facebook, Twitter. And then, of course, nowadays, they're using more encrypted messaging applications. So, while I disagreed with the UK Government through three or four years of pressure, we were able to get a password protection on it in April 2019, so, it's almost been three years. And I'm sure as you've noticed, online, jihadism hasn't stopped in the last three years. And there are many websites actually run by jihadis, so I found it interesting that they would single me out in particular. That being said, I'm happy that it's running. And that it's being used by many people in many locations all over the world, to better understand these different groups, individuals involved in it, so that we actually have an understanding of it instead of, based off of flawed understandings from, whether it's the media or even government trying to push their own narratives. People can actually go to the source themselves and see what they're saying, instead of relying on anything else.

SG: Well, you very rightly said that terrorism hasn't stopped in the last few years. In terms of al-Qaeda and ISIS specifically, have you ever faced any threats and challenges from them directly? And if so, how would you handle it?

AZ: Yes, there have been comments to me online before, on Twitter, making fun of me or even being threatening. Nothing that was to the point where I felt like my own person was in harm. But, if I felt like something bad could potentially happen, I'd obviously talk to law enforcement about it, and hopefully they would help out with the issue. But thankfully, nothing serious has happened. And I also think, in some level, because a lot of my research and the way I go about it is about actually

deriving what they're saying, even if we have different worldviews, I think on some level, some of them at least, respect the fact that I'm actually looking at what they're saying, and not just coming up with stuff or going off the straw men or anything along those lines. And that, because I keep up with it, too, I am able to show that there are these changes over time as well, even if they still have extreme ideas.

SG: Does it get challenging to look at some of the material which can be quite gruesome, it can be disturbing, and when you're having to process so much of that content, do you need to actually take a break on occasions from it? Or is it one of those things where, like a doctor, you get used to bad news and tragedies?

AZ: Well, I think one of the misnomers is that every single thing I put on my website, I look at. A lot of the time it's just me downloading it from wherever I get it from online, from the groups themselves, and then uploading it on my website and then it's there. I really only look at content that I'm directly doing research on at a particular time. And those that follow my research know that it has less to do with sort of the military and insurgent and violent aspects of the movement, and more of the socio cultural, ideological, governance related things like that. And therefore, I don't get exposed to the ultra-violent actions, especially that ISIS does.

Of course, I have seen some of those videos, though I try not to watch it just because it doesn't feel good watching it, of course. And my mental health is important. And I don't think watching them adds any additional analytical utility beyond knowing the fact that we know that they're extremely violent. But watching another beheading video is not going to tell me anything different in that way, in my opinion. So, some people see it as hazing within the field or like a rite of passage. But if you don't need to look at that stuff I'd recommend not because I just don't see any point in it. I find it more interesting the other aspects of what they're doing, than the purely violent actions they're taking.

SG: Absolutely. If we look at the attacks that have happened in 2022, the most notable one that occurred, perhaps first, was the incident involving the British National Malik Faisal Akram, who took people hostage at the Beth Israel Synagogue in Colleyville, Texas [15 January 2022], and he demanded the release of the Pakistani national Aafia Siddiqui, who had been convicted several years ago for attempting to murder members of the FBI and military personnel in Afghanistan. Now, Akram made references about Siddiqui and demands for her release, which seemed to echo views that had been made and expressed by both al-Qaeda and ISIS in the past. What is it about Aafia Siddiqui that attracts so much interest by the jihadis, especially when these groups themselves are misogynistic, and yet they seem to hold Aafia Siddiqui to a certain level that attracts a lot of curiosity?

AZ: Yes, she's been a huge cause célèbre, in many ways, for the movement going back about a decade now since her arrest happened and trial happened. I think part of it is just that she's seen as representative of someone that wanted to do something, even if it's not the norm for women to try and want to conduct some type of attack. Of course, there have been some cases here and there, but she was one of the first cases like this, and the fact that she is from Pakistan, which has a huge extremist scene, in the West in particular, especially in the UK. So, I think that because of that sort of national connection, that feeds into it. Of course, there have been other women involved in the movement in the West, but a lot of them have been converts. So, they might just not have the same intrinsic feeling in some ways.

Of course, we've seen that increasingly since ISIS came back in 2013/14, that women had a larger role in these movements and therefore, we've seen more and more people touching upon it in the

messaging of these groups. But Aafia Siddiqui still represents one of these original cases, and the fact that it's related to the US and in her treatment of her, I think, adds to it just because of course, the US is seen as the symbol of all that's wrong in the world for the movement. On top of the fact that, even though it is a very misogynistic movement, they also have sort of this idealisation of women as well. They talk about the need to guard their virtue or their chastity and things along those lines. So, I think some of it relates to that aspect of it as well, since, while Aafia is one person that they do talk about a lot, in general messaging they'll talk about the necessity of helping out and freeing women prisoners too. So, it's not just her, she's just become sort of a broader symbol of this issue in general.

SG: Right, and one person who's spoken about Aafia Siddiqui and also demanded her release on several occasions is the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. He's certainly made many statements in the past about al-Qaeda's agenda and attempted to maintain the movement under the banner of al-Qaeda, the jihadist movement that is, but has, of course, faced opposition from other groups like ISIS. How do you feel al-Qaeda has evolved under him since taking over from Osama bin Laden?

AZ: It's definitely a different organisation, in some ways, while also still being the same in other ways. I think one of the differences is that al-Zawahiri doesn't have that same history and charisma that bin Laden had and therefore his story isn't quite as exciting as what bin Laden did, because he came from this rich family, but still lived in Afghanistan in a poor way and even used his own money to help out the cause. Whereas al-Zawahiri just doesn't have that same legend in some ways. And then the fact I think people just find him kind of boring in his speeches.

I also think that one of the things we've seen since al-Zawahiri has been in power, which I'm not sure would have changed under Bin Laden, is that there's this generational difference too, between the jihadis that got involved in the 1970s and '80s, and even into the 1990s, your 'Boomer'/ 'Gen X' Jihadis, versus more of the millennial and Gen Z, Jihadis that came of age more in the post 9/11 era. And that's why in some ways, you also saw this move for more of the younger, recent movement toward ISIS. Of course, there's other dynamics related to the split between al-Qaeda and ISIS also, but I think part of it is a generational thing too.

One of the biggest differences that you've seen is the consolidation in revisions or reforms within the movement under al-Zawahiri, that were first born out of, what was seen as, the excesses of the Iraq jihad. And that's why you've seen al-Qaeda in particular, while they have no qualms in killing innocent people, they try to target the focus just to security or military apparatuses, if they can, within theatres. Of course, it's not necessarily the same in the western context, but at least in the areas where they're operating in Muslim majority context, they're trying to be much more cognizant of the local population's views on what they're doing.

And on top of this, because of it, the organisation has become more sophisticated and not just being purely involved in terrorism or insurgency, but social services, proto-governance, and the like. And as a result, building deeper roots within the local mildews and societies, which is in part one of the reasons why we see many of al-Qaeda's branches in a number of locations. While they, from the outside, might seem more localised, it's more complicated than that, just because of the fact that the ideology is still very much global. But part of it is a strategy to be embedded within these populations so that they can garner the support and then takeover. And we've seen this in a number of cases, whether in Yemen, Somalia, Mali, where they've taken over territory at different points and have tried to tweak and become smarter with it over time. And that's why they've continued to not necessarily Excel. But as a consequence of their adversaries not being able to provide services, or they're seen as corrupt, or poor governance, they're able to take advantage of it. And that's why we

see the continued relevance of these groups in local insurgencies. Even if, on a global scale, I'd say that ISIS has probably seen more popularity than al Qaeda.

SG: I think that fits into the narrative that al-Zawahiri was speaking about, creating safe spaces around the Islamic world and to maintain a presence, embed yourself within host communities, try and win them over, and then strengthen from that position to grow, and potentially then expand. And if we look at al-Qaeda's relationship with the Taliban and Haqqani Network, in terms of how it has developed, and then if we look at also the fact that these groups are back in power in Afghanistan. My understanding is that al-Qaeda already has a presence in Afghanistan. But can we see the Taliban and the Haqqani Network allowing foreign terrorist fighters to return to Afghanistan over time? Could we have a situation like in the 1990s, when the country had become a cesspool for extremism, where they would start plotting and planning attacks abroad? Or do you think that al-Qaeda is going to keep maintaining that kind of safe base approach in terms of trying to stay relatively local in order to grow and continue to rebuild?

AZ: Yeah, I think you, in the beginning of your statement, had a key point there that al-Qaeda is already there, they never really left. I mean that's one of the misnomers, at least, if you look at the political debates about this, as to whether or not the withdrawal by the US will lead to al-Qaeda returning to Afghanistan. But the reality is, they've been operating there for the last 20 years still, even since the US invasion after 9/11. So, they'll continue to do that in many ways.

Though, I think one of the things that they'll focus on now, especially since the Taliban actually controls the country, since they don't need to necessarily fight anybody, per se from the outside, is that they'll help buttress the insurgency in Pakistan, as well as trying to use their easier freedom of movement now, to make it harder for their adversaries to stop them in other locations in that region now. So, Kashmir in India, and then plausibly trying to go farther afield into other places, whether it's Bangladesh or Myanmar, or trying to restart things with allies in places like Indonesia or Malaysia.

So, I think that's one thing I'm looking out for. Especially the fact that since 2014, al-Zawahiri created a cut out within al-Qaeda called al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS), which is just another branch for that region. So, I think that with that freedom, they're going to be able to put more resources potentially into that instead of Afghanistan necessarily being the key location where you necessarily think about them.

In terms of the foreign fighter question, I don't think that the Taliban really wants foreign fighters to go there in the same way that we saw in the 1990s. Part of it is that the Taliban now is a lot stronger than it was in the 1990s. It also has had a lot of experiences over the last 20 years. And as we've seen, since the fall of Kabul is that they're trying to get more and more legitimacy in the international realm. There haven't been many reports, at least as far as I'm aware publicly, that there's been a huge stream of foreign fighters trying to get into Afghanistan.

Part of it, too, I think is attributable to the fact that like I said earlier, a lot of younger people are more interested in ISIS than al-Qaeda or the Taliban. They see both groups as not legitimate. Of course, we do have an ISIS branch within Afghanistan and Pakistan. So, it's possible that you'll see people from sort of regional straits glomming on to that just because it's easier, but in terms of a large flow of people from countries outside of that regional environment where it'll be more difficult to get into Afghanistan, from the Arab world or the West, I think, at least initially, it'll be relatively limited. Plus, the fact that, as a consequence of what we saw in Syria, with the large-scale foreign fighter mobilisation, more governments are willing to stop people before they even go instead of letting them go

and being like, “Oh, well, they’ll die there. It’s okay.” Even though that never is the case, they always return home□—a portion of them. So, I think that because of the more proactive security measures, in many parts of the world not just in the West, it’ll just be more difficult for people to go in the first place.

So, it’s a complicated, multi-layered issue in many respects, of course what’s happening now can change depending on anything that could happen in the future, which is hard to predict, of course. But I think overall, the Taliban is more concerned with stopping outside security forces coming in and ruining sort of their Islamic Emirate project, which is why they’ve gone so hard against the Islamic State over the last four or five months now.

SG: It was interesting that in the build up to the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, and thereafter, that a lot of the terrorist groups that were aligned to al-Qaeda, including al-Qaeda core, and AQIS that you mentioned, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, as well as AQAP (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula), all issued congratulatory messages to the Taliban on their victory in Afghanistan. I think AQAP even produced a nasheed in honour of the Taliban victory. And then the fact that the Taliban does not actually outrightly condemn al-Qaeda.

Does that concern you to the extent that the opportunity for the relationship to continue more openly is there, because if you’ve got al-Qaeda and the affiliates endorsing what’s taking place, and they’re looking at the potential of enhancing that in terms of building and strengthening it, and then the Taliban’s refusal to condemn al-Qaeda, that that lays it open for the potential of another theatre re-emerging, in terms of what we have seen before? I know, you mentioned that the Taliban are not necessarily all that keen on having them. But then if we also look at the fact that the Taliban is not a single monolithic group, so you’ve got the Haqqani Network, for example, that are very close to al-Qaeda. Is it that this is, as you use the word very correctly, complicated? So, how do we unravel exactly how this can actually transpire when we’ve got all these complications with al-Qaeda and the different Taliban factions?

AZ: It’s definitely a messy issue because □— I think there’s one way of understanding this□ — so for example, there have been rumours that when the new leader of the Taliban came into power, al-Zawahiri, of course, gave bay’ah to him, just like he did in the past to the previous one and bin Laden did to, of course, Mullah Omar. Whereas the most recent one, allegedly, according to sources within the movement, he didn’t accept al-Zawahiri’s bay’ah, which is interesting. It’s also possible that it could be disinformation that this has been put out there by elements within the movement. But the fact is that you’re right, the Taliban hasn’t explicitly condemned al-Qaeda or tried to arrest or stop any of them within their own territory, in the same way that we see them going after ISIS.

And I think the case of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria is an informative angle to understanding this as well, because since they broke ties from al-Qaeda, in 2016/17, not only have they done the ‘talking of the talk’, but they’ve ‘walked the walk’ too. Where they’ve actually cracked down upon and either jailed, killed, or forced people to leave their territories from al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria, Hurras al-Din. Whereas in the case of Afghanistan with the Taliban, there has been nothing along those lines. So, it does augur questions for the future. Especially if people are not paying as much attention, because there’s such a heavy focus when there’s such a huge news story, but as that wanes over time, whether al-Qaeda will then pop its head out in a greater way, because they realise that the US or Western governments or others are focused on some other problem set, whether it’s an issue like Ukraine, or maybe something in the Pacific vis a vis China, or what have you. Especially because of this increasing focus on great power competition and more challenges by Russia and China, as well as more regional countries like Iran or North Korea, challenging the status quo, at least of the post-Cold War era.

So, that will be the biggest determinant and I think we'll have a better understanding of that probably within the next one to three years, then this lull period, in some ways, post-Kabul falling, because I think al-Qaeda is being smart about keeping a low profile in Afghanistan for now, while there's still somewhat of a focus on it, even though I would argue that there's less of a focus on it now than there was saying August or September.

SG: Right. It's fascinating what you're saying about these dynamics. We've been talking about Afghanistan and al-Qaeda, some 20 years after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. But let's go back to pre-9/11 If we can and talk about the assassination of the Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, which was the precursor to the 9/11 attacks. The theory being that without Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Northern Alliance would collapse, and that the Taliban would be able to take over Afghanistan freely, because the United States wouldn't be able to have a ground ally to help them once the 9/11 attacks had unfolded. And in the assassination of Ahmed Shah Massoud, you had a number of Tunisian terrorists playing a key role in this operation.

You've written about this, why were Tunisians involved specifically for this plot. My understanding was also that Ayman al-Zawahiri may have not directed the 9/11 attacks, but he was also assigned the role of working to kill Ahmed Shah Massoud. What would you say this operation was planned in the way it was, it seemed very meticulous? And it doesn't get the same level of attention as the 9/11 attacks do, but really, it should. So, can you break down the assassination of Ahmed Shah Massoud and the role of the Tunisians in this?

AZ: Yeah, so Tunisian foreign fighters that were based in Afghanistan in the late 1990s, had their own sort of group called the Tunisian Combatant Group, which was essentially an ally of al-Qaeda. And through al-Qaeda's resources, they were able to plan this attack, which, like you said, happened two days before 9/11. Two parts of this, one you you've referred to, is, of course, that bin Laden wanted to give this as a present to the Taliban, because he knew that 9/11 was, of course going to happen so that once the US invaded, the US would have a harder time having a strong ally to fight against the Taliban. Of course, the US came in and cleared the Taliban from control pretty quickly. But we saw once they started to come back in 2004 and 2005, with the insurgency, that because of the fact that there wasn't the strong figure, but more splintered different groups in different parts of the country that would help out, that is definitely harder and subsequently we've seen over time the Taliban get stronger and stronger until they took over the country again.

The Tunisians they play an important role because the leader of the group, Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi [Seifallah Ben Hassine], became a close confidant of bin Laden, and, at least according to reporting by the New York Times, became one of the 10 most important figures to bin Laden in the late 1990s, up till the 9/11 attacks. The thing too is that the Tunisian network that was based in the West, especially in Italy, France, and Belgium, they were most known for document forgery and helping out with facilitation and logistics in the movement.

So, one of the reasons why you didn't hear a ton about Tunisian Jihadis until after 2011 was because mainly they were these middlemen within the movement. They weren't the top leaders; they weren't the ideologues that everybody knew. And because they were middlemen, they were really connected to everybody in the movement. And therefore, also, whenever the new hotspot sprang up, or a new group that became the most important group, they were able to then just shift what they were doing from the thing that they were focusing on to the next thing. So, going from Afghanistan to then focusing up with helping in the Algerian Civil War in the early 1990s, to then helping with the foreign fighter flows to Bosnia, a year or two after that, and so on and so forth.

So, as a result, because of this, they were able to get easier documents forged to get access to Masoud in the first place because they, the two individuals that were involved in the attack itself, pretended to be journalists that were going to interview Massoud. But of course, they planted a bomb within the camera that they used. So, once it all came about after planning for about a year or so, they were able to pull it off, and Masood was murdered two days before 9/11. But it is interesting, as you note, the fact that Tunisians were involved in the attack really doesn't get the same kind of publicity as you hear of the fact that around the post 9/11 era that so many people focus on, say, Saudis, or Yemenis, or Egyptians, because there's so many people within the leadership of al-Qaeda at the time from those nationalities.

Yeah, it's a good question. It's hard to say. I think part of it is just people didn't know how to zero in on it because the Tunisians weren't the top leaders, or the top ideologues within the movement itself. Though, because of this, and the fact that people didn't focus on it as much. Post-2011 then obviously we saw, with the opening of society in Tunisia following the revolution, that it provided a base for them to actually recruit people. And then, of course, it's no surprise now that everybody's like, "Oh, my God, all these Tunisians in Iraq and Syria, and Libya are foreign fighters. A part of this goes back to that older history where they were always there, they just weren't the leading people. And only after 2011, did you really see them come into their own as being key personnel within the movement, especially within the ISIS domain.

SG: And this was very well documented in your excellent book, which was titled *Your Sons At Your Service*. In that book, you talk about the Tunisians in detail, and provide a perspective that is demonstrating just how significant they've been when it comes to transnational terrorism, not just within al-Qaeda, but of course, with ISIS too. And in fact, they attributed, I believe, perhaps the highest number of ISIS' rank and file when it came to foreign fighters as part of ISIS. Why has Tunisia produced so many? Was that because of the dictatorial policies that had existed inside the country, and then once the regime had fallen during the Arab Spring, that it was like Pandora's Box had opened up or other factors to play?

AZ: I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that there was an openness in Tunisia after the revolution, which provided the space for Ansar al-Sharia (AST), which was the group that was created following the revolution, which was an al-Qaeda affiliate, to proselytise and recruit people. Imagine if, say, Egypt or Saudi Arabia or whatever country that people think of historically having larger accruement for jihadis, they became a democracy and people were able to just openly proselytise and recruit. I actually would argue the fact that there weren't more Tunisian jihadis is actually interesting in some ways, because of the fact that was such an open system. Of course, it's become more restrictive since they designated Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist group in August 2013 and then the government really starting to seriously crack down upon the movement following the Sousse Beach attack in the summer of 2015.

But for the first two and a half years after the revolution, as a consequence of Ennahda, the main Islamist party being in control of the government, they sort of had this light touch approach with the jihadis locally, because they felt that if they crack down upon them, it would radicalise them and that eventually, they might take over Tunisia in the same way that the former leader of Tunisia Ben Ali did to the Ennahda movement in the late '80s, and 1990s. And therefore, you know, maybe 15 or 20 years later al-Qaeda would be in charge of Tunisia.

Of course, it was a flawed reading of their own history, because, in the same way that being over the top with cracking down and torturing in the light, as we've seen, in the case of, say, Egypt, not doing enough also provides the space for the potential for the movement to grow as well. You need

to calibrate something in between where it's not too hard and not too soft, of course, Ennahda has since learned that lesson. And now sort of disavows that policy. And they've been serious at going after them when they're in power again in 2017 until 2019/20. Until this most recent political coup that happened in July 2021.

So as a result, once the government started to crack down upon the local movement AST in 2013, you already had this larger population of individuals that could then be plucked, and recruited to do foreign fighting abroad, since the opportunity to do that was more ripe than actually operating locally. So, as a result, while there had been recruitment for foreign fighting endeavours abroad, in Iraq, Syria, and Libya, prior to the designation of AST in 2013, with the acceleration of the government's crackdown upon the group, that then provided the reservoir for people to be like, "Well, I'm just going to leave here and do jihad elsewhere now."

So, a lot of it had more to do with the particular post-2011 context than beforehand. But I think the fact that there were many Tunisians involved prior to 2011, and therefore provided a cohort of people that could then help build up the capacities locally after 2011, is more of a surprise for people because it seemed like it came out of nowhere, because there wasn't that much activism within Tunisia itself, because of the authoritarian regime and a lot of it happened outside of Tunisia, whether it was people that were based in Europe, or people getting involved in foreign fighting, whether it was in Afghanistan or Iraq, or Bosnia or Somalia, Yemen, and the like.

So, because of this openness, this shed light on what was already happening in this process beforehand, in a way that wasn't possible previously. And I imagine that if you did see an opening and other authoritarian regimes, that a similar dynamic would probably play out as well, on some level. So, I just think that Tunisia, because of its unique places, is the only country that really did have this true democratic opening, even if we've seen some backsliding now in the last year, in particular, that we could see this in a way that you can't see in other authoritarian contexts. Just in the same way that you are exposed to and see all the different types of arrests or mobilizations that people have in a western context, because they're also democracies.

SG: Well, you've provided a very important perspective on Tunisia. And I think what you said that you're surprised that there haven't been more just demonstrates potentially what may or could emerge down the road if there's more instability in other parts of the world, if not within the Maghreb itself.

If we can look at Tunisia's neighbour, Libya, one of those stories that just doesn't seem to die down or go away, is the 2012 Benghazi attack on the US Consulate, which occurred on the 11th anniversary of 9/11. And one of the terrorist groups that you mentioned in the context of Tunisia, Ansar al-Sharia, was tied to the attack, along with jihadists from Egypt, with I believe the blessings from al-Qaeda's core command led by Ayman al-Zawahiri. Now the attack resulted in the death of US Ambassador Stevens and three other Americans. On the one hand, the attack seemed to be somewhat opportunistic, and on the other hand, it looked like it was very well planned and premeditated. Can you unpack what transpired and ultimately, how well coordinated was this attack?

AZ: I think it's important to also contextualise this beyond just Libya at the same time period there are also these large-scale protests in Cairo at the US Embassy, as well as one at the embassy in Tunis in Tunisia. The one in Cairo due to the Egyptian security and Americans, it really died down and didn't lead to anything more than protests and some destruction of some property on the outside of the embassy. And Ayman al-Zawahiri's brother actually, Mohammed al-Zawahiri, was a key

instigator in what was going on there.

In the case of Tunisia, they actually, the group I already talked about, Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), brought ladders and went into the complex of the US Embassy in Tunis, and burned a lot of them, they raised the black flag at the embassy in Tunis. And it's quite remarkable that nobody was actually injured or killed. Based off of interviews I've had with people from the embassy, though, it is possible that there could have been more people that were killed, because they're in a safe room in the embassy, but because of all the fires, the fire smoke was starting to get in the safe room. And they're worried if the Tunisian presidential police, then come and stop everything and save them that there could have been a lot of people that could have suffocated to death because of the smoke. So, thankfully, that didn't happen.

It's important to know that this was not just a purely Libya thing that was happening on these dates, around the anniversary of 9/11. but we saw it regionally as well. In terms of Libya, in particular, the main group that was involved was also Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, which was sort of the Libyan branch of this. As you know, there were foreign fighters from Egypt involved, of course there's foreign fighters from Tunisia too. And I think there needs to be two things separated. One is part of this was spurred on by the fact that there was this film created that was seen as Islamophobic. And therefore, there were people that were involved in protests, because they were not happy about this. But then there is also the fact that there are these jihadists that were able to take advantage of these protests, to then use it to do something far more sinister and violent, which we did see in the case of the attack on the consulate in Benghazi.

There were two things happening and that's part of the reason why there's this confusion, why some people like, "oh, it started out as this spontaneous protest type thing." That was definitely true, but there was also the second aspect of it to where the jihadis were able to use that as a cover for them for what they really wanted to do, in the same way that they were hoping to do in Cairo, and in Tunis, as well. It's just that in Benghazi it was the most successful in part probably because it was a civil war atmosphere. Whereas in Tunisia even though there was the revolution, there wasn't a civil war afterwards. There was a proper government and they had control of their territory. And in the in the same way, in Egypt, even though the Muslim Brotherhood was in charge there, they were in charge of making sure that there wasn't anything super bad happening. And the fact that the Egyptian military still also had a tonne of power, as we would then eventually see a year and a half or so later when they did their own coup in Egypt.

So, I think that there's a lot going on there. And many people glommed on to only one aspect of it at a time, depending on maybe what their partisan viewpoint was in the American political context, instead of looking at the whole picture related to some people truly being upset at this Islamophobic film, but then the jihadis being able to take advantage of that for their own means. And the fact that this didn't just happen within Libya or Benghazi, but it was this broader phenomenon that they were trying to exact on the United States, in the region as a whole.

SG: Well, I'm glad that you're unpacking it to show just how wide this actually was. That it wasn't just in the context of Libya, but you've also got to look at what was unfolding in Tunisia, as well as in Egypt. And you mentioned, the protests outside the US Embassy in Cairo, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri's brother, Mohammed al-Zawahiri.

It's also interesting that I recall that Ayman al-Zawahiri issued an audio message commemorating the 9/11 attacks, some people speculate that that was almost like the signal to these different groups

across North Africa to start their protest agitations, their plotting. Do you think that the al-Qaeda command was ultimately playing a role in this? Maybe they didn't know the finite details of what was going to transpire, but they were aware that there was something that was going to be unfolding?

AZ: It's definitely plausible. And when you go back to that time period, the command-and-control features within the organisation were also a lot stronger since many historical senior figures within the movement were still alive. Whereas nowadays, it's far more complicated due to the drone campaign that has killed so many senior leaders, as well as leaders within the historical moment going all the way back to the 1980s, and that's partially why you have greater issues now in the way people view the broader network, and why it is viewed as maybe more decentralised, because of that. And the lack of sort of human connection in the same way many of these people had, when they networked, for lack of a better term, in the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s.

SG: Right, and that's such a key dynamic to all of this. Let's conclude our discussion on how we started by talking about *Jihadology*. Did the content that you were coming across and uploading reduce in volume during the pandemic, or did it actually increase ironically? And what do you envisage down the road for the work you do with *Jihadology* in 2022? How do you see that shaping up?

AZ: I think one of the biggest dynamics that we've seen, in part of the ebb and flow of documentation, is you saw a larger growth in it in the past decade, in part because technologies were a lot easier accessible in a commercial venue, and the strength of the technologies in terms of video, in particular, and therefore is a lot easier to put out content related to that in a way that wasn't necessarily possible in the first decade after 9/11. But one of the features too, that you can notice, is that when these groups sort of control territory and become proto-states, or states depending on your perspective, they put out a lot more content, because it's not just about the fighting, but also the governance that they're conducting. So, for example, when ISIS was in control of territory, in Iraq and Syria in particular, and Libya too, for that matter, the amount of information they were putting out on a daily basis was unfathomable. Whereas nowadays, it's much less so since more of it's just purely related to insurgency and military operations.

So, that had a huge part in the number of content that I was posting on *Jihadology* — was directly related to that. But if you look at other groups, they've been relatively steady themselves. What's interesting, though, is that, in the case of the Taliban, while they put out a lot of content now, it's not in the same way that they did prior to their takeover of Kabul. Whereas before, a lot of it was primarily just branded as part of their al-Emarah media wing or other smaller ones that are lesser known, like Manba al-Jihad and the like. Whereas now, they're trying to present themselves like a normal state, and therefore a lot of it's more like public diplomacy type of messaging and branding, instead of it being sort of like propaganda-style branding, which is interesting to see that change in comparison to say, ISIS or HTS or AQAP or AQIM when they have been in control of territory, where they continued in some ways to operate that same type of propaganda-like material instead of trying to make it seem as if they're a normal state.

I will say that HTS on some level, they're trying to do that with their civilian government called the Salvation Government in Idlib. But they still have HTS as this apparatus too so it's this weird dichotomy where they don't fuse them together to make it seem as if they have this one legitimate government instead of it seeing like this military apparatus, sort of behind the scenes, acting as a marionette doll to this civilian front for their governance apparatus locally.

In terms of going forward, I think one of the things that will be a constant is that there's more and

more calls, not necessarily for the legitimization or normalisation of many jihadi groups, but accepting the fact that they are realities on the ground and therefore you need to deal with them, which is why you see more calls for negotiations, diplomacy, and the like with jihadi groups in different arenas in a way that we really hadn't seen before. Part of this, I think, is because the jihadi groups have been able to sustain themselves and become stronger and consolidate their capabilities in different arenas.

But also too, I think, part of it is to try and take some of these jihadi groups off the board in terms of being direct threats to the west. And the fact that many in the US, as well as even in Europe, are increasingly looking at what Russia and China are doing. And seeing that is a much greater strategic, and potentially even existential threat, depending on which country might be thinking of. And therefore, if the jihadi groups are there and not bothering Western interests or trying to do attacks abroad into western countries so long as there are no operations, then I think some people in Western countries will be like, "alright, we need to be realistic about it and use our resources wisely." And obviously, while the drone campaign has helped derail a lot of the senior leadership in al-Qaeda's historical leaders, as well as many people in different iterations of ISIS, it hasn't stopped the growth in people being interested in this ideology over time, and therefore, they're able to re-spin themselves into a new web again and start over.

Part of this is also the fact that the governance and corruption in the places where they operate, continue to be poor, or get worse, or governments become more authoritarian and less democratic and therefore, this creates greater opportunities for jihadi groups to create an alternative vision of governance. So, in many ways it's gotten to the point where there's this, now, competition, in some respects, about models of governance. And you can see this not just with relation to jihadis and these local areas that they're operating in, but I'd argue that it's a broader trend globally in many ways. Whereas, the original Cold War between the US and Soviet Union was, in some ways a competition between economic models, capitalism or communism, in many ways, I see this current era is sort of a competition of governance models, and who could provide in a way that doesn't necessarily just talk about the economic aspects of it, but also your day to day living in terms of whether you should be free or be more restricted in your freedoms. Between these models that China's pursuing in different areas and trying to explore to Russia, or these more theocratic understandings, whether it's Iran on one side, or these Sunni jihadi groups on the other side. So, it's definitely transitioning into a new time period. And I think that's why these questions related to the jihadi movement will get increasingly more complex, because of the fact that I think it's less of a black and white issue now than say, it might have been on 9/11.

SG: Well, your perspectives and your analysis has been fascinating. And I'm so glad to have had you on the show to be able to distil all the complexities when it comes to the jihadist arena. And I think what you've laid out at the end just demonstrates the challenges and how those are going to evolve, but also, potentially, how there are many dynamics that are going to be difficult to predict, as well. And then the added aspect of the great power competition that only complicates the situation even further.

Aaron, thank you so much for appearing on NATO *DEEP Dive*. I hope to have you back again in the future.

AZ: Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks for having me.

Aaron Zelin's bio

Aaron Zelin is a Levy Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University. He is the founder of the widely acclaimed and cited website Jihadology.net, a clearinghouse for primary source content. He is also the author of Your Sons are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad.

Episode 12 - David Loyn and the Taliban Dilemma, April 2022

Key Reflections

- **Zalmay Khalilzad's Doha deal with the Taliban resulted in the drawdown of international troops and contractors who were supporting Afghan forces, contributing to the collapse of Afghanistan's security apparatus.**
- **Al-Qaeda are operating openly in Afghanistan and still allied to the Taliban.**
- **Pakistan's military doctrine of 'Strategic Depth' in Afghanistan supports the internationally proscribed Haqqani Network, who are the real authority in the Taliban.**
- **The Taliban have been fighting against the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). However, on occasions they have also been tactical allies.**
- **The Taliban are supported by money from narcotics especially heroin and methamphetamines.**
- **China and Russia want to treat the Taliban as the recognised authority in Afghanistan. China has enormous desires to mine rare earth metals.**
- **The role of women's rights in Afghanistan has been severely curtailed by the Taliban.**
- **During Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Taliban carried out many extrajudicial murders.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

DL: David Loyn

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to David Loyn who was an award-winning foreign correspondent for thirty years for the BBC. He is an authority on Afghanistan, a country he has visited regularly. In 2017, David worked for a year as an adviser in the office of the Afghan president. His book The Long War uncovers the political and military strategies that tried to defeat the Taliban across two decades.

David Loyn, thank you so much for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

DL: It's very good to be with you, Sajjan, thanks for the invitation.

SG: It's our pleasure.

Let's begin by talking about the collapse of the Afghan government. There's going to be many post-mortems, but in your opinion, was this inevitable? Did its sudden collapse explain what went wrong due to the Western withdrawal, or other factors at play?

DL: I think you have to go back to 2019 and the very swift decision that President Trump made and the conditions that he put on it. The American negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad, was told by President Trump effectively that he wanted to pull troops out of Afghanistan. That's what he went to try and negotiate. And so what we had in Doha wasn't any kind of conditional withdrawal set on the Taliban, it was really just a withdrawal deal for the Americans to pull out, leaving behind some very vague assurances that the Taliban made on severing their links with al-Qaeda and making demands of the Afghan government that they should release Taliban prisoners. So, there was this quite swift timetable and then, of course, the American election happened, a new administration came in and wanted to keep to that timetable during the summer of 2021.

And so we saw this swift drawdown of international troops and a consequence, and really what was missed at the time, was that as American troops were drawing down and, of course, NATO support was pulling out at the same time, but the American troops were the ones doing the more of the fighting more than the muscle end, NATO by that point, were only doing train, advise, and assist. As the American troops were actually drawing down and pulling out, they also pulled out thousands of contractors who were doing the key implementing of the Afghan Air Force, they were providing software support for Afghan forces, they were providing all of the logistics and enablers for what we'd set up in Afghanistan, which is a relatively sophisticated modern force. So, when all those enablers were pulled out, in the spring and summer of 2021, Afghan forces effectively collapsed, and the country fell ahead of them.

I think the other key thing to remember in all this, alongside that political decision to withdraw, was a contested election, a weak Afghan government off the back of that contested election, and a strong sense in Afghanistan that as the Taliban moved forward, perhaps this government that had run its course, that was seen as potentially corrupt, was something that people were willing to see the back office. So, the Taliban effectively negotiated their way to power across the spring and summer of 2021.

And the other key thing that happened in those two years was the secret annexes to the Doha deal that Zalmay Khalilzad did with the Taliban, which meant that American forces could no longer attack the Taliban if they were moving across the countryside. Providing the Taliban didn't attack Afghan cities and didn't attack certain key infrastructure nodes and road networks, they were given effectively carte blanche to move across the Afghan countryside. And the Afghan government didn't see those secret annexes until after the government fell. So, they were operating blind if you like, in terms of trying to protect their own country, and American forces were frustrated watching Taliban troops moving into countryside areas and not being able to prevent them from moving in. So, as America pulled out the Taliban took over the country.

SG: There are so many key factors that you've been talking about. The name Zalmay Khalilzad came up several times in what you were saying. How much of the blame does he have to bear when it comes to what has now taken place in Afghanistan?

DL: He's an extraordinary character when the history of Afghanistan is written. I've written two books on it, but perhaps I should write another one just about him. He's written his own autobiography on his story. But his Afghan experience, of course, he was born there, he went to school there, he knew Ashraf Ghani, the President, very well, they were just a couple of years apart in school, and then went to American university abroad, and then, of course, became an American citizen. And in 1988-1989, he was part of the American negotiating team, negotiating the end of the Russian war. So, he had very long experience in Afghanistan, as well as then-being ambassador in the years after 9/11. He was very close to President Bush's administration, very much a sort

of Neocon hawk, somebody who thought that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were things that America ought to fight. And I think when it came to actually drawing down in Afghanistan, perhaps he wasn't the best man to choose for the job.

But as I said, at the beginning, he was given an impossible task, because the alternative, which many people were pushing, certainly in the United Kingdom, and in some other NATO countries, was for a much longer period of drawing down, and much more of a sense of a conditional withdrawal, longer peace talks, bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table, with the Afghan government, giving the Afghan government every capacity that it had to do those negotiations. But instead of that, we pulled the rug from under the feet of the Afghan government, with this withdrawal deal, and effectively handed the country over to the Taliban.

So, would another individual have been able to do a different sort of deal? I think at the end of the day, President Trump wanted the troops out, there was always a danger that he might just announce an even more precipitous withdrawal, as he did in some other conflicts. Very swift, abrupt, military decisions made that would have destabilised Afghanistan even more. So, I think you could argue that Zalmay Khalilzad played a really, really difficult hand. But it didn't play out that well.

SG: It also seems that he wanted to be at the centre of what was transpiring in Afghanistan. It's almost as if this was the other end of the book that he had, in itself written, because he was key to the Bonn Summit, in which the creation of the post-Taliban Afghanistan had been created, which in itself had a number of inherent flaws. And then he has overseen the end of that very system that he helped create. And yes, I think history will probably judge him, over all of this.

DL: Yeah, and not very well, I suppose is the conclusion that you're drawing. You're right about the Bonn Summit and his importance in bringing together some of the old warlords, putting the old warlords back into power, right in 2002 and 2003. And that was the fundamental failure right at the beginning of the war, which is one of the reasons I argue in my new book, *The Long War*.

It's one of the reasons why it made the Afghan conflict such a long conflict and such a difficult conflict for the NATO allies and partner nations who went into Afghanistan, because from the very beginning, the old warlords who the Taliban had defeated in the mid-90s, when they came to power, were re-enfranchised by the Bonn deal, and by what America did in 2002, by giving them lots of money for effectively exchanging information about al-Qaeda['s whereabouts]. Those individuals came back into power. And for many Afghans, it looked as if the international community had effectively taken a side in a civil war. That we had supported people who had not been very popular back in the mid-1990s, before the Taliban came to power, people who were bandits, who fought among themselves, and those individuals came back into power in 2001-2002. Zalmay Khalilzad was one of the people who re-enfranchised them.

And that always made the intervention in Afghanistan far harder to achieve a success out of. Because all of the time, you were working against this system of these bandits and warlords who had returned to power, who entrenched corruption really from the very beginning of the years of the post 9/11 intervention in Afghanistan.

SG: Absolutely. And in your book, *The Long War*, which is a very important contribution to the whole Afghanistan dynamic, and will stand the test of time, there was another important aspect that you covered, and one that in many ways we can't talk about Afghanistan without bringing this factor in, which is the role of Pakistan. Pakistan-Afghanistan, their ties are perpetually intertwined.

What has been the role of Pakistan in the Taliban's return to power, both in terms of the takeover of Afghanistan, but also helping the Taliban form its own government? I'm reminded of that incident where the then-head of the ISI in 2021, Faiz Hameed, happened to turn up at the lobby of the Serena hotel in Kabul, sipping tea. And it looked like a somewhat orchestrated visual for the world. But it's no coincidence that within a couple of days of him being there that the Taliban formed their regime. So, how intrinsic is Pakistan's role?

DL: Yes, we can come back in a minute, perhaps, to talk about the Taliban and how they formed their government. But no, absolutely central, and Pakistan has been wanting, really for the last 40 or 50 years going back even before the Russian War, to, if not have a government in Afghanistan that was completely on their side, at least have a government that wasn't going to knife them in the back. Pakistan has this, I think very flawed, military doctrine called *Strategic Depth*, which give gives them the sense that because they're a relatively narrow country, facing this huge, in their mind, Hindu Raj to their East, in India, with the constant friction of the disputes in Kashmir threatening to turn into a shooting war, they want to have a compliant Afghanistan to their rear.

Now, if you look at the map, there isn't any military value in having a compliant Afghanistan because there's a huge mountain range across the North-West Frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. And the ability to manoeuvre across that frontier remains as limited today as it did when the British tried to cross it and try to pacify it during three wars in the 19th and early 20th century. There are only three navigable military passes across that mountain range, the Khyber Pass, of course, being the most famous.

So, I think Pakistan has a rather flawed sense of, you know, the need to have a compliant government in Afghanistan, but it's one that they've been, as a matter of national statecraft, they've been wanting to control what goes on there for a very long time. And of course, you have got to remember that all this goes back to the war against the Russians in the 1980s, when America and Saudi Arabia in particular, of the donor nations, put a huge amount of money and weapons into Afghanistan, but through Pakistan, and it went through, the ISI insisted that it went through the ISI, the Pakistani intelligence agency. And that was the beginning, if you like of this sense of the Pakistani military state, which got very bloated, frankly, on the corruption in the 1980s. And then had a very strong sense of its ability to, having used the mujahideen to defeat the Russians, of its ability to manage things in Afghanistan, and wanting to continue to manage things over the next 20 or 30 years after that.

I think you mentioned general Faiz's visit a couple of weeks after the Taliban took Kabul in August 2021. And that sense of him bringing Taliban heads together and forcing, effectively, the government that Pakistan wanted, significantly led by Haqqani Network (HQN) figures, and the Haqqani Network are an insurgent group who have been allied with the Taliban since 9/11, but they go back to the mujahideen days in the 1980s, and the leaders of the Haqqani Network are very much based in the frontier region of Pakistan in North and South Waziristan in particular. So, they're absolutely clients of the Pakistani government. But increasingly, people are beginning to think, "well, does Pakistan really control these people?" And after all these years of Pakistan wanting a client state in Afghanistan, wanting its own government in power, there's a certain sense of 'buyer's remorse.' Now they've got it, they're not completely sure what to do with it.

SG: So, there's a couple of things I want to ask you about that aspect. One thing we were briefly discussing is this formation of the Taliban regime. And you wrote this very interesting article in *The Spectator* "Punch Up at The Palace," which was about the squabble between Mullah Baradar, whom the West had hoped would be able to lead a somewhat moderate Taliban regime, and the

Haqqani Network, whom you were also talking about. In which it actually turned into a physical fight between their two factions and ultimately, it was the Haqqanis that came out on top. So, is Afghanistan now effectively run by the Haqqani Network, whom we should actually point out are also a proscribed terrorist group?

DL: Yes, I mean, it's an extraordinary situation that the interior minister of Afghanistan [Sirajuddin Haqqani] is someone who's on an American wanted list, and almost certainly the person most responsible for the largest suicide bombings of the last 15 years in particular. And I remember in 2017, there was an enormous, I think one of the biggest ones, when I was in Kabul, about 150 people were killed, and that absolutely rocked the centre of town, in the middle of the morning, while people were going to school, children were going to school, people were going to work. And that individual who, we believe, carried out that attack, masterminded that attack, is now the interior minister of the country. And you do have to kind of scratch your head a bit to wonder if the Taliban really do want international legitimacy.

They've also recently held a parade of the families of suicide bombers and have sort of promoted themselves as being the most successful country in the world that is used suicide bombing as a military tactic. Again, not something that's designed to endear them with the international community. So, I think there has been something of a shock for the American negotiators, who had worked with Baradar, you mentioned, Muttaqi, Stanikzai, and others in those long negotiations in Doha to deliver a deal. And those individuals have spent a long time living in Doha, their families are there, and there was a sense, as you say, that perhaps the West could deal with them.

But as we understand at the moment, and it's hard to say, watching what's going on inside the Taliban administration, it's very difficult to work out exactly who's in control. But certainly, the Haqqani Network came out on top last summer and autumn. They still call it an interim government, there's still some sense that they're looking for something more inclusive. But all of the inclusivity that the Taliban have brought in is only among other Taliban groups. So, they're dispensing power among their own people, not moving it more widely into Afghan society. And it began, as you say, with that extraordinary incident in the Afghan palace where there was a brawl between people, including as I heard, people throwing thermos flasks at each other of green tea, spilling green tea all over the place. And after that, Mullah Baradar went down to Kandahar for a few weeks, to sort of lick his wounds and to regroup for the Kandahari, so called, Taliban. And for international analysts, it's very difficult to work out who we might be able to best do business with, between these two groups. Because there is one argument to say that the Kandaharis are actually more socially conservative. So, things like girls' schools, things like the other social and civil aspects of society that people want, there's an argument for saying that perhaps the Haqqani Network wouldn't be so tough on those, although they want to be tough in terms of their sort of international jihadi credibility in order to be able to continue to recruit young men to their corps.

SG: There are so many different factions and compulsions here, which is what is coming clearly across in our discussion and then to throw a further dynamic into the mix, to make it even more complicated, is that you have the Taliban 'cousin,' I guess, which is the TTP, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan [Pakistan Taliban], which seem to be operating and growing in the ascendancy following the Afghan Taliban return in Afghanistan.

You mentioned earlier about Pakistan's buyer's remorse. One thing the Pakistanis kept talking about was that if there was an Afghan Taliban regime in Afghanistan, it would limit and control the activities of the TTP. On the contrary, what we've seen is that the TTP have actually become much stronger. And it's one of these very odd paradoxes that defines Afghanistan-Pakistan, where

you've got the Pakistani military that are sympathetic and supportive to the Afghan Taliban, but the Pakistani military are at odds with the Pakistan Taliban. And yet the Pakistan Taliban and the Afghan Taliban end up cooperating, because they have that tribal connection. So, how does one somehow demystify this dynamic?

DL: Yeah, it was a real surprise, again, as it was a surprise that the Taliban haven't really attempted to have a more inclusive government or do any of the things that the international community might have thought would try and win them more acceptance, such as a nod to girls' education, etc. It's also been a surprise that they haven't reined back other terrorist groups who operate in Afghanistan, the TTP, you mentioned, the most prominent of them. And this really raises questions about how much power the Pakistani state and Pakistani ISI really has over the Taliban because Pakistan asked the Taliban to broker a peace deal with the TTP and it didn't happen. In fact, the opposite happened, there was an upsurge of TTP violent activity. And there's been clashes between the Taliban and Pakistani forces along the disputed border line, which Afghanistan has never recognised, that the Durand Line is an international border. Pakistan has been fencing it and the Taliban have been ripping down some of the border fencing.

So, there's a sense in which this is a pretty difficult client for Pakistan to have. And I think some other countries who were also willing to have the Taliban in power, are also looking at this and saying, "well, we're not getting the guarantees that we wanted on security." And in particular, I'm thinking of China. China, who have a border, a very narrow border right up in the northeast of the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan, with Afghanistan, have been wanting guarantees from the Taliban that they would not support Uyghur separatists who have been operating from Afghanistan in the past and the Taliban have not given that assurance.

SG: One of the other aspects, then, David, that's very important to Afghanistan, and it also is an aspect of the Doha deal and relevant to the annexes that you were talking about earlier is al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda has this relationship with the Taliban, and even though the Taliban has made many comments and commitments that they will not allow Afghanistan to be a cesspool for terrorism, they have never actually outrightly condemned al-Qaeda, nor have they tried to hand over al-Qaeda figures to the NATO alliance or to the United States. The other aspect is that there were al-Qaeda fighters that were embedded with the Taliban during the conquest of Afghanistan. Where do you believe this relationship is between al-Qaeda and the Taliban?

DL: Yeah, again, it's a deeply worrying aspect of the Taliban. There's a belief among analysts that al-Qaeda, who have been very quiet in recent months, are operating a policy of strategic silence, in order to allow the Taliban to try and secure the—as good as they can get, in terms of international recognition—to secure the unfreezing of aid money, etc. But it's not worked, because there's been very clear analysis—the most recent was the UN sanctions committee, who in their six-monthly report, which they do for Afghanistan, only recently came out and said al-Qaeda are operating openly and effectively in Afghanistan. They're still allied to the Taliban; there's been no real severance of links. Osama bin Laden's bodyguard has returned to Afghanistan to live, and he lives openly in the country, and other senior al Qaeda figures have been openly visiting the Taliban. And there's a strong sense in this sanctions committee report that it's very much business as usual and no change in terms of the Taliban's continued links with al-Qaeda.

And they also mentioned in this report that during the summer last year, during the fighting last year, there were tactical alliances between the Taliban and Islamic State, even, against America. Now, on the whole, the Taliban have been fighting against the Islamic State Khorasan Province, ISKP, in the east and the north of Afghanistan. But at least last summer, they were tactical allies.

So I think you're seeing the Taliban not really moving in the directions that the international community hoped they might move in order to win recognition and acceptance and become a more normal government, but instead needing to continue to promote violence, as a way of both suppressing the population and of recruiting young men, so they don't lose young fighters to these other potentially more extremist jihadi groups.

SG: You said there are these concerns about the fact that the Taliban are not moving in the direction that the West has been hoping for. In relationship to that, you've also got the narcotics factor, because we know that the Taliban and, for example, the Haqqani Network, have invested very heavily in criminal enterprise, which Afghanistan has unfortunately been succumbed to by the narcotics, especially heroin, and increasingly methamphetamines seems to be a new product that is being produced inside the country. Do you have concerns that we will see a proliferation of narcotics now that the Taliban are back, even though publicly they may condemn it? Privately, they seem to do other things, just like as you mentioned the relationship between the Taliban and ISKP—which doesn't get enough attention—the narcotics aspect also doesn't seem to get enough focus.

DL: I think it's one of the most fundamental challenges that the Taliban face. They've clearly been supported by poppy money and money from other drugs, as you mentioned, some very clever ways of processing the ephedra plant for methamphetamines in recent months. So there's a sense in which the Taliban are buoyed by this criminal enterprise, and while in principle, as you say, they'd like to end the drugs trade, they'd like to end drugs growing in Afghanistan, it's going to be very difficult to see how they can do it without losing support of very significant people, who support them up to now. And again, that's going to be one of the real challenges for the international community if they're going to try and engage with the Taliban and try to unfreeze assets, move towards something, if not recognition, at least a pragmatic acceptance that they're the government, some World Bank programmes to fund schooling and to fund clinics, etc., so that the Afghan people are not damaged by the fact that they've got this, effectively, a tyrannical government in Afghanistan. I think it's going to be very difficult for the international community to do that if the Taliban remain buoyed by pocket money.

SG: That is going to be a huge challenge indeed. There are two other countries I wanted to bring into this discussion: one is Russia, and the other is China. Let's talk about China first. How important is China now for Afghanistan? Because we are increasingly seeing contact between the Chinese embassy in Kabul; there have been meetings with the Haqqani Network. What does China want from the Taliban regime? And is it going to be possible to achieve what China wants?

DL: With China and Russia, the embassies never closed, and although they haven't recognised the Taliban, they have a de facto diplomatic exchange because their ambassadors are still there, and their embassies are still staffed, and there's a sense in which they want to treat Afghanistan like any other country. China has enormous desires to mine rare earth metals from Afghanistan with huge untapped resources in terms of various other rare metals and precious stones. There's also the world's largest un-excavated copper mine in Afghanistan at Mes Aynak, not very far south of Kabul in Logar province, which China has the concession on but have never been able to extract the copper because of the insecurity. Well, now Afghanistan is secure. Is China going to be able to move in? And I think we're still seeing quite a lot of reservations on the part of China. There have been reports of some Chinese citizens being arrested by the Taliban, there have been arbitrary detentions of Western businessmen who've tried to do business with the Taliban and others in Afghanistan. So, it's a very mixed picture for people who are beginning to try to do business in the country. And I think China is looking in a pretty worried way at what's happening.

You've got to remember that China's so-called all-weather friendship is with Pakistan, their closest ally in the region. And so, China and Pakistan will be operating as one. And as we've seen, Pakistan is finding it much more difficult to manage the Taliban than it was before. I think Russia, you mentioned, also has some sort of sense of buyer's remorse. They were willing to let the Taliban continue to fight against the Americans. It was a wonderful, beautiful symmetry, if you like, for Russia, that the Americans were defeated in Afghanistan, taking twice as long to be defeated as the Russians were a generation before. And so that sense of defeating the Russians in the very backyard where America had funded the mujahideen to defeat the Russians before—the Americans being defeated this time was very sweet for them. But again, we understand that they're finding it difficult to work with the Taliban, to relate to them, and to do the kind of business that they want to do, and to stop terrorism coming across the frontier to the Central Asian states whom Russia see as very much within their security orbit.

SG: I don't know if you saw, David, the recent Taliban message that was released by their foreign ministry, in which they spoke about peace between Russia and Ukraine. It seemed very bizarre as to how the Taliban now are talking about global peace.

DL: Well, they're operating—they're trying to operate like a government. I thought that there was a certain amount of overextension of their ability to operate internationally. I think they're trying to show to the international community that if they were properly recognised, then they could engage on some of these issues. But I have to say, people who've been talking to them…they're not very successfully running a central administration yet. They're collecting revenue, collecting a lot of revenue considering the collapse of the economy. Their revenue collection is at a higher proportion than the previous government's. And they're not corrupt, so the money is going into a central fund, but it's very unclear what they're doing with it. They're not managing the state. So, they're certainly not managing foreign affairs with any of the professionalism that you would expect from a modern state. And I think that's the challenge that the international community now face, the West in particular.

We lost the war—it's very clear—but…we shouldn't lose the peace now. And I think I would urge NATO countries to not necessarily to recognise the Taliban, but certainly to try to support some of the people whom we left behind. It's a completely different generation in Afghanistan from the generation who came before. And I think, in many ways, the Taliban are finding Afghanistan an alien country. It's a very different country to when I was with the Taliban when they took Kabul in 1996. And I was there in 2001 when they were pushed out. And it's a very different country then to what it is now. Younger people with high expectations of a different kind of life, who've been educated, who look at women rights as an expectation, not just in the cities, but in the countryside.

And I think that the international community would do well to support media organisations, to support women's networks, in order to enable Afghan society itself to recover from the shocks of this enormous disruption that happened when the Taliban took over last summer. And for people to be able to withstand that pressure and to have the confidence to be able to decide their own futures, because clearly there's not going to be another international military intervention in Afghanistan, certainly in the lifetime of any of the people who were involved in this one, because I think it was such a difficult operation. The Afghans are on their own in those terms, but the least we can do is to give them the confidence and the ability to be able to withstand some of the propaganda from the Taliban, which means supporting media organisations, women's organisations, etc. And that feels like a fairly simple thing to be able to continue to do.

SG: The role of women's rights and civil liberties that you have been talking about is so fundamen-

tally important to Afghanistan's future. But the problem also seems to be that the Taliban are very reluctant to recognise women's rights and, in many ways, still have that mindset from the 1990s, where women were to play no role whatsoever in society. How does one get the Taliban to try and make changes to their very stiff doctrine that has been the cornerstone of their belief system? Because without women in Afghanistan having a right to live, function, teach, be educated, Afghanistan will never recover whatsoever. And it seems the Taliban are always very reluctant to make any tangible changes for women's rights. And the international community seems to be trying to convince them, there's some talk that goes on, but then we don't see anything on the ground that is effective. What more can we do?

DL: I don't think it's going to come from international pressure. I think it's going to come from within, which is why I say I think we need to support Afghan women and men to be able to take those issues on for themselves. And I think the changes that were made over the last 20 years were not just in the cities. For people who fought the war or were involved in Afghanistan over the last 20 years, people in NATO, it was a profound shock last summer. Many people were really upset because they'd served, they'd given a lot of their time, attention, watched good friends die, to try and actually build a better society in Afghanistan, at the heart of what was going on there. And I think it's been very difficult for people who were fighting there before from NATO countries. But I think it'll be even more difficult if we don't preserve and build resilience in the society that we did build. So, I think it wasn't a complete failure. The war was lost; but it wasn't a failure in terms of leaving behind a society with different expectations. And as I say, I mean not just in the cities.

If I can give you one very quick anecdote: I was working on a programme last year to support communications around the peace process, an American-funded programme. And one of the projects that we were doing was quite a simple piece of research, going into villages and asking people what they thought about the peace process and what they wanted to get out of it. And we said to this local NGO who was doing the work, "We need to have 50% men and 50% women." And in the cities, of course, they were running joint meetings, but expecting that in rural Pashtun areas, they would be separate meetings. And so that happened in Kandahar. And then they went down to Nimroz province, way down in the southwest in the desert, very remote, Pashtun area, fundamentalist, sort of Taliban-supporting population in the past. And they went into the district centre and were expecting to run these separate meetings, and the women of Nimroz province said, "No, no, no. We want to be in a joint meeting with the men. In fact, we want the men to hear what we have to say." And that was new; that wasn't a Western organisation coming in and saying, "women here need to be able to do this." This was women demanding for themselves. And it's preserving that capacity that I think the international community would do well to support in the coming months and years.

SG: Well, that's a really important story about the tangible results that have been achieved in Afghanistan, the hard-earned gains that are so important to keep and not to lose. One last question, David, is that during the middle of this crisis that's taking place with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been talk about the fact that the Taliban have been conducting activities, where they've been taking people away and carrying out extrajudicial murders, in order to deal with those people they deemed as their enemies, in the hope that the world's attention is not on Afghanistan, so they can get away with a lot of things. Does that worry you?

DL: Yeah, one of the things—and I argue this very strongly in *The Long War*, my book on the war—I should just say one thing about that book, one of the key aspects of it is that I interviewed all of the commanding officers during the key combat years of ISAF and Resolute Support. And it's a book about military leadership, as much as it's a book about Afghanistan, and the challenges that individual soldiers faced, but magnified by the challenges of their commanders. And I think in

doing that and trying to understand Afghanistan, I saw the distractions of other parts of the international community. So, when the Iraq War happened, and there was an immediate change of focus from Afghanistan, it was a real problem for what people were trying to do in terms of both of countering terrorism and then ultimately this nation-building project that emerged from the beginning of the Afghan war.

And I think there's a danger that Ukraine now is of course going to suck all of the oxygen out internationally from Afghanistan and from a number of other places, and I think it's a real shame. Whether the Taliban have used that as a cover for what is a new campaign of repression, I'm not sure that's true, because these house-to-house searches that they've been doing, particularly in Kabul, street by street, every single house in the city, was quite a methodical campaign that must have taken quite a few weeks to organise and to plan. So, I'm not sure whether that was the reason for it. But I certainly worry going forward that now we're really focused, and quite rightly, on the magnitude of what's going on in Ukraine, on war in Europe, which is of course fundamental NATO business, that Afghanistan is forgotten again. And for those of us who spend a lot of time and effort working in Afghanistan, writing about Afghanistan, and for the Afghan people, I think that's a shame.

SG: Absolutely. And it's an important reminder as to what is still there to save. And there's a lot to save in Afghanistan, because it's not just for the Afghans, it has global ramifications, as you've been outlining throughout our discussion. But David, once again, thank you so much for spending the time with us on NATO *DEEP Dive* and talking to us about your experiences and your book, *The Long War*, is certainly something that I very strongly recommend people to read if they want to understand about Afghanistan. So, thank you, David, again, for joining us.

DL: Sajjan, thanks for the recommendation. And thanks very much, it's been very good to talk to you.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

David Loyn's bio

David Loyn is an award-winning foreign correspondent, author, and analyst on global affairs. He is a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at Kings' College London and an authority on Afghanistan where he worked for a year in 2017 as an adviser in the office of the Afghan president. He is also the author of The Long War: The Inside Story of America and Afghanistan Since 9/11.

Episode 13 - Leon Panetta and Strengthening Global Alliances, April 2022

Key Reflections

- **What happens in Ukraine will reveal a lot about what the 21st century will look like. Undermining Putin's agenda will strengthen democracies for the future.**
- **Russia's military has been depleted due to the resilience of the Ukrainian people. Putin wants to try to retain and extend control in eastern Ukraine. Kyiv needs to be provided with sufficient arms to defend itself.**
- **The ability to deal with global threats from a position of strength requires unity, democracy, and multilateral alliances such as NATO and the Quad. Russia's aggression in Ukraine has unified NATO's resolve.**
- **China is trying to tread carefully over Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Beijing's rhetoric may support Russia, but China will not go further for now.**
- **The Haqqani Network could once again make Afghanistan a safe-haven for terrorists including al-Qaeda and ISIS to use as a launchpad to attack the West.**
- **The Abbottabad operation in Pakistan that found and eliminated Osama bin Laden demonstrated the effectiveness of counter-terrorism cooperation and resilience.**
- **Women need to be given the same opportunities as men to serve in combat positions in the military.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

LP: Leon Panetta

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to the former Defence Secretary of the United States, Leon Panetta, who also served as the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in President Barack Obama's administration and was the White House Chief of Staff in the Bill Clinton administration. Secretary Panetta co-founded The Panetta Institute for Public Policy with his wife Sylvia to help provide a platform for people to engage in public service and strengthen democracy. He is the author of Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace.

Secretary Panetta, thank you for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*, it's a huge honour to have you on the podcast.

LP: Good to be with you.

SG: There are so many important issues to discuss with you. But let's start with the most immedi-

ate, pressing concern, and that is Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We are seeing an escalation in the conflict with the Russian military systematically destroying infrastructure, even targeting schools and hospitals and transportation hubs. It's resulted in the deaths of civilians and has contributed to Europe's biggest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. What do you believe is Vladimir Putin's end goal in this conflict?

LP: Well, I'm sure that whatever his goal is, now, it wasn't the goal that he had in mind, when he began the invasion. It's pretty clear that he thought that the invasion would proceed very rapidly, that they would be able to capture the capital, that the government would fall, and that Russia would be in charge of Ukraine. That did not happen, as we all know, due to the bravery of the Ukrainians, and also the unity of the United States and our NATO allies, not only in applying sanctions, but also in providing arms to the Ukrainians. So, as a result of that, I think Putin is trying to decide just exactly what his goal is going to be. Because, in effect, phase one has concluded, and Russia has failed to achieve the mission that they embarked on.

And so now the question remains, does he engage in a siege warfare, where he just totally destroys the country? Does he retreat to the areas in the east with a hope that he can, at the very least, maintain control of the Donbass area? I think that if I had to guess, that he's really trying to feel his way, because the Russian army has been depleted, and they're trying to rebuild and reinforce it. They're in the middle of conscripts going into the army, they're not sure what kind of performance they'll get out of these conscripts. And so I really think that right now, he's hoping that he can at least be able to get something out of all of the deaths that have taken place, all of the Russians that have been killed, all of the failures that they've endured, that in the very least he can achieve at least some of the Ukrainian territory. I think that's probably what he's focused on right now.

SG: Is there anything that you think needs to be done that is currently not being done to try and prevent Russia from either creating further problems in Ukraine or potentially escalating it to other theatres?

LP: Well, as a former Secretary of Defence, I really think this is an opportunity that hopefully won't be passed over because the reality is that the Russians are not only retreating from their positions, they're trying to rebuild and regroup as an army. And we shouldn't allow that to happen. The Ukrainians can't allow that to happen. So, this is an opportunity, if we can provide sufficient arms to the Ukrainians, not just javelins and Stinger missiles, but ammo, as well as drones, as well as hopefully S300s and S400s, and whatever is needed to be able to go after both artillery and missile sites. I think if we're able to provide significant arms to the Ukrainians, that the Ukrainians themselves, are going to be able to keep pushing and putting pressure on the Russians. And frankly, that is the best course of action right now, because the only thing Putin understands, is force. He doesn't understand 'pretty please,' he understands force. And that's what Ukrainians have to do.

SG: Speaking about pressure and force, there is a lot of talk about the role of China, and what Beijing could do to bring an end to the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Both President Putin and President Xi of China, they enjoy strong relations, they have met, I believe, about 38 times in the last 10 years, which is even more remarkable based on the fact that we've had the pandemic for the last couple of years. Do you think China is willing to get involved and get Putin to back out of Ukraine because they seem to be oscillating a lot in the last couple of months?

LP: I think that's probably a good way to say it, which is that China is not quite sure what they

should do in the situation. They've seen how Putin has become a pariah. They've seen the terrible destruction and brutality that the Russians have shown. They've seen the failure of the invasion. They've seen the fact that the world is unified in terms of sanctions against Russia. And I think President Xi is trying to tread very carefully here. And he knows that it would not be in China's interests, if China and he become a pariah in the world, like Russia. He certainly doesn't want to receive the kind of sanctions that Russia is under, which would harm the Chinese economy. And he's making an effort, obviously, to try to spread his influence around the world, he's trying to do that through the Belt and Road Initiative, through diplomacy, through investments in other countries. But if he's a pariah, if he's simply someone who's trying to help Putin kill people, I don't think that's what China really wants at this point. So, I guess the best way to say it is they are proceeding very carefully, they may use rhetoric to support Putin and Russia, but I do not see them taking the kind of actions that could result in the sanctions and retribution that will harm China and the Chinese economy.

SG: One related theme to all of this is the perception of the haphazard withdrawal by the West from Afghanistan in 2021 motivated countries like Russia and China to be more assertive, globally. In their mind, they think that there is a decline of the West taking place. Do you believe that even in a small way that the fallout from Afghanistan has emboldened Russia and China?

LP: Well, I think what has happened over a period of several administrations, particularly in the Trump administration, but several administrations, Putin and for that matter Xi, sensed weakness on the part of the United States. Obviously, Putin is a bully, he'll take action as a bully if he thinks he can get away with it, and if he senses weakness, that's when he will act. And so that's why, in sensing weakness on the part of the United States, he went into Georgia, he went into Crimea, he went into Syria, he went into Libya, and he conducted a bold cyber-attack against the United States. And I honestly think that when he looked at what happened with Afghanistan, and the mistakes that were made there, that he again assumed weakness on the part of the United States, distrust among our allies, and for that reason, took advantage of it by invading Ukraine. Only to find that this time, the United States and our allies were willing to unify and make clear that he would pay a price. So, I think there was a perception of weakness on the part of both Russia and China, they were trying to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of United States leadership. But I also think that at the present time that President Biden, the United States, and our allies are doing exactly what is necessary, which is to unify, come together, and make clear that we are unified in opposition to Russia. And for that matter, it's the same message that ought to go to China, that ought to go to North Korea, and that ought to go to Iran. That the United States and our allies, if we are unified, can ensure that if these adversaries get aggressive, they will pay a price.

SG: Absolutely. Sticking with Afghanistan, we are seeing the fact that the Haqqani Network, which is a prescribed terrorist group globally, part of the Taliban, are effectively now in charge of the country. Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is the Taliban interior minister, under his reign of terror, hundreds of U.S. soldiers were killed during the period that the NATO alliance was in Afghanistan. This is now the man running Afghanistan. He is close allies with al-Qaeda and there is this concern that al-Qaeda is showing signs of regrowth with an increase of messages.

Does it worry you, sir, that the Haqqanis are running Afghanistan and what that could actually mean for security in the region, and potentially, the fact that you could have foreign fighters and other terrorist groups re-emerging in this theatre that caused so much havoc in our lives, pre-9/11, and even post-9/11?

LP: It concerns me a great deal. I think it's tragic what has happened in Afghanistan. Both as CIA

director and Secretary of Defence, I was very aware of what the Haqqanis were doing in killing our troops. And the fact that the Haqqanis are now in charge, again, in Afghanistan, the Taliban is in charge of Afghanistan. After all, the one lesson we learned from 9/11, was to try to make very certain that Afghanistan would never again, be controlled by the Taliban and become a safe haven for terrorism. That was one of the missions, in going into Afghanistan. Unfortunately, that mission has not been achieved.

And the result is that right now, Afghanistan is a haven for terrorists. Al-Qaeda will regroup in Afghanistan, ISIS will find some kind of safe haven, in Afghanistan. I think there is a real danger, that terrorism can not only reorganise itself. But will use the opportunity to have Afghanistan as a base from which to conduct attacks, not only in the region, but against the United States. I think the situation in Afghanistan is a real threat to not only our national security, but to the security of other countries.

SG: Absolutely. And as director of the CIA, as well as when you were US Secretary of Defence, you had to deal with the conundrum of Afghanistan and Pakistan on almost a daily basis, you faced a lot of challenges. One in particular, was the terrorist attack on Camp Chapman in Khost, Afghanistan in 2009. When the al-Qaeda terrorist Humam al-Balawi blew himself up with a massive bomb, which killed seven CIA personnel. One of the worst tragedies in the history of the agency. You spoke about this in great detail in your memoirs, but I thought what was significant was that you chose to talk about it in your prologue. I think I understand the reasons for this, but I'm interested in your perspective, why you chose to start your autobiography that way.

LP: Well, in many ways, what happened at Khost, which was a tragedy, we lost the seven officers and had many others who were wounded. A suicide bomber, who was really a double agent blew himself up as a result and, you know, caused real tragedy for the CIA, we lost, probably, as many officers as we've ever had, and those stars are now on the wall at the CIA and Langley. But what happened was that the CIA, in reaction to what happened at Khost—in many ways it reinvigorated the CIA, to really go after not only those who had set up the suicide bomber but go after bin Laden and make sure that we did everything necessary to try to locate bin Laden and go after him. So, in many ways, what happened at Khost, as tragic as it was, became a tremendous inspiration to the CIA and to the military, to not stop the mission of going after bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and those involved in 9/11. And that's why I wanted to use that at the beginning to show that that event, in many ways, was the real inspiration for what ultimately happened with the mission that went after bin Laden and brought him to justice.

SG: And it was a very powerful story. And I want to come to the bin Laden operation in a second. But one other aspect about the Khost attack was that Humam al-Balawi was supposed to provide information about the deputy of al-Qaeda at the time, Ayman al-Zawahiri. He seemed to play that game of turning Balawi around and basically become the suicide bomber who caused all that devastation. Is there a reason why it's been difficult to get Ayman al-Zawahiri? Because he's still out there, in fact, only recently, he's issued a message, which is proof that he's actually alive because he's spoken about recent events. And does it concern you that he still is able to get that oxygen of publicity and taunt the West and potentially use that for recruitment?

LP: There's no question al-Zawahiri is the successor to bin Laden. But at the same time, he really doesn't have the stature of a bin Laden. He is someone who's been ill, has not been located in a place where he can really exercise real leadership with al-Qaeda, he has been in hiding, and no question he's been in successful hiding. But in many ways, that's also an indication that he really has lacked the kind of leadership capability to really pull al-Qaeda together, to become a threat

again.

But having said that, I think it is really important for the United States and our allies to continue the search for al-Zawahiri. Because one of the one of the successful things we did as a result of 9/11 is that we targeted the leadership of al-Qaeda. And we did it pretty successfully, using our operations and using the kind of counter-terrorism operations that we developed very capably between the intelligence people and the military, especially Special Forces. So, I think we want to continue the effort to try to locate al-Zawahiri, I think ultimately, we will, one way or the other. After him, we have to continue to target those who would succeed al-Zawahiri as well.

The point is, the more we can go after their key leadership, the more we undermine their ability to be able to organise and conduct the kind of attacks that have killed innocent men, women, and children.

I've often had the same thoughts of where the hell al-Zawahiri is located because we were ultimately successful with bin Laden. I'm really surprised. Either al-Zawahiri is very ill and is operating in a situation that is very difficult to penetrate. But at some point, we'll get a break.

SG: Well, it could happen, because I think he is being protected by the Haqqanis. And I think that it's interesting how he went quiet for the last 18 months and then suddenly post-Haqqani takeover he's churning out all these messages suddenly, and that could actually lead to his exposure.

LP: I think that's right, whether it's through his couriers or whether it's through the sounds in whatever tapes he's doing, we'll figure it out one way or the other.

So, terrorism remains a real threat to the United States and to the world. And we've had a lot of metastasis with al-Qaeda. We have ISIS. We've got branches of al-Qaeda, not only in Somalia, but also Boko Haram in North Africa. So, there are a lot of terrorist groups that we're continuing to confront. And they have one goal, which is to kill people in the West and that's why they remain one of our national security threats that we cannot stop going after.

SG: Absolutely. And I think it's so important to remind everybody that transnational terrorism has not gone away. And just because of other pressing concerns, there still remains the threat from al-Qaeda, from ISIS, and other groups that may emerge. As you very rightly pointed out,

I said, we'd go back to the issue about bin Laden and Abbottabad. I think the whole world knows that you were the CIA director at the time of that operation that successfully eliminated the head of al-Qaeda. What struck me the most in your memoirs is just how humble you are about your own role. Of course, there are many actors involved in this, but a lot of people I've spoken to have said that you were actually absolutely pivotal to convincing President Obama to sanction what would become Operation Neptune Spear, and that you were also a very reassuring and calm presence, as the operation unfolded.

Maybe this is a dynamic about leadership. But how were you able to firstly, keep things so cool under pressure? And at any point did you contemplate the consequence if the operation had failed? Because this was one of the most daring military operations in American history, there was no take two. So, I am just curious to get your perspective on that.

LP: Well, it is without question, a very proud moment for me to have been a part of that operation. And the reason it was successful is because there were a lot of dedicated intelligence officers who were involved in the search for bin Laden, who looked at every potential possibility to try to locate him. I mean, after all, when I established the task force at CIA, it had been almost 10 years, and there was simply no lead as to where bin Laden was located. But thanks to that task force, and thanks to our intelligence capabilities, we were able ultimately to locate the couriers for bin Laden and establish not only a name but a face. And that really was kind of a breakthrough.

And then, obviously, we proceeded to do a lot of surveillance over this compound that we were able to locate. And although there was a lot of evidence that it might well be the location of bin Laden—there was a mysterious family on the third floor; there was this individual who would come out every day, walk in circles, and go back in. I can remember telling the CIA, "We should get a facial ID because that could be bin Laden." They said, "There's a lot of problems; there's 18-foot walls on one side, 12-foot walls on the other side. It's very hard to do." And I remember telling them, I said, "You know, I've seen movies where the CIA can do this." We all laughed about it. But we never had 100% evidence on bin Laden.

And when the president decided to do the mission—because we were worried that it might leak that we were focused on this compound—we looked at several operations. But most importantly, I selected somebody called Bill McRaven, who was head of Special Forces, to basically develop the mission. And while some of what he proposed was rejected, it was agreed to go with a commando raid—two teams of seals going 150 miles into Pakistan, two helicopters rappelling down, going after bin Laden, getting back on the helicopters, and coming back. No question, it was a risky operation. It was risky. When we went to the National Security Council—there were a lot of members of the National Security Council, some of them had been around when the Carter helicopters went down, when we were going after our individuals who were part of the embassy that had been captured by Iran. And so, there was some legitimate concern about that.

But I think I remember when the president asked me what I thought, I said, "Mr. President, I have an old formula I used when I was in Congress, which was when I was facing a tough decision, pretend I was talking to an average citizen in my district and saying, 'if you knew what I knew about this issue, what would you do?' And that helped me make decisions." I said, "In this instance, if I told the average citizen that we had the best evidence on the location of bin Laden since Tora Bora, I think they would say we have to go. And that's what I'm recommending to you, Mr. President."

And to the credit of President Obama, he made a very risky and tough decision. We were nervous about the operation, obviously. You have two helicopters at night going into Pakistan. And particularly when one of the helicopters—because it was hot that day, the air came up and stalled one of the helicopters, and it came down, thank God, nobody was hurt. And I remember asking Bill McRaven, "What's happening?" Because that's one of those moments where you really are concerned that the mission may be falling apart. And I remember—he never missed a beat—he said, "We're going on with the mission, we have backup helicopters coming in, we're going to breach through the walls, and we're going to continue the mission."

I remember that very clearly, because it told me that they were going to continue to fight to get it done. And so, a lot of credit here belongs to obviously the intelligence officials, but also to the Special Forces, the seals that went on that mission, and to Bill McRaven. This was really a mission where we really pulled it together. And it was important because we sent a message to the world that nobody attacks the United States of America and gets away with it.

SG: Well, you definitely can be exceptionally proud of that operation. And, again, it's just an important testament to your leadership that this was able to be done. One aspect that attracted a lot of interest at the time was the location in Abbottabad, which is not somewhere in the tribal areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It's an urban centre, it's right next door to Pakistan's military academy, their version of West Point. There's always been this concern that how much did the Pakistani security establishment know about bin Laden's whereabouts? Obviously, you didn't consult them prior to the operation, and they only found out afterwards. Do you think that Pakistan's military was playing a double game? Was that a concern in why they were not consulted?

LP: Well, that's a question that has turned over and over in my mind for a lot of years. I honestly don't think that officials at a high level were aware of the location of bin Laden. But when you look at Abbottabad and where this compound was located, it was three times the size of other compounds: 18-foot walls on one side, 12-foot walls on another side, 7-foot wall on the third floor. And they were going 90 miles away to make phone calls, they had very high security. Abbottabad, as you've mentioned, is this kind of…it's almost a resort-type area, because it's in the mountains. But it is the location of their West Point; it's the location of an intelligence centre as well. And at one point, when we were doing surveillance, a military helicopter—a Pakistani military helicopter—actually went right over the compound. So, I have to believe that they were aware that something was happening at that compound. And I would not be surprised if some of the local military or intelligence officials knew exactly what was happening at that compound. But I have also never been able to establish that people at a high level really knew that that was the case.

SG: That's very interesting. If we sort of look at what then took place after that, President Obama appointed you US Secretary of Defense, which was, of course another high-pressure job to take on. And in terms of that, during your tenure, what we saw was the emergence of what is now known as the Quad, which is the strategic security dialogue involving the United States, Australia, India, and Japan. You've spoken about the importance of the Quad in the past. How do you see it evolving and developing in terms of supporting global security?

LP: Well, as we've discussed, there are a number of danger points in the world. We've talked about war in Ukraine. We've talked about Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, terrorism, the Middle East. I think ultimately our ability to deal—and I say "our" ability, the United States and our allies throughout the world—our ability to deal with those threats requires that we do what we've seen done in Ukraine, which is to unify and to come together, and to make clear that we are going to make sure that a line is drawn with regards to those that would try to take advantage of it.

And I see that in the Pacific, with regards to China. I think it's critical for us to have strong allies. I think the Quad is a good foundation, based on nations like Australia, India, South Korea, Japan. Add to that our ability to work with the ASEAN countries, those other Asian countries that have developing economies. If we could develop a security alliance with them as well, and also make it a trade alliance that is strong, I think that represents a real force in dealing with China. And it gives us the ability to deal with China from strength, not from weakness, but from strength. So, I'm a believer that alliances are the key to dealing with these threats that I talked about. I think we need to build the Middle East alliance, moderate Arab nations, Israel, to confront both terrorism and Iran. I think we need to build and strengthen obviously NATO, which is incredibly important in terms of the security of Europe, particularly with regards to Russia. I think we need to do that in Latin and Central America, I think we need to do that in Africa. I think alliances are the key to our ability to provide security in the future.

SG: Of course, maybe it's a biased opinion, but I don't think there's any greater alliance than the

NATO one that has led at the forefront of so many different challenges throughout history. The other aspect of your time as Defense Secretary is that you helped end the US military's long-time ban on women serving in combat. And you spoke about being moved by seeing women in various sensitive positions that protect America but by extension also contribute to global security. We know that there were many women in the CIA during your tenure as Director that contributed to tracking down Osama bin Laden. In 2022, how much progress have we made in creating an environment for women to be in important positions of intelligence and defence? And what more can be done?

LP: Well, you know, I'm really proud to say that a great deal of progress has been made to give women and, for that matter, to give people, regardless of their colour or their creed or their beliefs or their gender, the ability to serve their country. And I'm a believer in that. I think everybody—I guess because I'm the son of Italian immigrants—but I really believe that everybody ought to have the opportunity to be able to serve their country. And I saw that first-hand with the military that I was responsible for as Secretary. These were men and women who really were able to work together, and to serve, and to fight bravely on the battlefield. And I saw that happening. And when it was brought to my attention that women were prevented from being in combat positions, that's when I went to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and I said, "Look," I said—he indicated that we might be lessening standards if we allowed women to be in combat, and I said, "We don't have to lessen standards. But if there are women that can meet those standards, they ought to have the opportunity to be able to be in combat, and Special Forces, and Green Berets, and all the other areas that they were prevented from being a part of." And Martin Dempsey, who was Chief of Staff, went to the other military leaders, they looked at it, and they came back and said, "You know, we ought to proceed to give them that opportunity." And we did. And now women are very much a part, not only of our combat forces, but are part of our Special Forces as well.

And I think that sends a very important signal, to the American people, and for that matter, the world—that we're a country, where, regardless of where you come from, if you want to serve your country, we think you ought to have that chance. What we've seen—it's very interesting—what we've seen in Ukraine is something that I've always believed, as Secretary, even going back to my own military experience, that if you have a fighting force that's made up of those who really believe in their country and believe in making sure that they protect their country and are willing to fight and die for their country, I'll take that kind of warrior anytime, over somebody who's kind of ordered to go in and attack somebody else for no reason. I'll take the warrior who is truly dedicated. And that's what we have right now, in the US military, is a broad cross section of our country serve in our military. And I think that's healthy for our democracy. I also think it's healthy for our national security.

SG: And it also makes us much stronger as a united force as well. You deserve huge credit for that. So, one final question, sir, is you run the Panetta Institute for Public Policy in California. What are you currently focusing on at the institute? And what would you like to focus on in the future?

LP: Well, we've talked a lot about national security. I have to tell you one of my concerns…one of the key threats to our national security is a potential dysfunction in our democracy. And if we allow partisanship and polarisation in this country to divide our leadership, to make our democracy unable to function, and to deal with the issues that have to be dealt with, it will hurt our national security, and it will hurt our ability to survive as a democracy. What happened on January 6, with the attack on the US Capitol, is really a wake-up call for this country, that we cannot allow that to happen. We can't allow our democracy to be stopped by a mob. So, it is very important to come together and work.

The work at the Panetta Institute is to try to inspire young people to become part of our democracy, to serve, and to be willing to dedicate their lives to public service, because that's how a democracy is going to survive. You know, leadership may have its failures today, but new generations will become leaders in the future. And if they believe in what this country is all about, if they believe in service, if they believe in the values that are important to our country—freedom and the dignity of each individual, and the ability to self-govern, the freedoms that we have as a people—those are the values that make us a great country. I think that's what keeps our democracy strong. So, the purpose of our institute is to try to make sure that we're inspiring future leaders of our country, who will bring the right values to the responsibility of leadership.

SG: I think it's such an important point to conclude on about democracy is actually what defines us. It is the cornerstone of our culture, our value system. It's also what makes us strong and helps us to defend our allies, as opposed to those that seek to undermine it and try and, I guess, promote a more dystopian future, as we're trying to see what Russia is doing in Ukraine. Secretary Panetta, it's been such a privilege and honour to have you on the NATO *DEEP Dive* podcast. Thank you for giving up so much of your time for this.

LP: Well, thank you. I've enjoyed this. You've touched on an awful lot of very important issues. I hope that people understand that it is absolutely essential that we discuss these kinds of issues, and that ultimately, we come together in trying to make sure that we protect our country and protect the world from what we've seen happen in Ukraine. I think this is a pivotal moment. It's a very pivotal moment. What happens in Ukraine can tell us a lot about the 21st century and what it's going to look like. And if it goes right, if we're able to undermine Putin and Russia, I think it will strengthen democracies for the future. That's a very important goal to be achieved.

SG: A very important goal that we all need to strive for. Thank you again, sir, for taking this time. It's been a complete privilege.

LP: Thank you very much.

Leon Panetta's bio

Leon Panetta is a former Defence Secretary of the United States and former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in President Barack Obama's administration. He was also the White House Chief of Staff in the Bill Clinton Administration. He is the co-founder of the Panetta Institute for Public Policy and the author of Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace.

Episode 14 - Mohammed Naqvi and Documenting Extremism, April 2022

Key Reflections

- **Documentaries have served as primary source information vividly depicting the challenges of radicalisation and extremism permeating through society.**
- **The documentary *Insha'Allah Democracy* on former Pakistani military ruler, Pervez Musharraf, evolved from being about a former key figure in the War on Terrorism to becoming political satire of a man who courted the West whilst at the same time tacitly supporting terrorist groups.**
- **The radical Islamist group Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP) has grown in popularity in Pakistan and become a political force. Under the pretence of blasphemy, its supporters have murdered secular politicians and foreigners and have been courted by the now-ousted former prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan.**
- **Documenting extremist groups and their leaders, whilst being objective, still inevitably carries risks, threats, and repercussions. Some of the entities being filmed like the notoriety.**
- **It is important to challenge the post-9/11 rhetoric that there was a war between religions and cultures. Much of this was due to failing to learn from lessons of history.**
- **Afghanistan had a burgeoning civil society, which included outstanding female journalists. It was terrifying how quickly Afghanistan collapsed to the Taliban in 2021.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

MN: Mohammed Naqvi

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Mohammed Ali Naqvi, a Pakistani-American filmmaker whose films explore themes of human rights, social justice, politics, identity and radicalisation. Mohammed's documentaries - which include *Among the Believers*, *The Accused: Damned or Devoted?* And *Insha'Allah Democracy* - have received multiple awards. Mohammed also served as Co-Executive Producer of the Netflix docuseries *Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror*.

Please note, this podcast was recorded just prior to the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan which led to his removal as the Prime Minister of Pakistan on 9 April 2022.

Mohammed Naqvi, thank you for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

MN: Thank you so much and happy to join you.

SG: It's a pleasure.

You are a documentary filmmaker who has looked at a lot of issues to do with what's gone on inside Pakistan for many years and your documentaries are primary source information for some of the challenges that have occurred inside the country. One documentary that stood out for me was the one that you did several years ago called *Inshallah Democracy* where you spent time with the former military ruler of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf. Why did you want to focus on him for this documentary?

MN: That had a very long production process. When I first started filming Musharraf, it was in 2010, and it was literally a few months after his ouster from Pakistan and when he went into self-exile, so I went and met him in Dubai. And I can tell you that I was interested, obviously, in Pakistan's own journey towards democracy and building a burgeoning, stronger civil society in government, and I thought that Musharraf would be such an interesting character to follow. One, because he was a military dictator, and two, he also played such an important role on the global stage. And, as luck would have it, with US intervention and foreign policy, they had historically backed some of our military dictators in Pakistan. And Musharraf was no exception. And I had good access to him. And I thought that this would be a great opportunity to get to know him personally and get to know what were some of the challenges that he had to face on the ground.

But what was interesting about this documentary, compared to the other documentaries that I've done, is that it's somewhat of a political satire. And it's also a first-person documentary in the sense that I'm in this film compared to my other films. And a lot of that had to do with me forming a close relationship with Musharraf, becoming friendly with him, and realising the many flaws that he had as a leader. And a lot of the reasons that I had actually supported him maybe in my youth were naive. So, it kind of became my own journey of political maturation. And essentially, it became a story of me voting for the first time in my life. And I should point out to you, that was the narrative of the film. I was basically following Musharraf, while he was attempting a political comeback, and running for election back in 2013, and post 2013. And so, that is basically how that concept first started.

SG: I was going to say it was very interesting seeing you filming that. And as you said, you were in the documentary itself. And you followed him around, not just in the United Arab Emirates, but also when, as you said, he was trying to make his political comeback in Pakistan, as well. You mentioned a lot of the flaws that he had, which is interesting, because I also noticed that your own opinion of him began to evolve and change in the documentary. What do you think were his main flaws?

MN: Well, he was a military dictator and believe it or not, there is no such thing as a benevolent dictator, in my opinion. And my story, why I decided to put myself in the film was, now purely speaking from a filmmaker and a storyteller standpoint, I was changing while I was filming him. And I kind of found that compelling because my own opinion of him was unravelling. I bought the hook, line, and sinker narrative of enlightened moderation that he had sold to the world when he first took office, and he first joined the war on terror.

For me as a Shiite minority security was important. Because I grew up in the 90s, where sectarian violence targeted a lot of people. Shiites, for example, many people in my community in the early 90s, in fact, one of my uncle's was murdered, he was targeted by one of these militant groups. And when Musharraf came on, and he was this kind of secular, for lack of a better word, quote unquote, 'moderate leader,' who was pushing enlightened, moderation, and security. I bought that. I thought that was great and I wanted to support him.

But as I got to know him personally, once he was out of office, I saw a lot of that was kind of a performance. It was a bit of a facade, because even though on a personal level, he might be secular, and he might not be hard-line or supporting right wing fanatics, he kind of was supporting those groups, or at least as he said, in my documentary, turning a blind eye to them and using Taliban factions and militant groups as assets, geostrategic assets, in Afghanistan. And he continued to do that. That was for me how the penny dropped. And there's a scene in the film, where I'm following him, and he goes to Washington, DC, right after Osama bin Laden has been caught in Abbottabad [Pakistan], 2011. And he meets with many power brokers in, in the States, various senators and congressmen. And he wants to shore up their support for his return to Pakistan, in the sense that, if he's going to run for election in Pakistan, he wants the Americans to tacitly support him and back his campaign. And to also to clear his name that he never knew that Osama bin Laden was actually in Pakistan for the last five years, because some of those last five years would mean that it was during his tenure, and he wanted to clear his name.

And I was shocked at what I was seeing. Where he was continuing to, basically, privilege foreign policy and American people's interests over some of the people in Pakistan and their interests. And he was playing this double game of being part of the War on Terror, and fighting against militancy, but then, at the same time, tacitly also supporting these militant groups in Afghanistan against India. And he didn't realise that the fallout from that was increased militancy within our own borders within Pakistan. And that was really how my opinion totally changed for him, and I lost total faith in him as a leader.

SG: I remember that scene that you were talking about, where he had gone to the United States, and he was meeting people there, and basically wanting them to back him to return to power. And I was aghast myself to see somebody who wanted external support to enhance his own position inside Pakistan. So, it just shows you that I guess, if you can keep following somebody and documenting them, they will provide some quite revolutionary aspects of their life, which are also quite disturbing at the same time.

One other aspect I thought was curious about your documentary was that he seemed very keen to still exhibit a sense of grandeur of influence, almost like guiding you on occasions to film him looking at a photograph and getting you to then ask him about it, or even him reading out Facebook messages. Do you feel that he had become conscious that he was no longer relevant? That at one time this was the most important person in the War on Terrorism, and now, he was almost a forgotten footnote in what had happened to do with al-Qaeda and the Taliban and the whole dynamic of counter-terrorism.

MN: Oh, yes, absolutely. That is when I had come to begin filming him, and I don't know many dictators, but I'd imagine that they all kind of full of themselves and Musharraf was no exception. But, in many ways, maybe that's why I can assume he possibly even gave me the access and the permission to actually film with him this much, and with this much access, because I was actually still paying attention to him at a time when the rest of the world wasn't. And so, that's true, I agree with

what you're saying.

SG: Then you had also interviewed him when he was in Pakistan, where effectively he was under house arrest. His attempt to rehabilitate his political career ultimately, had failed. Do you feel that he was naive in thinking that he could go back to Pakistan and that he actually had standing and support? Is it one of those situations where you're almost deluded when you're outside the country, or people are maybe telling you you're, you're a hero, and you're worshipped? And if you come back, you'll be garlanded and you'll be treated with huge reverence and respect? Do you think there was a sense of naivety?

MN: Certainly. I think with Musharraf, he was surrounded by a lot of 'yes-men' and people who kind of projected an image of his own grandiosity and how much he was still loved. Having said that, to be fair, there are a lot of diehard Musharraf fans and fanatics. I was a big supporter of his and that's why I made this film because in a strange way, Musharraf brought about, if I'm being semi-optimistic, Pakistan's own journey towards democracy, that he kind of solidified that. He hopefully is one of the last dictators. Of course, you can counter-argue and say, 'well, the military establishment is still running the show in Pakistan, they just don't have to do a coup anymore, they can just use a puppet person like Imran Khan.' Yes. And I would say, yes, there's merit to that argument.

But with Musharraf. The fact that we had our first civilian to civilian transfer government, at that time in 2013, and then, of course, subsequently, in 2018, that is at least something. It is like small steps, but these are big things, because we've never really had that since the inception of our country, right. And I think to traverse this specific period of Pakistan's own journey towards self-rule, it was an interesting person, Musharraf, to guide us through this specific time period in Pakistan's history.

And I was lucky enough to be there and to document it and Musharraf's own journey, which ultimately led to failure, became a secondary arc and story to follow. Because beyond that, the bigger arc was my story. And what I mean by my story is me going through my own political maturation process, not falling for personality driven politics, or running to the military every time that there is an issue or when we feel threatened by safety and security. That old naivete I transcended in myself, and there are a lot of other people like me, who lived in a sequestered, privileged bubble and we all went through that same journey, and I wanted to represent that journey.

SG: Well, you did an excellent job in representing that journey.

One final aspect on Musharraf is what do you think his legacy has been in Pakistan that endures, both maybe negatively and positively?

MN: That's an interesting question. Well, I guess you can say, one of the biggest legacies, I think, not just in Pakistan, but the world over is that he actually was one of the architects of the War on Terror. He was part of it, he was very much part of the U.S. coalition on the War on Terror. And he made Pakistan, it wasn't just him, frankly, in a strange way, he kind of failed upwards. And that's been kind of the legacy with Musharraf. He found himself in these leadership positions where he wasn't supposed to be the guy. He wasn't supposed to be the Army General, the Chief of Army

Staff, and he wasn't supposed to become president.

I guess he solidified Pakistan's position in fighting this specific war, and made, perhaps, some of our regional concerns more important in the international community, where people actually started caring more about Pakistan's specific interests and place in the world. Whereas I think prior to that, we were mostly ignored. Right. So, I don't know if that's necessarily Musharraf's legacy, it just happened to be just the geo-forces and politics that were happening in the world and post-9/11. But he happened to be at the helm of Pakistan leadership. So, he gets attributed with that.

SG: It's worth remembering, as you said, that maybe he wasn't meant to be in that position. You have to track back to before 9/11 and even before the coup, because Musharraf was not the highest ranking general during Nawaz Sharif's second term in office. But I believe the story is that the reason why Nawaz Sharif promoted Musharraf to Chief of Army Staff was because Musharraf was the only one who didn't lobby for it. Precisely because he didn't think he was going to get it. So, sometimes I guess fate has an odd way of thrusting people at specific times, which are very unanticipated.

MN: Yeah, he was the least likely to overthrow Nawaz Sharif in a coup, according to the Sharif brothers, that's why they chose him. And he was fourth in line or something. He wasn't supposed to and then and lo and behold, the West as you saw, what happened is history.

SG: Absolutely, hashtag irony there.

MN: Yeah, exactly.

SG: Another one of your documentaries, Mo, which was fascinating, it was riveting, mesmerising in almost a disturbing way I would say is *The Accused: Damned or Devoted*? where you spend a lot of time focusing on this group called the Tehreek-e-Labbaik (TLP). A group that, at that time, maybe people outside of Pakistan had not heard of, but is definitely getting global notoriety now. Tell me about why you wanted to do this documentary.

MN: So, the *BBC Storyville*, which is *BBC Four's* feature documentary strand, had approached me to make a documentary on the blasphemy law in Pakistan, very open ended. And, as I'm sure you're aware, it's extremely dangerous for anyone to make anything on the blasphemy law, or even criticise it publicly, because you could be putting yourself, your family, and everyone in danger. We saw what happened to Salmaan Taseer, Governor of Punjab [in Pakistan], just for standing up for Asia [Bibi] (Christian woman accused of blasphemy), 10 years ago. His own security guard murdered him and then later became a martyr by the same group, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan.

So, when they first approached me, I declined. I just thought it was too much of a dangerous project to take on. And then it was the Fall [Autumn] of 2017, I think in September or October, I found myself in Islamabad. And it coincided at the same time when the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan essentially shut all of Islamabad down, led by their leader, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, who was one of

the main subjects in my documentary, and the leader of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik party. Him and his followers descended upon Islamabad, because there was this oath taking provision that was being amended and was recommended by the law minister at that time in Parliament, that they wanted to bring some changes to the language in taking an oath.

The inference that the Tehreek-e-Labbaik got from that was that it kind of was diminishing the glory of Prophet Muhammad and was hence blasphemous. And what they wanted was for parliament to retract this amendment, and basically have the law minister resign and have him be handed over to the Tehreek-e-Labbaik party. And even though Parliament had passed this resolution, they shut down all of Parliament, they shut down the city, and for three days, everything was at a standstill, I remember because I was supposed to fly back to Karachi, but instead, I was stuck in Islamabad, because airports and everything were closed. And then on the third day, the army got together and basically appeased the Tehreek-e-Labbaik and all of its [hundreds of thousands of] followers. And they even gave them 1,000 rupees [$5 USD] each, all the people who were protesting and forcing the parliament to close down.

And that enraged me—because I'd seen many times Pakistan, my country, fall prey to the political ambitions of despots. And here we had another one, and he was using Islam as a veneer. And I wanted to expose Rizvi for this. And I didn't want our country to continue to cower or kowtow to these kinds of people. Here was a cleric who did not speak for me, he didn't speak for other Muslims. And he only spoke for his own political ambitions, that this is what it was. And so, I decided to take on the project, and I decided to make him my focus, because that way, it would also kind of provide a cover for embarking on this project. And considering how dangerous it was to do this project…it wouldn't be a victim-driven project. I mean of course we feature people, victims, in this film too, but we wanted to feature more the perpetrator, because we didn't want to put any of our victims or anyone…any of those people in danger. We wanted to hear straight from the horse's mouth and give him a fair chance and see what his thoughts are and see how he defends the blasphemy law and why he's so popular. Just to kind of explore that.

SG: You spoke about the danger of this, and I wanted to ask you more about it, because are you not concerned about your own safety and security based on just how fundamental the TLP are and how motivated their cadres are on the streets?

MN: Certainly. One good thing is that all the subjects that were featured in my documentary — for example, Asia Bibi or Gulalai Ismail, the human rights activist fighting against the blasphemy law — they're all abroad. So, I feel good about that. At least, that they're not in danger. And then I also had my crew, my two specific producers who worked with me, Musharraf Shah and Moshin Abbas, both of whom were instrumental in gaining the access to Rizvi and filming with him—they're also abroad. I go back and forth, and I mostly am abroad. And in a way, although I've screened *The Accused* around Pakistan—but in very ad-hoc and private settings, not publicly—it's still a film that is mostly shown abroad. So, I don't necessarily think that it would be safe for us to actually show the film publicly here in Pakistan, precisely because of the repercussions that could happen.

However, having said that, one of the biggest things that we had was that we attempted to be brutally neutral in projection of Rizvi and this issue. We were upfront with him, in the sense that we told him, "We'll be filming with you, and we will also be filming with some of the people who have been accused of blasphemy. And both of you would get the shot and chance to share your testimony to a global audience, and what people decide is up to them, but we're not going to falsify

anything you say. We're just going to show you as is and show you the story as is." So, we did do that. And so far, so good.

I mean, just to kind of reference with you, I did another film called *Among the Believers*, in which we also follow the cleric, Maulana Abdul Aziz, who was the head cleric of this mosque in Islamabad—militant mosque—called Lal Masjid or the Red Mosque. And when that film came out, there was an immediate reaction from his camp, because they hadn't seen the film, but they were responding to all the social media coverage that the film was getting in Western film festivals, like at Tribeca, and in Amsterdam, and wherever the film was being launched. And they specifically said that this director lied to us, and he's made a film insulting Islam, and basically, he's a kafir. It was all made up. It wasn't true at all; they hadn't even seen the film. So, they were just having a knee-jerk reaction as to what the press was.

I had to stop the film from distribution for a bit, I had to go back to Pakistan, and I had to show the cleric of the film. And I sat next to him, he watched the whole film, and I recorded him seeing the film. And I had him issue a statement, in which he said, "I don't find anything wrong in this film. You've just shown basically my point of view, and then you've also shown people from the other side, their point of view, about how Pakistan should be run, and whether there should be a more specific form of Sharia or Islamic law brought about. And so yeah, I mean, there's no issue. You didn't falsify anything that I had to say in this film. It's not against Islam." And I took that soundbite from him, made a short video, and released it onto the internet—onto YouTube, Facebook, all those places. Oh, I should specify, the reason I had to stop the distribution is because we started getting a lot of threats. I got a lot of specific threats…death threats, specifically, through social media where they wanted me dead and that I should watch my back. And so, I needed to handle the situation right away. And that's how we did it. And then the threats dissipated once that video went up through social media.

SG: That's very frightening, what you're conveying.

MN: Yeah. And also, my film was banned at that time in Pakistan. So, I had had some experience like this before filming with the leaders of militant groups. I mean, I've been making documentaries for the last 18 years, but if you look at the last 12 years, I've been very specific to follow the people in power, who are sometimes the oppressors. And the reason I do that is—I don't do it because I'm trying to platform these people who I obviously disagree with—I'm literally showing them as is, and they're using all this rope to hang themselves, if you will, obviously, right? But more so than that, because I work for a global audience, and a lot of the documentary audience is international and Western, I feel weird about going after some of the victims and featuring their stories—of course, I feature them in my film, too—but what I don't want to do is poverty porn. And what I don't want to do is, just from an ethical standpoint, get people who are already victims—to whom I have a lot more privilege and much more power…even though I have their consent, to get them to share their story and…for me to use their story and…I just don't feel right about it. I find that exercise kind of exploitative. And it's a good thing that these kinds of movements in nonfiction filmmaking, just from an overall standpoint, that that's happening, and things are changing.

So, for me, filming with the leader of the Taliban, or a former dictator like Musharraf, or the head of TLP party, I feel a lot more comfortable filming with them—not because it's not dangerous, it's dangerous—but I feel comfortable from an ethical standpoint, because they're a lot more powerful and privileged than me. I mean, they can have me killed, if they want. And there's not much of a push-

back that I can do against that. So, I feel more open to sharing their story. And beyond that, obviously sharing it with Pakistanis in the diaspora and then Pakistanis are able to see it here, to show the truth of people like Rizvi, how hypocritical they are, and how a lot of their piety and everything that they put out is very much a performance. It's not about Islam, it's not about religion, it's about their own ambition for political power. And that's what it was. They were literally using the blasphemy law as a platform for their electoral campaign; their song, their anthem for their political party was "Vote for us to earn your place in heaven." I mean, come on. I went off on a tangent there, but yes.

SG: But you brought in some exceptionally important dynamics about your process, the filmmaking, the risks and the challenges that you face. And it sort of tracks back actually to the dynamic of the TLP that we're talking about now. Since your documentary was made on them, Rizvi has passed away, his son has taken over. The TLP has gone through some very odd machinations, in the sense that they ended up becoming a proscribed group, and then it seemed that the proscribed tag was then removed by the Imran Khan government. It almost seems to be coming across like they are able to hold the government to ransom, because you're looking at the TLP having not just staged protests, but they've committed very violent acts against the Pakistani security forces. They've murdered police officers.

There was this very disturbing incident in December of 2021 when TLP supporters lynched the Sri Lankan national, Priyantha Kumara in Sialkot. And if that wasn't bad enough, his body was set alight, and you had TLP people taking selfies with the burning body. Now, how dangerous has this group become, to the extent that they can actually influence and shape policies in Pakistan, and where does Imran Khan stand on this group? Is he needing them because he needs support to keep his government afloat? Or is this ideological? If you could perhaps explain this, because it's just so disturbing what is happening with the TLP right now.

MN: Well, when it comes to the blasphemy law specifically, and if I were to even reference the 2018 elections, a lot of the TLP supporters Imran Khan used to buttress his own political banks. And then when Asia Bibi was set free, he really had no choice but to actually get them arrested and thrown in jail and all of that. Keep in mind of course, this was once when Khadim Hussain Rizvi and some of the senior leadership of the TLP started calling out the military and started challenging them. And then you saw who really was in charge, and then they were all put in jail. And then, of course, they was set free again. I mean, how strong is the TLP? Well, it's telling that a brand-new political party, when it ran for elections, garnered up to 2.2 million votes, third-largest in Punjab. And that's extraordinary for a political party that was, I think, registered in 2017 or something, and it ran for election in 2018. And now—and it was 4% of the vote nationally—and now from what I understand, the vote back is even larger, and they actually have some candidates here in Karachi and in Sindh and in other places.

The thing about the TLP party is that even the people who were taking selfies with this abhorrent act that took place with Priyantha Kumara…it's not just TLP party. I mean, they actually have a lot of support that goes beyond just politics. It's purely from a strange ideological affinity, which, by the way, if you want to get into the history of the blasphemy law and how it was left over from the British government, and then how during Zia's years, the Zia-ul-Haq years in the '80s…1989, the mid '90s…the rule was amended to eventually include the death penalty. If you were to actually go into the whole history of that—and I'm not a religious theologian—but there are people who would argue in its implementation—the way it's been interpreted, the way it's been used—religious scholars would, which is a whole other story.

Yes, it's frightening—how much influence the Tehreek-e-Labbaik has. It seems to be growing—can they be stopped? I've seen historically, when the military decides, or the establishment decides to push back on groups, they can—they can certainly shut it down. Does the establishment back TLP? I don't know. I mean, I think your guess would be as good as anyone else's. I think, sometimes in Pakistan, the military establishment and the powers that be aren't a monolith in themselves, I think they're so themselves a myriad of different views. And there's different factions within different factions within the deep state. But it seems to be—and again, this is just based on my observation—the fact that this group still exists and hasn't been extinguished, is maybe there is some political asset that can be ascertained by our establishment for keeping them around, for keeping maybe the Nawaz brothers or the PML-N (Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz) in check or maybe keeping PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf) in check. So, who knows?

SG: Well, that's, I think, a disturbing account of what is taking place. And again, I guess history is repeating itself, where these extremist groups are seen as strategic tools to serve a political purpose, and it's not always possible to control them in the way some people may think is possible. They are like Frankenstein's monster; they will rebel.

MN: And they do. And we've seen that over and over, whether they were using Deobandi groups back in the day, or whether it's like Barelvi-backed groups. So yes, I agree.

SG: So, in the final part of this, it'd be good to get your personal take on your experience in Afghanistan, because my understanding is that you were one of the last people out from Bagram, just before or during the process of the Taliban takeover. What abiding memories did you take with you? What did you feel? What concerned you, and what continues to concern you?

MN: So, when I was brought on to co-executive produce *Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror*, which was a Netflix anthology series looking back the last 20 years, 9/11 and post-9/11, what have we learned, how have we changed? I had a very, very specific goal. It was great to be working with the rest of the team, I should mention Brian Knappenberger, who is the director of the series and Eve Marson and Lowell Bergman, who were also executive producers on the series. I was the only, you can say, well, Muslim, and someone from this part of the world, in the above the line credits from the producer and the directors on the series. And my big push was to show that despite spending trillions of dollars, there have been massive failures. And the other really big thing that I wanted to do was to dismantle the post-9/11 rhetoric that has existed—that still kind of permeates some of those stories and narratives that surround 9/11, specifically where Muslims are the evil force.

And I had the opportunity to film in Qatar, because that was…the series of talks that were taking place, negotiating the US pull-out with the Taliban and the Afghan national government. And we also got to film in Afghanistan and Pakistan, for that matter. And it was important to show and share these stories, because I wanted to transcend that binary of good versus evil. And I wanted to show that even the Taliban, and we spoke to, for example, Anas Haqqani who is Sirajuddin Haqqani's brother, and we also filmed with Suhail Shaheen. And then we also filmed with some of the other Afghan warlords like Ismail Khan, Gulbadin Hekmatyar, some of whom were part of the original mujahideen.

So, the story of 9/11—and I think that was what was really important for us to put in the series—was that it begins way before 9/11. It begins with the US' own Cold War strategy of backing these mujahideen groups, empowering them, and sending them to go do jihad against the Soviets. And once that's all done and it's accomplished, they leave, and of course, as we know, then follows a lot of civil war era until the Taliban come, historical forces that be. But I should point out that our team—and I would be remiss not to mention one of my producers on-ground in Afghanistan, Sultan Faizi, and just another assortment of amazing Afghan team that we had. We filmed with the NATO forces as they were withdrawing. We were one of the last documentary teams. This was in the summer of 2021, literally a few months before Kabul fell. We were filming in Bagram. And I knew then, and so did everyone else, how sideways this was all going to go and how bad things were going to happen. I just didn't expect that it would fall literally in the speed that it did. That was kind of terrifying and sad. But, you know, there you have it.

And it was so sad, because a lot of the people that I met on-ground and the people that we were working with, they were the first Afghan nationals, who, at least in contemporary times, there was a burgeoning civil society, they were some of the most brilliant female journalists and producers that we'd also worked with, and they'd worked with us, and now all of a sudden, overnight, they were in danger, and they didn't have any jobs, they were all fired. And they had to find ways to escape the country to save their lives. It was really, really harrowing. In fact, the last few months, we've been spending…just trying to get a lot of our crew out of Afghanistan, which, knock on wood, we've been able to do.

SG: Well, it's a testament to you and how focused you are on covering the ground truth as to what's taking place in Afghanistan and the tragedy that has befallen these poor people who are now at the mercy of the Taliban and the Haqqanis whom you mentioned.

Unfortunately, we don't have more time, Mo, but I wish we could talk to you for many more hours, because it's been riveting to talk to you. I feel like I'm actually in one of your documentaries, because you have provided a real tour de force as to what you do, how you do it, and why you do it, and the importance of it. And I'm very grateful for you spending the time to talk to us. And most importantly, please stay safe, and make sure you have protected yourself because you're covering a lot of important angles and taking a lot of risks in the process.

MN: Thank you. That's really kind of you to say, and inshallah, everything's fine. And yes, so far, so good. But yes, thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed myself here. Thanks.

SG: It's a pleasure, and we look forward to having you again in the future.

MN: Yes, me too. Thanks.

Mohammed Naqvi's bio

Mohammed Naqvi is a filmmaker whose films explore themes of human rights, social justice, politics, identity, and radicalisation. His documentaries, which include Among the Believers, The Accused: Damned or Devoted? And Insha'Allah Democracy, have received multiple awards. He is also the Co-Executive Producer of the Netflix docuseries Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror.

Episode 15 - Mary Fetchet & Sue O'Sullivan and Supporting Victims of Terrorism, May 2022

Key Reflections

- **2,977 people died on September 11, 2001, but in reality, the number of individuals impacted was actually much larger because the families and first responders were also affected. The real number is over 500,000.**
- **Canada's biggest ever terrorist attack resulted in the bombing of a transatlantic flight in 1985 in which 329 people were killed by the proscribed Khalistani terrorist group Babbar Khalsa International. Its legacy continues to linger globally.**
- **Victims of terrorism need consistent information on what's happening after an attack. Governments need to be listening to what their needs are. It's vital to build public trust, confidence, and community engagement.**
- **The victims' voice should always be at the table when decisions are made at an executive level on how to respond to an act of terrorism.**
- **Inquiries into terrorist attacks take years, which add to the trauma of family members. Sustained relationships with governmental agencies are essential as well as building the capacities to respond to the needs of those impacted.**
- **The pandemic has magnified the challenges that victims of terrorism have to endure. Many have faced isolation and unable to even attend funerals of loved ones resulting in re-traumatisation. Mental health support is very important, and victims need access to resources.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

MF: Mary Fetchet

SOS: Sue O'Sullivan

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Mary Fetchet and Sue O'Sullivan. Mary is the driving force behind VOICES, an organisation she co-founded in 2001 following the death of her son Brad at the World Trade Center during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Mary has guided the development of programmes that provide continuity of care and promote resiliency in the lives of victims' families and survivors. Sue served as the Deputy Chief of Police for the Ottawa Police Service and Canada's Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime. Throughout her law-enforcement career, Sue has continually advocated to increase the efficiency of services to victims of terrorism. Sue is also a member of the Leadership in Counter Terrorism Alumni Association, a group of senior professional executives who work together to develop best practises for international counter terrorism coordination.

Mary and Sue, very warm welcome to NATO *DEEP Dive*.

MF: It's great to be here.

SOS: Yeah, thank you for the invitation.

SG: It's a pleasure. Mary, I'd like to start with you. Your story is very personal. And it's important to hear about the terrible loss both you and your husband Frank and your children had to endure. Most people may not know what your background is when it comes to victim support. But please tell us, what got you involved in this?

MF: Well on 9/11, I was working as a clinical social worker at an outpatient mental health clinic. And back in the late '90s, I attended a conference where a woman spoke that lost her daughter in Oklahoma City bombing, which really propelled me to be interested and involved in the clinic's response. So, I did a lot of research on how they responded following the attacks on Oklahoma City. And so, when 9/11 happened, I was at work that day and received a call from my husband that Brad had called him to tell him that he was okay, that a plane had hit the first tower, and they were told to remain in the office. And what I didn't know at the time then, Brad called me at home, but I was at work at the time. So I think if we fast forward several weeks after we had the funeral and were managing thousands of people coming through our home in those few weeks, I started going into New York, and when I saw the thousands of people that were flooding into the Family Assistance Center—the second one was set up along the West Side Highway—it was then I realised the scope of the tragedy. And really as unprepared as we were to prevent the tragedy, we were also unprepared to respond to something of that scope. So that's when I became involved, and I started travelling into New York City to attend the meetings with elected officials. And then Washington, DC in the public policy realm. So, it went on from there, where then we formed the organisation that continues today to provide long-term services.

SG: Brad, of course, who is your son who tragically died on 9/11. One thing, Mary, that I was struck by in one of our conversations that we had previously is you said that 2,977 people died on September 11, 2001 but that in reality, the number was actually much larger, because you have to talk about the families, and you have to talk about the first responders. How many people were actually impacted by the September 11th attacks if we actually look at the knock-on effects of it?

MF: Well, the nearly 3,000 families lived in 90 countries. So, it wasn't a local event. And then of course, there were three locations. Much of the focus is on New York City, but there was an attack on the Pentagon and then the plane that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. So, when you think about a family, take the number of family members you have and multiply it. You know, you have siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and then of course close friends that are like family. But in the case of 9/11, in New York, the attacks were in the financial industry, so you had people… there were over 400,000 people that survived that day—they lived, worked, or went to school in the area. And then there were 90,000 that responded…I think the number is much higher than that because people came in from around the country and around the world, but that's what they have documented. And today, those people have life-threatening illnesses and serious mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, and PTSD. And then there are nearly 4,000 that have died since, of those conditions. So, it's not only the scope of it on that day, it's the rippling effect over the last 20 years. And still today, we have individuals coming forward that we've never heard from in 20 years asking for our support.

SG: The rippling effect just shows you how significant that is, some 20 years later, just how devastating that the attack has been—perhaps the most devastating terrorist attack that we will ever witness.

MF: Hopefully.

SG: Hopefully, hopefully. Sue, talk to me about how you first got involved with helping victims of terrorism and the families who lost their loved ones.

SOS: Well, I did 30 years in policing, and I've always had as one of my priorities how we're supporting victims and the impact on victims when tragedy happens. And so I remember back in 2004, we were just starting with the Leadership in Counter Terrorism Alumni Association—at the time I was in policing—and I was very privileged to be invited to the pilot program, which basically brought together senior police leaders from the Five Eyes countries to look at leadership, to look at intelligence, to look at how together as a global community, we could look at the issues around terrorism and our response to it, or obviously prevention, all that goes with the different things that need to be addressed. And so, when we started the Leadership in Counter Terrorism again, one of the things we started, a few years in, we formed an association. And a few years in, we were able to put together our first international conference with senior police intelligence, and of course, I wanted to make sure that victims were front and centre. So, when we started the first Leadership in Counter Terrorism conference, if I may use the acronym from now on "LinCT," Leadership in Counter Terrorism. So, one of the things that we wanted to ensure, so we had our first panel, we wanted to make sure that the victims' voice was at the table, as all of these key leaders were looking at how they were going to respond to, what were the priorities, what were the issues. And of course, then it became an annual event, and I am proud to say that the victims panel or the victims' voice has been included in all of the Leadership in Counter Terrorism conferences. And I think what more importantly is the LinCT alumni led to so many relationships being formed.

And one of them, I remember the first time I met Mary, I was actually at a conference Mary does every year annually in New York. And I was with a colleague of mine who was with a victim-serving agency in Canada, and she introduced me to Mary, and we never stopped from there. And it really is, I think one of the messages I've always learned is, we talk about partnerships, we talk about collaboration, but it is about relationships. And it is about bringing together the right people to make the change happen. And so that relationship with the senior police intelligence leaders and bringing it together with the victims' voice, people like Mary, who have been very much part of pushing for change in terms of how we are prepared for and how we respond to, not just in the short-term, but in the medium- and long-term. And you'll hear us both talk about that as well, because the impacts to families is so large. And when you asked Mary the question, "Who's impacted?" one of the things, when people look at who are victims, they use that word—Mary will say she's a family member—there are victims, survivors, family members, and also all of those that have been impacted. So, we look at it in terms of circles of impact.

And so, some people, and I'll just give you one example, we learned lessons learned because we have these networks in place internationally, and we're constantly looking at evergreen and learning sadly from each tragedy and what can be done and what we can learn from that. And one of the things is the importance of pre-planning the importance of understanding there are predictable challenges that need to be planned for. If you don't, then you're not going to be ready to respond. And so, when we look at impact to…the circles of impact, that's how we want people to be thinking

about their pre-planning and response strategies. And the FBI, one simple example is they created a brochure called “I was there.” There are so many tragedies that happen where people who aren’t “physically injured” don’t feel that they have the right to those services, that they need to be prioritised. And it’s just understanding the impact to all of those people in the circles of impact. And the fact that they sometimes don’t feel that they should be reaching out for the help that they need. And so that’s what we want people to be looking at, is in terms of that, but also understanding that impact goes just beyond people who obviously in the circles who suffer a loss, like Mary’s lost a loved one, family members, people who are survivors, people who are witnesses…the first responders that respond and the impact to them.

SG: So, this is exceptionally important what you are identifying and laying out, and I’m glad you also brought up the Leadership in Counter Terrorism, “LinCT,” because that is also where I was fortunate to meet the two of you several years ago in New York. One thing, Sue, I’d be keen to get your perspective on is you’re from Canada, and not many people know this, but Canada experienced one of the worst acts of terrorism all the way back in 1985, which doesn’t get much attention, and many people aren’t even aware of it. Could you talk more about that incident that took place?

SOS: Well, we’re really privileged, a colleague and a friend of mine, Susheel Gupta, he lost his mother in Air India Flight 182. There were 329 people killed, and 268 were Canadians, and charges weren’t laid until 15 years later, and the trial lasted five years. So, when we look at, as you say, Canada’s largest terrorist incident, what did we learn from that? And how are we putting into play, or how are we implementing what needs to be done in order to ensure that families…. And we had another tragedy Flight PS 752 [Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752] where many of the people on board were Canadian or had Canadian links. Susheel is now working at the RCMP. He has been a national advocate for us in this country, and it has led to relationships and links. So Susheel and the Air India Victim Families Association (AIVFA), pushed for an inquiry, and an inquiry happens many years later. And in fact, that led to something called the Kanishka Project where the families wanted some money to go to research and making change to prevent these in the future, what we can do. And so, through the Kanishka Project, I’ll let Mary speak to her involvement with the Kanishka Project and the work that Voices Center for Resilience did but…the kind of change that can happen when victims’ voices are at the table and pushing for change.

Many times, people say to me, “Well, what are the needs of victims?” I said, “Well ask them, they’ll tell you.” And it’s to make sure that you have that voice at the table, whether you’re in law enforcement, whether you’re in government, whether you’re in any agencies that are responding, to ensure that you’re listening to what their needs are, and that you make that change that happens from that. And so, Air India, and…I just had the privilege of co-presenting with Susheel at a national security conference here in Canada. And he spoke to kind of where we were with Air India Flight 182 and now the lessons of where we’re at with PS 752, and we’ve got some work to do. And so, one of the things, when we talk about, again, relationships is, it was clear that we needed to look at…I mean, let me make this statement: we have great first responders, we have great investigators, we have good Crown Prosecutors and victim service people in Canada.

What we hadn’t done is we hadn’t given them the training, the knowledge and expertise, and the capacities to respond when there are these types of tragedies, these terrorist attacks or large mass victimization incidents. And so, it’s adding those capacities to existing structures and making sure that it’s pre-planned. So, we formed about three and a half, four years ago the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police National Working Group, which Susheel is a member of. And what we

did is we looked at it in terms of pillars, so no surprises, looking at best practices research, looking at training, looking at policies and protocols, and looking at how we can be better prepared or pre-planned for and have in place the appropriate response strategies in order to support communities, families, victim, survivors when these tragedies happen.

And I'll just use one simple example, when we look at personal effects—and I know Mary can speak very personally to this—managing personal effects is so important to families and to people that suffered loss. And for example, in Las Vegas, what we would do, part of the National Working Group and our international network of INVICTIM what we did is we asked for a briefing from the FBI, who had to manage 20,000 people in the Las Vegas tragedy that fled that scene and how they managed that. It's not just to wait, it's to make sure that you're reaching out for those opportunities to learn and having a network and having those relationships allows you to do that. And then the reason I mentioned the Canadian National Working Group is that our Working Group here in Canada is pulling from all of our international colleagues, all of the lessons learned, both from the Leadership in Counter Terrorism, from organisations like Mary with Voices [Center] for Resiliency, like victim support groups, all of those, that we're all learning that it's our job to mobilise that within our own communities in our own country.

SG: These are very important perspectives that you're providing. And it's also just worth mentioning that in the Canadian inquiry that looked into the bombing of that Air India flight that you mentioned, it identified Talwinder Singh Parmar as the lead orchestrator of it, and he was part of the Khalistani terrorist group, which is a proscribed terrorist group internationally known as the Babbar Khalsa International. So, it's significant that even many decades later, the impact of that attack is of course still very prevalent amongst the minds of many Canadians.

SOS: Oh, absolutely.

SG: Mary, why is it that victims and families still don't get enough attention and support? They are so connected to that particular act of terrorism—the examples that we've spoken about, so many more. Yet it tends to almost be an afterthought, that they still have to live with the consequences of that particular act of terrorism. Why do you feel that they just don't get enough attention?

MF: Well, I think things have improved over the years, but as Sue mentioned, we actually started an organisation almost immediately after 9/11 called "Voices of September 11th." And as our work evolved, where we were not just working with 9/11 families, but we were taking what we've learned and working with them and working on our public policy and all the issues that are critical to the healing process for families, we changed the name, over a year ago to "Voices Center for Resilience" because we're working with Sue and INVICTM, and of course, our relationship with the folks at LinCT organisation and the international individuals that are working with so many organisations across the world. But I think victims need several things immediately after: they need information, they need a central hub that's going to coordinate all of their services. And it's not just mental health services; it's making sure that they're sitting at the table, and as Sue said, ask them what they need, and that's a critical question. What we did immediately after, as I mentioned, I went into New York City and started meeting with Governor Pataki, Mayor Giuliani, Hillary Clinton, and others, and we became a liaison with the families, so that when they were planning the three-month, the six-month, nine-month, year anniversary, we were able to share with them what we were hearing from families.

We also became involved in public policy. We started going to Washington, DC and asking for an investigation. We realised just reading *The New York Times* and other publications that there were systemic government failures that occurred on 9/11. Agencies were not talking among their colleagues in the same agencies, and they were not sharing information cross-agency, which led to these failures. And there was a real reluctance at the time to have any investigation because they wanted to eliminate the possibility of accountability, so to speak. And I was horrified when I started going into Washington [D.C.], which began actually with a rally of families, but when we started visiting our elected officials' offices, that they didn't understand the bigger issues. They're looking at their constituents in whatever state or community they live in, and they weren't looking at the nation or the world as a whole. So, our advocacy efforts led to not just the creation of the 9/11 Commission and the investigation, but the two years following that were required to make sure their recommendations were legislated and funded.

And then simultaneously, we were advocating for the memorial. Commemoration was very important for these families. And it took over 10 years to build the memorial in New York City, which was complicated…I think they had nine different stakeholder groups that were involved, and it was some of the most expensive real estate in New York City. So again, being at the table to guide what we wanted in the memorial as family members. And then the trial, it's ongoing. They still have not been held accountable. And we actually have agencies withholding, we think, important documents that would lead to who the real perpetrators were on 9/11.

Simultaneously, it's the mental health issues. So, these people still need to be informed, they need access to resources. They need to be sitting at the table when decisions are made that are going to affect themselves and their families. So, I think it's a holistic approach, and it's not taken care of in six months or a year. As I mentioned before, we just passed the 20th anniversary this September, and we have a flood of survivors and responders that are coming forward that we've never heard from before. Some of the survivors have never talked to another survivor in 20 years. And it's that power of the peer-to-peer network that's supervised of course by a professional that helps them heal over time. And the sooner we can do that, the better. And so, as you see, most responses are short-term. In our case, in the US, organisations are funded for a year or 18 months. Some people haven't gotten out of bed yet. So, you have to look at continuity of care and the holistic approach and providing services not just to victims, but to the responders and survivors who oftentimes are overlooked after these tragedies.

SG: Well full credit to you and a lot of your colleagues as well for pursuing justice for the victims of 9/11 and also ensuring that there was an inquiry, the 9/11 Commission, as well as a memorial that is now a key landmark in New York City to identify and remember all that we lost on that day.

MF: I didn't mention that because the museum/memorial was taking quite some time to build, on the fifth anniversary we started meeting with the families to collect photographs to create a digital archive that commemorated their lives. And we collected over 87,000 photographs that really are at the heart of the museum now. Of course, we have them on our website, but we also shared those photographs with the museum to make sure that these individuals were remembered in the way, the fitting way, that their families wanted.

SG: Absolutely. As you know, as I mentioned in the past, in our discussions that 9/11 was signifi-

cant for me, it's what got me involved in counter-terrorism in the first place. So again, full credit to everything that you've been doing to keep the memory alive of what transpired on that ill-fated day and also that we don't forget what took place.

Sue, when we look at this aspect of people being re-traumatized, as Mary was talking about the 20th anniversary [of 9/11] and the whole impact that that had, how does one deal with the fact that this problem doesn't go away for victims, for family members who lost their loved ones—that every year, when there is an anniversary, it brings back those horrific memories, if not every day, in fact. But every year is just a reminder again, for the rest of us, what these people have to deal with. What can be done to help those that are going through the re-traumatization of terrorism?

SOS: I think again, I'm going to go back to the pre-planning place to understand that proper supports…and again, Mary said, we talk about doing needs assessments, and that will change over time, and I guess, the way I look at this is in terms of a continuum. I mean, obviously there's prevention, there's the stage where you have opportunities to establish those relationships and partnerships with key stakeholders, that should be established ahead of time. And so if you actually look at what those challenges are going to be after, and as a community, look at what you have, what you do have, what you don't have but you need, and be able to put those in place, so that you can support people who are impacted by these acts of terrorism in the in the short-, medium-, and long-term.

And so, and as Mary identified, part of the problem is early on, we've seen such improvement in terms of communities' abilities to pre-plan and respond in the short-term, but it's recognizing that there has to be in place the medium- and long-term supports. And so, on that continuum after prevention, you look at sadly, then, there's a tragedy that happens, you're going to respond to that. And then as Mary said, in her case, the trial's still going on. And I can tell you right now, we're working with—well, we're learning from France Victimes on what they've done to pre-plan and prepare for the current trial that's taking place in Paris from the Bataclan theatre and the other attacks that day and how they have been supporting a huge number of people who have been impacted through that process. And then recognising that they've—and this is lessons learned—what France Victimes, and they sit at the government table, is looking at, for those after the trial as well, and in many cases, trials occur many years later, so it's understanding that along that continuum, the needs for families, for many, will be a lifelong journey.

And so, organisations like Mary's, that recognize and that bring together tools —and in the world of COVID we're living in, many are webinars and virtual—but it's, it's bringing people together. And I think one of the most powerful sessions, when I first met Mary and was at hers, I had the privilege of sitting in and listening to a session that was for the family members, and to be able to see the kind of support that they can each bring to each other and at the same time be honest, telling us about what they're going through, and some methods to cope. And that's why I never missed Mary's September two days because I've always listened to some of the best, telling us how we as communities and how we as civil society and government and all the partner agencies can work together to ensure.

And so, it's making sure that the right agency has the right role to play but it's all our responsibility to ensure that in our communities that we pre-plan for that, have that in place, and can continue to have in place evergreen technology. We need to evergreen our ability to learn from, because every incident is unique, and every victim is unique and will have their own needs and issues. But

there are common themes for each of those, as Mary says, the need for information, the need to be considered, the need to be protected, the need to be supported. And then it's just understanding that you have to look at that journey over time.

And so, one thing that we've looked at recently—we've done several webinars with our international colleagues—is memorials. It's 1 way that families and people that have been impacted can look at that. But memorials are something that you really need to listen to. And I recently attended a webinar where it was the victims looking at how memorials are done well, how they're not done well, what are those key things, considerations, that need to be thought about. And Mary spoke to them about the amount of work that went into the memorial for New York. These are not simple things to do, but they need to be led with the victim's voice and doing that, and all the challenges that go with that.

MF: Victims are one stakeholder that should be at the table. But I have to say, people like Sue, the group at LinCT and INVICTM, the international group that Sues put together; we've made a lot of progress in this area. And we shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel every time there is an emergency, or every time there's a tragedy. Tragedies can be different, it could be a school shooting, it could be a bomb, it could be whatever the situation is, but truthfully, there's more similarities than differences in all these tragedies. The victims' families still have to cope. The survivors may have narrowly escaped whatever the situation was, and the responders are oftentimes having to respond to some unimaginable tragedy.

So, we shouldn't be reinventing the wheel and we have to be proactive in making sure people that are in those positions are trained appropriately. The notification process is problematic after most tragedies, and there's no reason for that. If people are making notifications, they should be trained, and they should have the resources available that can then help the family with whatever: plan a funeral, access their family members, and so forth.

So, I do think that they've really made a lot of progress. And I would really—hats off to the LinCT organisation who is preventing these crimes from happening. And it's all about the relationships that they've built. They can call somebody in whatever country and now that they have a professional that they can rely on that can step forward and do things in the right manner.

SG: And I know the two of you are massive advocates in pushing this, to everyone and anyone. So, again, full credit to what you're both doing. I'd be very curious to get both your perspectives on how the pandemic has impacted on victim support for those who have lost their loved ones in terrorism or survived a terrorist attack. Has the pandemic had an impact in terms of being able to help, to be able to reach out the same way you would have normally in a pre-pandemic situation? Has there been those obstacles? Or have you been able to get around it, using Zoom for example, or Skype? Or is that personal touch no longer there, which is making it harder to provide that support? Sue, what do you think?

SOS: Well, I think the pandemic changed a lot of the way that we interact, both at the local, national, and global level. So, we have continued to do the work using virtual, using the different technologies that are available. And so, a lot of people—as everyone has—had to pivot in terms of being able to personally talk to people. To be at a conference, to have that interaction is, of course, something that we all want. But I think we have adapted the best we can to continue those rela-

tionships and move the change forward. So, for example, where I would have met in person with a group, I now do it all virtually. So, in some ways, it's a lot easier to arrange a virtual because you don't have distance, you don't have travel, you don't have costs, you don't have all that goes with that.

And when we talk about what we're doing, I just want to add one comment to Mary's previous, is that one of the things: INVICTM, and you've heard us mentioned INVICTM, so, I'll explain the acronym. It's the International Network Supporting Victims of Terrorism and Mass Violence. And what's unique about INVICTM is we have a small group, there's about 25 or 26 of us, but we all come from different backgrounds, civil society, law enforcement, government aid. So, we have, for example, Mary's Voices Center for Resilience, we have 'Sush' [Susheel Gupta] from the Air India Families Association, we have Victim Support Europe, we have Victim Support Portugal, Netherlands, we have France Victime, we have NATAL from Israel, we have the UK represented, the Met, and the work that they do, we have the U.S. Department of Overseas Terrorism.

The reason I mention INVICTM is that we're not an organisation, we're a network. We volunteer our time in looking at this. But what we are is doors into the unheard. And so, each of us have access to a large—be it through our organisation—to victims, to family members, to law enforcement, to different groups that all need to be collaboratively working together. And so, one of the things we do is—because of that—we have flexibility. And so, Mary talked about what INVICTM, the link organisation, has led to in terms of—I call it the gift that keeps giving, because what we've been doing is building key initiatives globally. So, for example, Mary and I are members of something called the International Victim Focus Group. There are six of us, with a massive criminal investigation taking place in Northern Ireland. And the key lead investigator on that is John Boucher, who's a member of LinCT—we know through LinCT—and he had been listening to and understanding the importance of victims' voices. So, before the investigation, they took this on, they formed two groups, one as you would expect would be the law enforcement expertise as an advisory group, and then he brought in the victims focus group to bring that lens to the investigation and make victims in those families the heart of the investigation.

And that's about building public trust, and public confidence, which is, as we know, when you look at police leaders right now, some of the top three priorities are public trust and confidence, community engagement, and member support, of all this going on, and COVID is a part of that, ensuring that they can do that. And we've all seen the strains that are happening to the people we're asking to do the job. And so, I think that the flexibility of INVICTM and bringing those voices led to the formation and support of the National Working Group in Canada. And one thing I do want to quickly mention is—we just completed it this year—INVICTM worked with the National Police Wellness Service in the UK and did an international, virtual counterterrorism tabletop scenario.

And what we were testing—and what was unique here—is we were testing the victim response and the member support side. And that really is what's important. That's the human side. And when people say to me, "we have good people, we have good response strategies" I say, "well, I always carry this little list of the top 25 protocols." And what I say is, "yes, you do." But what's needed in these is the added capacity of—we know, that one of the predictable challenges is going to be, in many cases, developing your victims lists, who has been impacted, it's going to be death notifications, having developing Family Assistance centres, volunteer mission management, incident command, how your linked into that. So, there's these different protocols that if you don't have these in place, and haven't had them ahead of time, you're not going to be able to provide the best support and response strategy.

And the last thing I want to mention on this is the power of these relationships and the leadership that's at the table. And when I say leadership, it doesn't matter if you're civil society or government agency. It's by bringing together the network that we have and taking them and constantly pushing for change. So, one of the things we did with the CACP National Working Group, the Chiefs Association, is we passed a resolution looking for the Canadian government to stand up a centre of expertise to support victims of terrorism and mass violence. And I have had one meeting with the minister and we're continuing to push for that. But you have seen it happen in countries, the United States has had one. Now, Mary, I think you're part of the Advisory Committee on that for the National Mass Victimisation Resource Centre in the US. We have Europe, the European Union has the European Centre of Expertise Supporting Victims of Terrorism. So, we're seeing those changes, but it really speaks to what you said about the importance of making sure all of those pillars are in place to support the people we're asking to do the job.

SG: Well, it's very apparent just how well connected this is. And again, the personal relationships are so important in that. I'd be curious to get your perspective on, is it possible to extend this network to victim support in the developing world? So, for example, unfortunately, countries, such as, say, Afghanistan, or Sri Lanka, India.

SOS: We have. And I thank you for asking that question. I'll let Mary jump in, but very quickly, INVICTM is always looking for ways to connect and how we can support. So, for example, after the bombings in Sri Lanka, we got reached out to a victim serving agency from Sri Lanka, and we're also members of—Victim Support Asia, which is a new organisation formed in the last couple of years. And so, we don't interfere with the policies and protocols, but we offer support. So, we were able to provide some very practical tools for Sri Lanka. We recently also, and in another case where it was going to trial, were able to, in a short period of time, facilitate victim impact statements from families in other countries.

So, we're constantly looking for ways—if I could say our motto is "how can we help," it's to keep those linkages, we're always looking to identify key leaders in those countries that we can help, we can connect with. I recently actually just did a presentation in Africa, looking at the importance of supporting family members and relationships. It was hosted by one of the embassies, but through the International Committee, Red Cross.

SG: Very, very important. Mary, anything you'd like to add to that?

MF: Well, I think the question started with how has COVID impacted us. From the victim's perspective, it has had a big impact, we see a higher percentage of people that we're working with that have been directly impacted by COVID. They've lost someone as a result, either during or because of COVID. And there's challenges with that. They weren't able to have a proper funeral. They weren't able to be with the person when they died. If they lived in New York, whether they lost someone or not, they constantly heard the sirens going on. People clanging pans, applauding the first responders.

For somebody that has PTSD, this is very detrimental. Many people were living in the community where they had set up makeshift morgues, again, the reminders of the trauma that they suffered

on 9/11. And I'd say that the attack on the Capitol on 1/6 was another challenging tragedy. A horrible tragedy that impacted people that were affected on 9/11. It brought back that unpredictability situation, that was out of control, that they could not control. And then, of course, the devastation of the Capitol and the loss of life, both of the police officer that died the next day, and the police officers that have committed suicide.

With regard to communications and providing services, we were in a unique position after 9/11, because in most tragedies, it happens in a community. So, the community is able to set up services within that community that are available to the people that were impacted. In the case of 9/11, people lived around the country and around the world. And so, we had to think creatively on how can we provide services to these people, and how can we connect them with each other. So, in 2002, we started holding teleconference groups. And those went on for over 16 years where we were connecting people that lived in other communities, around the United States, but also outside the United States, the international community. And we were able to connect parents with parents, siblings with siblings, witnesses and survivors with witnesses and survivors.

So, I have been a big advocate for the delivery of services virtually, and the mental health community didn't want to hear about it, the federal agencies don't fund it, and because funding comes down through each state, where you would have had to apply to 50 states to get funding to have this provided continuity of care, and to think holistically about that 9/11 community. So, with the introduction of zoom, we've held probably 100, over 100, support groups and focus groups. We've held workshops and webinars, with brains and experts in the field that we've worked with over the last 20 years. And so, our symposium that Sue talked about, which we typically hold in New York City, on September 9th and 10th, we had over 1,300 people because it was a virtual, the year before last when COVID hit. But also, this year we did a combination, it was in person and virtual, and we had over 1,300 people participate from 34 states and nine countries. So, as horrible as the pandemic is, we've been able to address the isolation that these people have, we've been able to connect them with each other, and we've been able to provide the information and support that they need to deal with the skyrocketing mental health issues that are impacting all of our communities, because of COVID.

SG: That's interesting, and just a reminder as to how important it is to even discuss mental health, it doesn't necessarily get enough attention. Perhaps the pandemic in some ways, ironically, has enabled that to become more of a mainstream topic amongst people.

MF: I would say mental health is not just an issue for the victims' families, it's also for the survivors, and the people that respond. And what you see after many of these tragedies is people in law enforcement commit suicide, they quit their jobs, or they're released from their jobs because they're not able to do their jobs. So, I think it's important across the board, for anyone that was either affected by or responding to these tragedies, that they have the support within their organisations that are going to be able to recognise the mental health conditions and are going to be able to support them in a way that they're going to be able to continue with their careers. But we did see as an example in smaller communities, after the shooting in Newtown, several people never went back to work, because they were responding to the shooting. And it was their community, it was their neighbour that died or was affected, and it was just too much to bear.

And so, the suicide rate, after some of these tragedies, I think goes unreported. But it's there and so we have to address it and provide the support that's needed for these people that are critical to

our response.

SG: Absolutely, absolutely. One thing to conclude with, for this podcast, it's been such an important discussion to have with you both. Mary, you spoke about the loss of your son, Brad on 9/11. I'd like to conclude today with you talking about him as a person, what was he like? What were his hopes and dreams? Because we talk about numbers often when it comes to a terrorist attack, how many people died, how many people were injured, but behind the number, there is a person, there is a life, there are dreams or aspirations, that are taken away behind that terrorist attack. And I remember at a conference, you actually played the voice message that Brad had left. And it struck me just as to what a caring human being he was, how much he just wanted to communicate with both you and your husband, Frank, and I just got that from a voice message. But please talk about him as a son, as a person and what type of person he was.

MF: Well, Brad was 24 years old when he died, and he was the oldest of our three sons. Wes was 20 and attending college, and then our youngest son, Chris was 13. We moved a lot with Frank's job, Frank worked for IBM. And So, Brad, being the oldest, was much like a father. And because of the age difference, too, when you think about it, he was 11 years older than our son, Chris, so much like a father to the two boys. So, it was, I would say, complexities to the loss, it wasn't just their brother, it was somebody that they looked up to, and relied on, and admired.

Brad was a very accomplished athlete, he played hockey and lacrosse, from a young age, and he attended Bucknell University, all three of our boys actually attended that university. He was always the centre, very understated, but accomplished, but he never let that go to his head. So, I think, after any death, you hear stories from people, and his kindness and compassion and things that he did for people that he didn't even know.

He was living with his girlfriend who, I believe, they planned to get engaged and married. So, I think when you lose a son, and you see all that they've gone through, in their life, to get them to a point where they're educated, responsible, and of course, he had a wonderful job at Keefe, Bruyette & Woods and of course, not just a career, but a life ahead of them. So, I think as a parent, then you mourn, not just who he was, but what he could become.

And we found a journal that Brad had written then and on the front page, and I still don't know where he found the quote, but it said, "you can tell the character of a man by what he does for the man who offers him nothing."

So, I think Brad, sorry to get teary eyed here, but I think Brad and truthfully, all the people that died that day, that should be alive today, have really guided our work, and given us the strength and truthfully the passion and determination to continue on and make sure that hopefully nothing like this happens again. God forbid it does, or any of these other tragedies, that we can take what we've learned and work with people like Sue, and the LinCT alumni, and other agencies and organisations to make sure that the people that are affected, the victims, families, survivors, responders, have the support that they need and deserve.

SG: Well, thank you for sharing that story about Brad. I can tell you it was very emotional hearing that for myself. He is an example of why I do what I do. And May his memories always be a bless-

ing for you and Frank and for your sons.

And thank you again, Mary and Sue for spending the time today to talk on NATO *DEEP Dive*'s podcasts. I'm very fortunate to know you both, and your passion, and your commitment is truly infectious—if I can use that word during a pandemic.

MF: Thank you for the laugh!

SG: Well, sometimes we need to laugh in these difficult circumstances.

MF: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

So, I do think that we're making a lot of progress. And even what you're doing right here, you're educating people. And of course, Sue and I are available to anyone that might be listening in, if we can provide any support or guidance that's needed.

SOS: I just say thank you, to you, Mary, for your continued leadership. And if I may Sajjan, thank you to everyone that's listening that is working to make a difference for our communities to keep us safe, to make sure that the people that need it have the support that they need and for making a difference, you know, every day for making a difference for the people that need it.

SG: Well, bless you both for everything that you're doing and for taking the time to talk to us on this podcast. And I think this is going to be an ongoing discussion that we will continue to have and hope to have you both again on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

SOS: Thank you.

MF: That'd be great. Thank you.

Mary Fetchet's bio

Mary Fetchet is the driving force behind VOICES, an organisation she co-founded in 2001 following the death of her son Brad at the World Trade Centre during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. She has guided the development of programmes that provide continuity of care and promote resiliency in the lives of victims' families and survivors.

Sue O'Sullivan served as the Deputy Chief of Police for the Ottawa Police Service and Canada's Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime. She is also a member of the Leadership in Counter Terrorism Alumni Association, a group of senior professional executives who work together to develop best practices for international counter-terrorism coordination.

Episode 16 - Meetra Qutb and Women in Afghanistan, Part 1, May 2022

Key Reflections

- **The West has understandably focused and prioritised its efforts in helping Ukraine, but as a result, the Taliban have seized this opportunity to undermine the civil liberties of Afghans, especially women, and carry out extrajudicial killings.**
- **The Taliban remain the same entity they were when they first ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001. They retain close ties to terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, as demonstrated by the Haqqani Network, who are the main authority in the country. The presence of IS-KP also complicates the security situation.**
- **The Taliban's order for women to cover up from head-to-toe is designed to reinstate their misogynistic agenda, whilst also punishing male members of Afghan households who don't enforce the draconian policy.**
- **Before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, women constituted a significant number of the workforce, and many were breadwinners. As the Taliban banned women from society, many have become destitute and forced to beg as a way to earn money. Almost 90% of the population is starving.**
- **Taliban fighters have received a distorted religious education in Pakistani madrassas that is incompatible with current Afghan cultural norms.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

MQ: Meetra Qutb

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Meetra Qutb who is an independent researcher and commentator on Afghan politics who has worked with refugee and migrant organisations in the United Kingdom. We discuss the plight of Afghans especially women under Taliban rule and the impact that is having within Afghanistan as well as the wider international security implications.

Meetra Qutb, thank you very much for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

MQ: Thank you, thank you for having me.

SG: There are a lot of things happening right now in Afghanistan that perhaps don't get the attention that they need to. One thing in particular, is the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, or I should say, the complete lack of any rights. The Taliban has reneged on its promises for women to be entitled to employment, for girls to be educated. Should we be surprised by this?

MQ: Well, thank you, the Taliban's restriction on women surprised many and didn't surprise another group. It surprised the activists, and diplomats, and Afghanistan watchers, who listened to the Taliban and who trusted the Taliban's promises during the negotiations and the peace talk, who said that they are going to observe and respect women's rights, including their freedom of movement, their access to education, their access to employment.

But it did not surprise one specific group: the women who were present and who left the first rule of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001. The women who suffered during the first rule of Taliban; they were expecting this to come back to them. And, especially, this was women of Afghanistan, who had gone through the Taliban's restrictions on them, on their education, on their work, on their freedom of movement, during the first rule of Taliban, and they were expecting this to happen.

SG: If we look at the Taliban ideology in itself, it seems to be a very misogynistic movement. So, the fact that the Taliban are anti-women, is that part of their ideology? Or is there another dynamic to the Taliban that perhaps some people don't understand?

MQ: I believe that Taliban religious ideology is a very fundamentalist and extremist interpretation of Sharia, and it is an ambiguous amalgamation of Islamic ideology. This is based on the Deobandi school. [The] Deobandi school is characterised by fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, opposition to innovation, and any injunctions against women outside the home. So, they are against any meaningful participation of women in society, including women's education, women working outside, women's appearance in the public sphere, such as women in politics, women anywhere. I think this is the very fundamentalist ideology of the Taliban, which leads to their misogynistic approach against women's rights in Afghanistan. And they have implemented these approaches since they came back to power.

SG: What worries me is that by taking away the rights of women in Afghanistan, by preventing girls from being educated, they are being deprived of their future, and ultimately, they have no role. Now, one thing I've noticed in Afghanistan is that many households are women led, they are the breadwinners, if they are not allowed to work, women will effectively be destitute, they will be living in poverty, and perhaps the only means to earning anything is to beg. Is the situation as concerning as that?

MQ: Yes, this situation is very concerning, because during the past eight or nine months that the Taliban came back to power, women were working, they were making [up] a good amount of the workforce in Afghanistan, their employment was okay. I don't want to say that the situation for women before the Taliban was very ideal, it wasn't like that, but, however, women were allowed to work. And the breadwinners, they lost their jobs because the Taliban came to power.

They unemployed lots of women, they fired many women from work and the country is going towards a hunger crisis, an acute hunger crisis, almost 90% of the population are starving. You can see many women begging on the streets. It's not only women, but lots of men also lost their jobs. But when men lost their jobs, it was not because they were fired from the work that they were doing, but because unemployment rose, and lots of good projects, lots of internationally funded projects or work, that people were working in the offices, in the organisations, they stopped working in

Afghanistan. So, lots of people lost their jobs. And lots of people, including the women, were fired from their jobs, because the Taliban didn't want women to work.

And you can see lots of women who are begging on the streets just to provide some food on the table for their children, because they don't have a man to work for them. And especially now that the Taliban banned women's participation and women's appearance in society, in the public square. Women even cannot go begging. It's such a very upsetting situation in the country, and especially for women. They have closed all ways for women to work, to study, to even beg, for example, in this situation.

SG: It's deeply tragic and painful what is now unfolding, and what you're conveying only highlights just how dire the situation is. You mentioned this aspect about misogyny, and we know that the Taliban practice that, it seems to be part of their identity, their ideology. How much do you think the role of misogyny plays in the rise of extremism? So, for example, when there was women's empowerment in Afghanistan, when there was a vibrant civil society, extremism to a degree was being contained. But if you start seeing the rise of misogyny, do you also start seeing as well, the rise of extremism, of terrorist groups, of radical groups emerging at the same time?

MQ: I believe that the radical groups and fundamentalist groups have this thought in common, and that is: any opposition against women's meaningful role and participation in the society. So, this is what brings these groups all together, and they are inspired by each other when it comes to women. They copy each other when it comes to women's rights and women's appearance outside the house. But I would like to say that the Taliban specifically, they are not educated in Islamic history and Sharia, they're very poorly tutored in Islamic history and Sharia, they do not have a manifesto, an Islamic manifesto, or any historical analysis, which would ground their perspectives in Islam.

So, whatever the restrictions they are posing to them, it does not have any basis in the Islam that the people of Afghanistan are following. They are actually grounding their arguments that 'we are doing this according to the Sharia,' but 99% of the country are Muslim, they have always followed the Sharia. This is not the type of Sharia that people of Afghanistan know. This is not the type of Islam that people of Afghanistan are following. I believe that this misogynistic approach, of the Taliban against women's rights and their education and any participation outside the house, comes from their own, very old fashioned, I would say poor, ideology, which is against any participation of women outside.

SG: You say that the Taliban are poorly educated, and I think that's very apparent when you look at the fighters on the ground. They seem to be very surprised when they see the new Afghanistan, the Afghanistan that's been created over the last 20 years. They, for example, couldn't understand the new technology that was brought in the development of infrastructure. For them, this was all very new, which kind of shows you how sheltered their life has been. Where have these Taliban fighters been brought up? Could it be in some parts of Afghanistan? Or is it more likely that they were being trained and educated in neighbouring Pakistan?

MQ: Yes, if we go back to the history of how the Taliban emerged, we can go back to the civil war and the war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan during the 80s. They were the group of clerics who were studying at Pakistani madrassas, the madrassas bordering Afghanistan, between Pa-

kistan and Afghanistan. They met each other there and they were funded by some wealthy Arab countries and at some points, the Taliban managed to oust all other Mujahideen or jihadist groups, who are fighting at the same time against the Soviet Union.

So, according to some research, they were a more organised group, they had horizontal ties and vertical ties with their own group and among the people. So, they managed to come to power with the support, of course, of the Pakistani ISI, and some wealthy Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia. So, most of the fighters they have studied, they have been tutored at those madrassas and they were being educated with a very fundamentalist interpretation of Sharia, such as the Deobandi schools. They have been running since these years in these areas of the bordering areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

They are coming from there, because even we witnessed that most of them cannot even speak any of the languages spoken by the people of Afghanistan, they do not dress like the normal, ordinary people of Afghanistan, they have not seen women outside the house. [Over] the past 20 years, women had some achievements in Afghanistan, they could go out, they could work, they could dress normally, according to the traditions of the Afghan society. But these fighters came into the city, as if they had never seen normal human beings in their lives. So, that's how they treated women, when they were not obeying them. They didn't know how to treat women, even the Taliban officials, they also admitted that their fighters are not educated on how to treat women. They don't know how to behave with women. And they even admitted that they are looking to educate their fighters, their members, to treat women.

But, however, I find this a propagandist approach and something which they would want [to make] people think that they have changed from the past 20 years, however, they have not changed at all. And they totally forgot about what they said for the fighters that are going to educate them on how to treat women. However, even the leaders, the officials, they started posing more restrictions on women, they don't even care about what the world is saying about them and what the world wants from them in order to recognise them.

So, coming back to the point of where these fighters come from. I believe there have been religious schools where they educate these young fighters from a very young age. They educate them with the very fundamentalist interpretations of Sharia, according to the Deobandi school that they believe, and they believe in jihad. They believe in making an Islamic emirate and they are being educated with the Deobandi brand of Islam, which adheres to orthodox Islamism, and they are insisting that the Sunni Islamic law, Sharia, is the path of salvation. And they also insist on making Islamic practices alive, which goes back to the very first centuries, or the seventh century, the time of the Prophet Muhammad. And they also think that the notion of global jihad is sacred duty to protect Muslims.

So, these are the thoughts that they are growing up with. And also, this also leads to any opposition to women's presence outside the house and any role for women outside the house. So, this goes back to their own ideology again.

SG: As you say, the Taliban have not changed. It's clear that Taliban 2.0 is effectively the same as Taliban 1.0. And if we recall the Taliban, in their previous rule in Afghanistan in the 1990s, they al-

lowed al-Qaeda and other jihadist terrorist groups to operate inside Afghanistan and use the country as a launchpad for terrorism. Where does the Taliban stand today, when it comes to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups? It's interesting that they have not condemned al-Qaeda as yet. And it's also interesting that you have people like Amin ul-Haq, who was at one time bin Laden's bodyguard, returning to Afghanistan, from Pakistan, with a guard of honour from the Taliban. So, it is very worrying what's taking place. But I'd be interested in your take as to where you think the relationship is between the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups.

MQ: As you mentioned, the Taliban have a very close tie with al-Qaeda, even this led to their overthrow from power in 2001, because the Taliban provided safe haven for al-Qaeda. And that led to al-Qaeda's 9/11 attack in New York.

The Taliban still remain very much connected to al-Qaeda through the Haqqani Network. For example, Sirajuddin Haqqani, the deputy of the Ministry of Interior of Taliban, who is also leader of the Haqqani Network, published this op-ed in the New York Times, and he kind of illustrated how interconnected these two groups are. I mean they have ties, they have woven family relationships, because they are actually existing in the same region between the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even if the Taliban does not actively permit use of territory of Afghanistan for terrorist organisations or terrorist operations, they wouldn't even have the ability to deter terrorist groups from establishing their presence in the country, even if they deny, for example, that they do not have any ties with al-Qaeda. But the Taliban also lacked the capability to prevent any activities of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. We have seen them.

And the leadership's concern is nowadays mostly on how they should get recognised and how the funds should be released. But they also fail to provide security to the people and make the borders secure. So, I believe the tie still remains and they have not denied it. But, however, they have illustrated that they are interconnected, and they have links with this group.

SG: It's interesting that you spoke about the Haqqani Network led by Sirajuddin Haqqani. So, the Haqqani Network is an internationally proscribed terrorist group. It carried out some of the most deadly terrorist attacks in Afghanistan across the last 20 years. Sirajuddin Haqqani himself is a proscribed terrorist.

Is he the most powerful person in Afghanistan? Are the decisions that are being made by the Taliban when it comes to security, education, and the lives of Afghans, are they all impacted by the decisions that Sirajuddin Haqqani makes?

MQ: I believe, if we look at the internal dynamics of the Taliban, we can figure out two different groups who are saying that "we are together." But then we have the Kandahari Taliban who are the Taliban, the Afghan Taliban. And then they have the affiliated Haqqani Network. I believe that they seem to be the same, but the dynamics and the disagreements in many of the decisions stem from the differences that these two groups—showing as one—have with each other and they have some disagreements. At some points the rivalry—inside rivalries and competitions—will lead to lots of failures.

For example, we had in the news that some Taliban members agree with the reopening of girls' high schools, and some other Taliban members do not agree. On the other hand, we had statements from Haqqanis, for example, yesterday, or the other day, Anas Haqqani, the other very famous figure of the Haqqani Network, he said that—after the decree on hijab—he said, "let us not make people hate Islam by imposing such decrees, such as covering your entire face."

And then he also said another statement that the Taliban will come up soon with a decision about reopening girls' high schools, but at the same time other Taliban leaders, such as Mullah Baradar, he didn't say anything about it. So, it seems like half of these groups agree with something and the others don't agree. So, they have their own disagreements that might even block some decisions. And this has implications on the lives of the ordinary people of Afghanistan.

SG: It seems very paradoxical what's going on inside Afghanistan, with these different Taliban factions that you mentioned. They have agreements, they have disagreements. It's unclear sometimes who is actually making decisions, whether those decisions are national or whether they are regional. It is interesting that there are those divisions, fault lines that are emerging between some of those groups.

And in addition, you do have a resistance movement that is showing signs of growth known as the National Resistance Front, the NRF, which is predominantly based in the Panjshir Valley. Talk to me about what's going on right now with the NRF. Are they making gains? Is this a movement that can be taken seriously in terms of being able to undermine the Taliban's domination of Afghanistan?

MQ: As we can see in the news that nowadays, there is heavy fighting going on in some northern provinces of Afghanistan. These resistance forces have emerged since months, and they are saying that they are fighting the Taliban. Well, yes, the fighting is going on in the Panjshir, and Andarab [District] and Takhar. And there are very grave human rights violations taking place in these cities. The resistance groups are there, they are fighting the Taliban. But at the same time, the Taliban are taking the civilians of these provinces hostage. The killing machine is open, the killing machine is going on, they are killing the normal civilians and stamping them as being members of the resistance forces. However, they are profiling people of those provinces. In other cities like in Kabul, they're looking for Panjshiris, they're looking for people from Baghlan or Andarab and people from Takhar, these northern provinces. We can see that clashes are going on. Some districts and some villages have fallen into the hands of the national resistance forces. The resistance forces did not just remain restricted or limited to the northern provinces, we could see the rise of other resistance forces in other provinces such as in Nangarhar, such as I think in Khost, provinces in the South and in the East. But the more active are in the north of Afghanistan.

I'm just following their social media and their statements, and there have been clashes, there have been casualties on both sides, and there have been some parts falling into the hands of the national resistance forces. We also read in the news, and it was verified, it was confirmed that the TTP—the Pakistani Taliban—they have joined the Afghan Taliban in these provinces to fight the national resistance forces, which creates such big concern for the people, because we are scared. Genocide is taking place, as you could see, like there have been mass killings in these provinces. They are taking the people hostage, they are detaining, the Taliban are taking the men of the families in these provinces with them, just for allegedly being a member of the national resistance forc-

es. And we do not have lots of coverage for this in the international media, unfortunately. I believe that this should be really spoken about.

SG: Do you think that one of the problems is that because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine that perhaps the West has got a little distracted with that conflict, and that the Taliban are taking advantage of it in the hope that these extrajudicial murders that you're talking about aren't getting the attention and the spotlight that perhaps they need to? And that the Taliban are quite savvy, they can see that the crisis in Ukraine is dominating the headlines and that they can carry out their systemic detention, torture of Afghans in the hope that it will go under the radar, and it won't get enough attention?

MQ: I believe so, because since the Ukraine war started, the world's attention kind of changed to Ukraine instead of Afghanistan. I wouldn't say that the world shouldn't pay attention to Ukraine. I would like to say, like an equal attention to the situation in both countries. However, Ukraine is very close to the European countries, but in Afghanistan, the war has been going on since over decades now. And there are lots of atrocities taking place in Afghanistan that need special attention. A terrorist group, a recognised terrorist organisation is taking the 40 million people of Afghanistan as hostage, just to get recognised and to get the funds released. I believe that the international community needs to pay attention equally to Afghanistan as they do to Ukraine. In Afghanistan, there is a very long list of human rights violations, starting from women's rights, and then going to the extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, forced displacements of people who, for example, have Hazara origins, Tajik regions, and the forced disappearances of the former national security and defence members, former Afghan government employees, disappearance of women protesters. There are some women who we still don't know their whereabouts, the families are calling, the Taliban have detained, but they don't know where they are. And there's such a long list of human rights violations. I mean, this group is taking 40 million people of Afghanistan as hostages for their political gains.

And they don't even now care what the world wants from them. They're just implementing their barbaric rules on women and on the people of Afghanistan. In their recent decree on covering women's faces, they have actually tried to take the domestic violence into the houses of people, it gives the men of the family more power to use violence against women, because the man or the male guardian will be punished on behalf of the woman if she doesn't cover her face. So, if we think that the violence in Afghanistan starts from the home, and it gets bigger when you go out of the home, I believe, just going back to Ukraine, I believe that the world and international community must pay the same attention that they are paying to Ukraine. It's not only the war and human rights violations that the world has forgotten about in Afghanistan, but it's also about the Afghan refugees and the evacuees outside the country. Since the war in Ukraine started, all attention was paid to the Ukrainian refugees, and they forgot about Afghan refugees who were evacuated from the country. So, I think there should be an equal treatment of both groups.

SG: It's an important point that you raised about not forgetting the Afghans and the Afghan refugees, as well. And you've painted a very stark situation as to the human rights abuses that the Taliban are carrying out. Two things I'd like to connect to that: one of the communities that has been really badly affected by the return of the Taliban has been the Hazaras, who are the Shia community inside of Afghanistan. And they've not just faced mistreatment by the Taliban, but also by the ISIS affiliate known as IS-KP. My question is, some people say that IS-KP is the enemy of the Taliban, and then there are others that say that actually, it's much more murky, and that on occasions IS-KP works with the Taliban, especially the Haqqani Network. Could you talk more about how the

Hazaras have suffered since the Taliban returned? And also, perhaps if you could connect it to the role of the Taliban and IS-KP as well?

MQ: Hazaras are the ethnic group, and they follow the Shia sect of Islam. They have always been a target by fundamentalist or extremist Sunni terrorist organisations. IS-KP started this activity, according to reports, in 2015. And the main target were the Hazara communities in Afghanistan. We witnessed lots of terrorist attacks against the Hazara community by the IS-KP in Afghanistan, mostly that the IS-KP is taking responsibility for. For example, they attack mosques in Kandahar and Kunduz and other provinces and in Mazar[-e-Sharif], in Kabul. The IS-KP carried out all these attacks. IS-KP has emerged as a rival to the Taliban; however, we don't know if they have ties behind the scenes or not. But their major targets are the Hazara and Shia communities of Afghanistan because of their ideology. Again, they deem that these groups are infidels, and they should be vanished. This leads to Hazara genocide. And…even the previous government failed to secure the lives of the Hazara people in Afghanistan. This systematic discrimination and systematic killing of the Hazara community in Afghanistan has been going on since years.

And now that the Taliban came back to power, the Hazaras are not safe at all at their schools and the mosques and educational institutions. They have lost jobs, they have been fired from where they were working, and…affiliated members of the Taliban have replaced them. So, this group is facing a particular discrimination and systematic discrimination since years in Afghanistan. However…since the Taliban took over, they have been targets of the attacks by IS-KP. They have, before the Taliban, been targets of the attacks by IS-KP, for example, they attacked their hospitals, their babies were killed, the hospitals got attacked, the schools got attacked many times, and IS-KP took responsibility for carrying out all these terrorist attacks. We still don't know if the Taliban and IS-KP are together in this. But however, their ideology…I believe both are extremist and fundamentalist. The Deobandi school of thought is an extremist ideology, and they do not accept the Shia sect of Islam. However, I think in this, they have something in common.

SG: Indeed. It's interesting that the IS-KP, they do seem to carry out attacks against the Kandahari Taliban, and yet they have never carried out an attack against the Haqqani Network, which often makes you wonder just how murky the relationship and the nexus of these entities are.

So, one other thing that I want to touch upon which you raised earlier, which I thought was very interesting, is this role of the TTP, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, also known as the Pakistan Taliban, you mentioned how they're working together with the Afghan Taliban. Why this is important is that the former government of Imran Khan, they used to say that if the Taliban returned to power, then it would provide greater security for Pakistan and that the TTP would not be able to operate, whereas in fact, we've seen the complete opposite. The TTP are not only operating, but they are increasing their operations, and they are growing. Was Pakistan naive in assuming that the TTP would come under control if the Afghan Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan?

MQ: Many people thought that the Pakistani government, by supporting the Afghan Taliban, will create a kind of rival group that would fight the TTP. However, we see that the TTP has joined the Afghan Taliban, who for years have been rivals and competitors to terrorist groups. I wouldn't exactly say that the Pakistan government was very weak in understanding this and thinking that supporting the Afghan Taliban would help them vanish the TTP, but the Pakistani government in many ways managed to take control of Afghanistan and its affairs by supporting the Taliban coming back to power by providing them safe havens for many years in its territories. However, I think now, the

TTP and the Afghan Taliban coming together, they have become a new challenge to the Pakistani government. As we could see, the airstrikes carried out by the Pakistani air forces in Khost province, in Kunar Province, they claim that they have targeted the TTP bases in these provinces was one of the signs that the Pakistani government felt insecure about thinking that the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban would make good allies against the Pakistani government. But however, I don't think that would be the case. Because the Afghan Taliban are more affected by the Pakistan government and the ISI. We could see it from the very beginning, when the Taliban came to power, the head of the ISI came to Afghanistan and visited them. And without the support of Pakistan, I wouldn't believe that the Taliban of Afghanistan would really survive.

SG: Well, it's an important point that you've helped to clarify. One final question, Meetra, is, just for our listeners, could you also explain your own connection to Afghanistan and the work that you're now doing to help Afghans? And also, if you could perhaps provide some perspective on what more others can do to help the Afghan people during this very difficult time.

MQ: I was born and grew up in Afghanistan. And I was very young during the first rule of the Taliban from '96 to 2001. That's why I said in the beginning that people like me were not very much surprised by the coming back of the Taliban and did not really believe that the Taliban have changed…they have not changed. We were expecting, people like me, my mother, we were expecting such a thing would happen. Because this connection…you know, my connection with the how Taliban ruled in Afghanistan is very old, because I was very young, and I was witnessing how they are oppressing women. I am actually determined to raise awareness. And if I'm not inside the country to fight and raise awareness about the situation of women in Afghanistan, outside the country, or at least advocate for the rights of the people, for human rights, I am now a reporter for an international broadcasting TV, I cover mostly the reports about women's situation, the human rights situation. And I report and write about women's rights and the situation of women, restrictions imposed on them. I believe that my networks in the UK and in Europe, hopefully, get my message and get the situation of women in Afghanistan, and I expect them to raise awareness as well.

So, what we can do outside the country is to raise awareness, to write a lot about the situation in Afghanistan and the human rights crisis, the women's rights crisis in Afghanistan. This is what I would expect from my international friends and Afghans in the diaspora. That you can just write, if you are not fighting inside the country. I mean, if I'm not there, and if I cannot go back there, at least I could just write about them and spread the word, advocate, whenever, wherever possible, for the rights of women and Afghanistan, and hopefully, make a network of people who would pressurise the policymakers in the UK, in Europe, and like in a bigger context, the international community, to put pressure on the Taliban, to bring changes and to make the improvements in the situation of people, and especially the women in Afghanistan, the minorities. However, this is less probable that the Taliban would change, especially after the hijab decree that they issued. The world actually cut off its hope to the Taliban, and the Taliban also didn't care. So, coming back to my point, all that I would like to say is that if we are outside the country, all that we can do is to talk about it. Raise awareness. Let's not forget Afghanistan. I know we have the war in Ukraine, but let's not forget the people of Afghanistan as well.

SG: You've been very impassioned about the rights of Afghans, the rights of women. It will certainly resonate. And we wish you the very best in your endeavours. And most grateful that you've been able to spend the time in providing your primary perspectives on Afghanistan. And it's just a reminder how the world must not forget what's going on inside that country, because what happens in Afghanistan doesn't just stay in Afghanistan. It has much wider global ramifications. Meet-

ra Qutb, thank you so much for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*, and we hope to have you back again in the future.

MQ: Thank you very much. Thank you for having me.

SG: Thank you for listening to this episode of *DEEP Dive*. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. *DEEP*

Meetra Qutb's bio

Meetra Qutb is currently supporting the research and engagement work of the Centre for Information Resilience's Afghan Witness project, a project to independently collect, preserve and verify information on human rights and current events in Afghanistan. She has worked as a journalist and with various refugee and migrant organisations in Germany and the UK. She has also worked as an associate lecturer at Kabul University's Law and Political Science faculty.

Episode 17 - LinaRozbih and Women in Afghanistan, Part 2, June 2022

Key Reflections

- **Since the Taliban seized power, they have issued over a dozen decrees directly aimed at undermining women's rights. Taliban leaders fear no consequences and should be sanctioned from travelling abroad.**
- **Women who were present in every sphere of Afghan society are now banned from working by the Taliban, who have once again turned Afghanistan into the worst country on earth for women.**
- **The Taliban's repressive attitudes towards women are not native to Afghanistan, which has a rich history of female poets and artists. The Taliban are trying to reinvent the cultural role of women in society, including the type of clothing they should wear.**
- **As women's rights collapse in Afghanistan, extremism will flourish with foreign terrorist fighters traveling to Afghanistan, motivated by state-sanctioned misogyny.**
- **The notion of the 'moderate Taliban' was initiated by Pakistan, who lobbied for the Taliban's global legitimacy. The stark reality is that the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and al-Qaeda cannot be separated, due to ideological ties and intermarriages.**
- **The Taliban have been financed through the trade of narcotics. Despite their assurances to stem the drugs trade, the Taliban are enabling the proliferation of heroin and methamphetamines. NATO DEEP's publication, *Narco-Insecurity Inc.*, details the social impact and wider security consequences of the Taliban's ties to narcotics.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

LR: Lina Rozbih

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In the second of a two-part series on how the decline of women's rights in Afghanistan has global security ramifications, we speak with Lina Rozbih, a civil liberties activist and acclaimed award-winning journalist, writer and poet in the Dari language. Lina is also the author of *The Promise of Paradise*, which is a collection of poems depicting war, women's rights issues and refugee life.

SG: Lina Rozbih, thank you for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

LR: Thank you so much for inviting me.

SG: It's our pleasure. I've read your book of poems, *The Promise of Paradise*. It's an incredible collection of over 140 poems, through which you chronicle the decades of conflict that the peo-

ple of Afghanistan have had to endure. Many of these poems, they draw on your own life and the hardships as a refugee from Afghanistan, in Iran and Pakistan, and also the plight of women and girls over the past many years. I thought what was interesting was that each poem is, in many ways, a collection and responds to tragic events in Afghanistan, depicting scenes of suffering, and also the victimisation that Afghans have had to suffer from terrorism, poverty, and the culture of impunity. Your book of poems is eerily relevant today with the Taliban now in power in Afghanistan for the past nine months. My question is, is history repeating itself? Talk to me also, in relation to that, the power of poetry, and how it can help one process what is unfolding in Afghanistan.

LR: Well, unfortunately, yes, history and actually recent history, it's not that we're speaking about a few decades ago, it's just over 20 years ago that Afghan women in Afghanistan did experience the rule of the Taliban. And now they're, again, experiencing a government by the Taliban that put limiting women as their priority in their internal policies. And we can see in less than nine months, with almost 14 orders or decrees that they've issued against women—they took women from being ministers, being ambassadors, being present in every sphere of their society to almost nothing. So, the women are prevented from going to school, the women are prevented from working outside their homes, they have to be accompanied by a male chaperone when they go outside their house, they can't travel on their own. So, it's pretty much an unfortunate repeat of the recent history for women of Afghanistan.

And poetry to me, being an Afghan and being a journalist, I deal with the news from Afghanistan on a daily basis. And to be honest with you, sometimes I think that it would have helped me a lot if I was not a journalist, dealing with the news from Afghanistan, because I cannot sometimes distance myself as an Afghan woman from what's happening in that country. So, emotionally, it affects me, it has impacted me in different ways. And to me poetry is almost something that helps me heal and deal with what I experience and what I hear and see from Afghanistan, particularly about women. And being a woman in a society that even before the Taliban was a very traditional society where it's a man-dominated society where women did not really have the rights that our male counterpart did. And then the experience of 40 years of war and what the illiteracy and other outcomes of that war has done to the society. Unfortunately, I think we can say that Afghanistan right now is the only worst country on earth for women, because they absolutely…speaking of basic human rights, to the basic of being a human is taken away from women in Afghanistan. So, through my poems, I try to document that pain, I try to document what I experience as an Afghan woman, and I try to also extend and give a voice to those voiceless women who are suffering or actually first-hand experiencing these atrocities. And fortunately, I've received a lot of positive reactions from Afghan women exactly stating that, "Thank you for voicing our experiences in the format of poetry and literature."

And my aim, once the Taliban regime was toppled in early 2000, I was hoping that eventually that I look into this poem as a distant history of Afghan women, that we will see better days…that women once again will be able to at least gradually gain the rights that were taken away from them. And we actually did witness that in the last 20 years. And I can say this with confidence, that the amount of advancement and the amount of achievement that Afghan women had in the two decades, coming from a place where they were not even allowed to leave their homes, it was inspiring. I mean, women were ministers, women were MPs. They were present in every sector of their society, although the critic would say that their presence was sort of symbolic, but still, women were there. But unfortunately, today, when I open that book, and I look at those poems, I see the same tragedy repeating itself once again. So, it's no longer the past, but it's very much the present reality of Afghan women's lives in Afghanistan.

SG: So, history is unfortunately tragically repeating itself, perhaps even worse than before. As you said, it's been nine months since the Taliban rule, and one thing you said that I thought was so important is that women had attained positions of influence. They became ministers, ambassadors, they were visible in every sector of society. I saw that myself over the years having visited Afghanistan on many occasions. What I think is so disturbing is the regression at the speed of light, with no fear of persecution on the Taliban's actions whatsoever, that they can act with impunity. Much of this is being implemented by the Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue. This has replaced the former Ministry of Women's Affairs. Is it fair to say that the Ministry of Vice and Virtue is basically the misogyny ministry?

LR: Well, so far, based on the decree and order that this ministry has issued and everything is focused on women, and also partially on media, I think it's, yes, it's safe to say that because first of all, when you dissolve the Ministry of Women's Affairs and rename it as the Ministry of Vice and Virtue, and then the majority of activity of this ministry is focused only on women—the recent order, which required females in television and media to cover their faces was the last extreme order that this ministry has issued. So, I think, yes, it does. And the purpose of it seems to be exactly that, to sort of expedite that process of formalising the lack of presence of women in society by issuing these decrees on behalf of the Taliban government.

SG: It's worth adding that when the Taliban shut down the Ministry of Women's Affairs that they also closed down Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission. And also with the fact that the angle that often gets portrayed, as if this is somehow cultural, that what the Taliban are doing is Afghan, but if you look at Afghan women abroad, for example, they are thriving in all kinds of fields, whether it is journalism, or civil society, in governments as well, in sports, they are part of prestigious educational and research centres, they're teaching, writing, singing. It's important, don't you think Lina, that we dispel this notion that somehow what the Taliban is doing is Afghan, that it's part of Afghanistan's culture and tradition, whereas in fact, it's the very opposite of what they're doing?

LR: Actually, what the Taliban do, especially as I said, the last order that requires women to cover their faces, that type of attire that they called niqab or hijab is not native to Afghanistan, or to Afghan women. I mean, if you take a look at Afghan women before the Russian invasion in the '50s, '60s, '70s, yes, we did burqa, some of the women in rural areas, and it was their own decision that they wanted to wear the burqa, but in the cities, the majority of women who preferred to wear hijab, hijab to us is wearing a scarf loosely around your head, something that we did see in Afghanistan in the last two decades. So, the format of the hijab, the format of a lifestyle that the Taliban are sort of implementing in Afghanistan and ordering the women to abide by it is not native to Afghan women. And if you also take a look at our history, we have prominent female figures like Rabia Balkhi, Makhfi Badakhshi, who were poets, who were painters, who were queens, very influential in terms of political decisions that were taken by the king, and who were side-by-side with males, although the numbers were not big, but we did have these prominent female personalities throughout our history in every sector.

The lifestyle and the orders and the type of role that the Taliban are trying to shape for women in our society in Afghanistan, whether in terms of what attire they need to wear, or what they can do and what they cannot, it's not native to Afghans. It's not part of our culture. It's not even religious. The religious interpretation of some of the stuff, that they relayed that to Islam. So, that's one of

the reasons why they face huge protest and disagreement, particularly from women in Afghanistan, who put their lives on the line to go out on the streets in Kabul and other major cities to protest these decisions. And to my opinion, I don't think they will be successful either, because these are not something that the women in Afghanistan are used to. The history and background of the country is proof to that, that women never wear that type of clothing, women were always present, maybe in a smaller percentage, but they were actively side-by-side by men in every decade or every change that came, except the civil war that took place in the '90s, the women were actively present. So, they cannot really accept what the Taliban are right now doing, and they're calling it cultural and religious orders, which basically is their version of religion and their version of culture that they're trying to bring to Afghanistan.

SG: Absolutely. I would like your take on, well, your own personal experience, on what is transpiring and how it compares to when you were growing up in Afghanistan, when you had to leave the country and live as a refugee in Iran and in Pakistan. What do you remember about that period? And how do you see it similar now in Afghanistan? Or do you see it potentially worse than it was when you had to leave the country?

LR: Well, when I left Afghanistan, I was very young. I was eight years old, and the Afghanistan that I remember, we left just almost four years after Russia invaded Afghanistan. So, I remember Afghanistan being a poor country, but being a civilised country. In Kabul, my mother was a teacher, she would dress like a Western woman, you know, jackets, skirts, pants, and you would see women who were wearing burqa, and you would see women who were wearing a scarf. And I really remember that on the streets of Kabul, any man wouldn't even look at you twice. So yes, Afghanistan was a little awkward country, we were not a rich country, you know, compared to our neighbouring countries, as advanced as them, but we were a civilised country. People were partially educated; women had their basic human rights. There was that peace and harmony that you would experience even if you go to the rural areas of Afghanistan.

But unfortunately, the four decades of war, and the outcome of this lengthy period of war, which was, at certain points were the most violent…I mean, the news of suicide attacks, the different types of violence that took place in Afghanistan, took that privilege, took that civility out of society. And we also have a generation who did not have any access to education. So, when it comes to war, I always say that, yes, you drop a bomb, you destroy a building, you destroy a bridge, it may take 10 years, five years to rebuild that country. But when you take that culture, that foundation of a society away from that society, and you come up with a generation who lack education, and who know nothing but war, rebuilding that civilization will take decades and maybe centuries. So, to my belief, if I want to, I think if we want Afghanistan to go back to the '80s that we were living, you know, in that country, I think it will take centuries for us to go back to that mentality, where people were illiterate, but very civilised. And now in Afghanistan, unfortunately, we have youth who fall victim to this brainwashing of extremists and fundamentalist believers of Islamic fundamentalism. We have men who actually…they're not Taliban, but they believe that the place of a woman is at home, that a woman needs to cover herself, etc. So, this mentality, unfortunately, is something that I think will take way longer than rebuilding Afghanistan to go away. And we may not see that Afghanistan that we experienced in the '70s and '80s for a long, long, long time from now.

SG: You raise a lot of important points there about this notion of extremism that can grow as a result of war, instability, and also the rule of misogynistic entities like the Taliban. Do you believe in the notion that as women's rights collapse in Afghanistan, extremism will flourish, and that we will see foreign terrorist fighters travel to Afghanistan via Pakistan, motivated by the opportunity of

state-sanctioned misogyny, effectively when women's rights are strong, radicalization is reduced, and terrorism is kept in check? But conversely, when women's rights suffer, extremism and terrorism will be on the rise, just like we saw in Afghanistan in the 1990s and we saw in Iraq and Syria, post-Arab Spring. Does that concern you that there is that correlation between impact of women's rights decreasing, and then you have the rise of terrorism and extremism increasing?

LR: Absolutely. I think the very trademark of any terrorist group is limiting women. Once you see human rights in general, and women's rights in particular, diminishing in a society, that itself tells you that there is a rise in extremism and Islamic fundamentalism in that society. Because these groups, I think, as I said, one of their trademarks is to create an environment where the women are pretty much absent from every sector of the society. And that's one of the conditions that they believe that they [women] are immoral toward Islamic government, it's sort of relied upon, and seeing women in a society is contradictory to their belief system. So, obviously, as soon as the Taliban started issuing these decrees, almost, I think, 14 of them to this day, it itself should concern the international community, that a group that can go to this extent to eliminate women from public life is capable of doing anything.

And also, once or twice, the analysts that I spoke to said exactly that, that some people believe that the Taliban are reformed, some believe this ideology…they preach this ideology, that there are good Taliban and bad Taliban, and that the Taliban are reformable. But we saw that as soon as, as I said, less than nine months since they came to power in Afghanistan, the first thing that they did was eliminate women altogether from society. And that itself should concern the international community that they're taking the opportunity, particularly now that the international community is very concerned and busy with the war in Ukraine, to build that extremist fundamentalist type of government in Afghanistan, where they will eventually go ahead and take the next step, which is to take a stiff stance toward the West and others and pretty much go back to the Taliban that we experienced in the '90s.

SG: So, again, you've touched on some extremely important points, which I want to unpack a bit further, in two parts. First question I guess is that if we discuss the breakdown of the Taliban factions, where do we stand on their view on women's rights? Who are the ones that are allegedly moderate? Who are the ones that are supposed to be the extremists? I got the impression from what you said just now that effectively they're all virtually the same when it comes to women's rights or lack of women's rights, that it's almost like a paradox to say moderate Taliban?

LR: Well, the idea of moderate Taliban, if you read the reports, was initiated by Pakistan when they tried to lobby for the Taliban in terms of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. And when we speak about the Taliban's regime, you are aware of the Haqqani leaders, Sirajuddin Haqqani serving as the interior minister and as a deputy to Mullah Hibatullah Akhundzada, who's the supreme leader of the Taliban. And then the second person in rank is Mullah Yaqoob, who's the son of Mullah Omar. And also mind you that Sirajuddin is much more extreme than his father, Jalaluddin Haqqani, when it comes to his stance toward different issues. And then the third deputy obviously is Mullah Baradar. So, by just looking at this cabal of officials and Taliban government, it should tell you what sort of government and what sort of mentality that this group has.

And second, when we speak about moderate Taliban or when we speak about good Taliban or bad Taliban, I think we need to remember this: that the Taliban are not a school of thought or a

political…that we would say okay communism versus democracy or versus liberalism etc. They are a religious fundamentalist group. And religious fundamentalist groups have a few core beliefs that they need to stick to that. And if you drift away and start sort of so-called reforming yourself, that you will no longer be accepted by your groups. If, for example, based on their interpretation of Islam, that a woman shouldn't work, and if a Taliban official standard [line] says, "I disagree, women need to work," that Taliban official will no longer be part of that government, because the core beliefs that these groups have is exactly that, that the place of a woman is in her house, no education, etc. So, the religious fundamentalists are very much different than a political school of thought, that you think they're able…they cannot even if they want, they cannot reform themselves, because they need to stick to that agenda and to their basic beliefs and elements that are the fundamental creation of those groups.

And the second thing or notion that exists is how we differentiate between Haqqani or Taliban and al-Qaeda. And this way of thought initially arose when the peace talks processes started with the Taliban, where some people argued, "Okay, we can talk to the Taliban, but we can keep al-Qaeda aside, or we can keep Haqqanis separated from that." These groups' core values that they have are the same. So, therefore, you cannot, for example, provide incentive to one group, provide support to one group and think that you can separate them from each other and that they would side with you and then leave their affiliation with the Haqqanis or al-Qaeda etc. And that notion is also proven wrong when the government of the Taliban was formed in Afghanistan, and as I said, the major member of the Haqqani Network…Sirajuddin Haqqani is on the list of the Most Wanted by the FBI. Jalaluddin [Khalil-ur-Rahman Haqqani], his uncle, is also on the UN Sanctions List—you have them as core members of the Taliban government, and the Taliban to this day did not denounce al-Qaeda publicly, nor did they admit to cutting ties with that group.

SG: So, Lina, again, you've touched upon some very vital dynamics when it comes to the Taliban composition and thank you for breaking that down so well. What do you make of the argument that some say in the West, that we have to now engage with the Haqqanis, and that by ignoring them, the people of Afghanistan suffer, and that by ignoring the Haqqanis, all it does is embolden terrorist groups like al-Qaeda to grow and proliferate? Because there are some in the West that believe that if we talk to the Haqqanis, somehow, we can moderate their points of view. And you've kind of answered it to some extent just now, but I'd be curious to get your perspective, because as you said, very rightly, Sirajuddin Haqqani is proscribed terrorist. He is on the FBI's Most Wanted list. He has a bounty of 10 million dollars. But it's interesting how some in the West feel that he should be spoken to or negotiated with, as if somehow that will change the agenda of the Haqqanis. What do you think?

LR: I was watching Christiane Amanpour's [CNN] interview with Sirajuddin Haqqani recently in Kabul, where he said, "We no longer consider Americans our enemy." So, at this moment where the Taliban joint government with the Haqqanis in Afghanistan is in desperate need of getting some sort of recognition from the international community, particularly the US and the key players, to my belief, I think they will accordingly go with what needs to be done to get that legitimacy. We remember during the peace talks process with the Taliban, they also played the same card that they would agree to forming an inclusive government in Afghanistan. They agreed to respect human rights, women's rights, and we now see what they are doing in Afghanistan, that not only do they not feel they have to remain committed to what they promised the US, but they're absolutely and openly without any fear of prosecution, they're doing the opposite. So, I think the Haqqani Network will be the same scenario too. I mean, I'm not sure if any peace talks process with any terrorist group would lead to anything sustainable to the favour of the international community anywhere.

SG: One thing that the Haqqanis also engage in is criminal enterprise. They are not just a proscribed terrorist group, but they are involved in running human trafficking, drug trafficking, many front companies, they are very wealthy and prosperous. One thing that has blighted Afghanistan for many decades has been the proliferation of opium and heroin, which has been then exported, globally, for raising funds by the Taliban.

The Taliban say that they are against drugs, and that they want to clamp down on it. But what we're seeing on the ground in the last few months is actually a spike in narcotics and the cultivation of it, not just heroin, but also methamphetamines, which comes from the ephedra shrub. Do you think the Taliban has any serious intention, or the Haqqanis have any serious intention, to clamp down on drug trafficking? Or do you think this will become one of their main avenues to earn money?

LR: Well, as you mentioned, this year, provinces in Afghanistan, for example, Kandahar and Helmand, had some of their biggest poppy harvests, this year, and Zabiullah Mujahid a few months ago, also publicly admitted that they're not going to do anything with the farmers who are cultivating poppy in Afghanistan, because they do not have any alternative plans for them. But then when the international reaction toward this statement started, then Mullah Haibatullah issued a decree and said that 'the cultivation of poppies is forbidden in Afghanistan.'

So, we're speaking about a group, the Taliban, who financed their wars throughout these years, more than three decades of war, based on the trade of narcotics. That's their only source of revenue for them. That's the only thing they know how to get money from. And they're used to the narco-economy. And given the condition of Afghanistan right now, with the financial situation, economic and downturn that they're experiencing, I doubt that they will be able to prevent poppy cultivation. And I doubt that they themselves want to move away from this narcotic trade, because it's the lucrative way, it's a more than eight billion dollar per year industry. And it's sort of free money, in a country like Afghanistan with rigid terrain, where there is no water.

And also, some of the alternatives that were successful during President Ghani's era in replacing poppies are, right now, not active in any of the provinces. So, I doubt that they will walk away from this. And I don't think that we would see anything—any reduction— in drug trades in Afghanistan under the rule of the Taliban in the near future.

SG: Yes, and what you say actually bears out in a report that two of my producers here for *DEEP Dive*, Marcus Andreopoulos and Victoria Jones, they were editors for the publication, *Narco-Insecurity, Inc.*, which talks exactly about this very issue, about the history of Afghanistan and drug trafficking and how that is likely to continue under the Taliban and especially the Haqqanis. So, what you say is extremely important.

In terms of your concerns, what can be done to try and help the people of Afghanistan, because options are limited. Afghanistan, in many ways, is cut off. I often think about the comparison to Ukraine. Ukraine has suffered a lot from the Russian aggression. But Ukraine is lucky that it has good neighbours and good friends. Whereas unfortunately, Afghanistan doesn't seem to have either. What are the options that are available, or what can be done that people don't realise could

help the people of Afghanistan?

LR: I think I will go back to the suggestion that many international organisations have—human rights organisations—and many of them requested the sanctions placed upon Afghanistan directly will impact the people, because they're facing hunger, as I've said, acute hunger, the economic downfall and financial downfall also is not helping, and it's obvious to everyone that a Taliban government is not capable of reviving the economy. So, any kind of general sanction will have a direct negative impact on the population, as opposed to the Taliban government. So, the solution to this issue would be, in my opinion, to sanction the Taliban leaders as suggested by many, take away their privilege to travel, they're freely travelling right now to different countries.

So, any sort of action that targets the Taliban elite directly, as opposed to the people, I think will be effective. Because sanctions, or anything that impacts the population, I think will, indirectly, be to the benefit of the Taliban, because right now, they are using that image of hungry Afghan people to gain support from the word; to gain sympathy from the world; to encourage the world to engage with them. So, that's actually to the benefit of the Taliban. But if directly, some sort of financial, or some sort of personal restrictions are placed on the Taliban elite, and that leadership portion of the Taliban, I think it will yield more results, as opposed to targeting the whole population.

SG: And tied to that, then, we are hearing about resistance movements that are emerging, showing signs of life in Afghanistan, challenging the Taliban. What resistance movements do you think are viable? And are women playing a role in helping to support those resistance movements?

LR: Well, with resistance movements, the only information that I have is based off the reports and interviews with them, with some of the individuals who are members of that movement. It's a movement that is in the process of spreading to Afghanistan. It initially started in Panjshir, right now it's in Baghlan, and it's in Takhar, and there are reports that there's some sort of resistance that took place in Khost and Nangarhar as well.

One thing that can be said about the resistance movement is that it's definitely the only active resistance to Taliban rules in Afghanistan. The only threat—the only movement—that's encouraging the Taliban to rethink its policies. They even requested the leaders of the resistance movement, and they brought them together in Iran a while ago, so they can go ahead and agree on an inclusive government because the resistance movement was putting pressure on the Taliban to change its format and government in Afghanistan. So, it is the only resistance movement against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and it is spreading, at the cost of a lot of human rights violations. There are war crimes being committed by the Taliban, by targeting the locals in those provinces and justifying it that they are actually targeting the members of the resistance movement while they're [targeting] the regular locals who are living in those provinces.

How successful this resistance movement can be, is something that we need to just sit and watch, because it's really hard to tell. The majority of resistance of this nature, can only last if they have the international support and the international financial or otherwise support with them. And as for women, yes, there are actually a few active members of this movement who are women and there are also different ethnicities of Afghans. When the resistance initially started, there were only locals from Panjshir, but now it's expanded to include Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, they have different ethnicities, and women, who are part of it.

SG: So, there is potential for that to grow and for that to expand. Whenever we talk about Afghanistan, very often, the neighbour of Afghanistan, Pakistan, is mentioned. And there's long been these concerns and accusations that Pakistan's military helps sponsor, nurture the Taliban, the Haqqanis, and that they enabled the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan to take place. Do you believe that to be the case? And where does Pakistan stand now, on this situation? Because there seemed to be some tensions with some factions of the Taliban. There was that Pakistani military air strike, I believe in Khost, and a lot of children were killed. Is it possible that there are tensions now between the Taliban and Pakistan? Or is the relationship still strong?

LR: Well, I think the role of Pakistan in Afghanistan's political arena and the support of terrorism is very obvious to everyone in the past 20 years or so. And report after report indicates that the terrorists' safe haven, whether it's Taliban, or it's the Haqqani Network, is in tribal areas in Pakistan. And the ISI and the military elite of Pakistan have a direct connection to them.

The Taliban, as you said, one or two bombings that took place and Khost and Kunar, which led to the killing of civilians there, was simply condemned by the Taliban. But I think at this point in time, especially because the Tehreek-i-Taliban of Pakistan, or TTP, is gaining ground in conducting operations within Pakistan. And especially since Mr. Khan was replaced by the new prime minister in that country, Pakistan is now sort of fearing the overflow of terrorism into its own country, as a result of supporting these terrorist groups. And therefore, they are putting a lot of pressure on the Taliban, to target the TTP members that, according to them, reside inside Afghanistan, and they conduct operations on Pakistani soil. And they justify the bombing of the two provinces of Afghanistan as exactly a result of that, and it did happen exactly after one or two attacks, which led to the killing of military officials on Pakistani ground. So, they are aware of this now and they're trying to use the Afghan Taliban to facilitate talks with the TTP and bring them to the negotiation table. Exactly the same scenario that happened in Afghanistan—a negotiation with the Taliban.

But these terrorist groups being used by Pakistan, or other neighbouring countries, as a policy instrument, in having influence over what's happening in Afghanistan, is very much valid. And I don't think it will stop anytime soon.

SG: What's interesting is that you've mentioned that Imran Khan has been ousted as Prime Minister of Pakistan. He had the nickname, whether it was deserved or not, I guess time will tell, of 'Taliban Khan', that he was seen as very close to various Taliban factions. Now that he's in opposition, he is trying to organise protests. He's also talking about an unfounded conspiracy theory that somehow he was removed from power by the Biden administration.

Do you think that his [Imran Khan's] administration contributed to the destabilisation of Afghanistan, because one thing that we used to keep hearing from Khan's government was that if the Afghan Taliban took over Afghanistan, it would lead to peace and stability, whereas the reality is the complete opposite has happened? And it's even having a knock-on effect on Pakistan's own security and stability?

LR: Well, I think Khan's government, in a way, was very favourable towards the Taliban, once again because of the interest that Pakistan has in Afghanistan. The issue of Pakistan has been

that they always think that if there is an independent government in Afghanistan then the role of India will become prominent in Afghanistan, and somehow that is not to the benefit of the interests of Pakistan in the region. And that fear seems to linger on despite how hard the Afghan government tried to give confidence to Pakistan that they would keep a neutral position when it comes to India and Pakistan in the region, and that they have no ill feeling toward Pakistan and that they are not planning to form this coalition with India against Pakistan in the region.

So, this fear is very much valid and it's one of the main reasons that any government in Pakistan tries to use these extremist groups as a tool to have some form of influence over the government in Afghanistan. And through which they think that their interests will be served in the region, and that they will prevent India from penetrating into the Afghan political arena, and therefore [prevent] that country from turning against Pakistan.

I cannot say that Khan's government has been extremely supportive of the Taliban or not, but pretty much every government in Pakistan follows the same policy and the same strategy, exactly because of this reason. That they see their interests being threatened in the region if a government in Afghanistan is not politically under their influence.

SG: The irony in all of that is that now that the government—the civilian elected democratic system—in Afghanistan is no more, that actually, it is the dictatorial Taliban that is potentially destabilising Pakistan more than any other entity had previously done in the previous 20 plus years.

Let's recap Lina, on what we've been talking about. It's nine months since the Taliban took power in Afghanistan. Women's rights have been completely derailed. Women have basically been made to disappear from society, from having jobs or employment. Many of them are the breadwinners of Afghanistan and that has had a knock-on effect with the economy then collapsing as a result. There is heavy censorship in the media. There are arrests, killings, and extrajudicial murders taking place. The ministries run by the Taliban are dysfunctional. And there are war crimes that the Taliban are committing,

especially in places like Panjshir, Baghlan, and Andarab. And then there's also Pakistan and their role that we've been talking about. It all seems to be very depressing and very concerning. What can we expect for the rest of 2022 in Afghanistan?

LR: I think Afghanistan is a very unpredictable country. Who could predict that the government, a 20-some-year old government that was built—was created—with the support of the international community, and billions of dollars in aid, would collapse overnight? So, I think I'm too little to even predict what can happen in the future in Afghanistan, because to be honest with you, I give up predicting.

Afghanistan is very unpredictable, politically. We don't know what will happen, but we can make assumptions based on what is happening right now, on the ground. As I said, the international community is very busy with the Ukraine war. And if the war in Ukraine continues, along with the negative economic impact that the COVID pandemic had on the world, [then] the economy of Europe, the economy of Western countries, will suffer greatly. And so, these countries will be very busy dealing with their internal issues and with the war in Ukraine to notice what the Taliban are actually doing on the ground.

And I think the Taliban are very much aware of that. And, as I said, decree after decree, or order after order that they're issuing, in limiting women, is a sign that they are fully enjoying this lack of attention of the international community on what they are doing to their benefit. So, my fear would be that if this lack of attention and lack of action, such as sanctioning the Taliban leadership, continues, then the next step would be the empowerment of regional terrorist groups. Let's remember that there are more than 20 terrorist groups that exist in that part of the world. So, we would probably see al-Qaeda coming back to life, we will probably see Daesh [ISIS] gaining ground in Afghanistan, we will probably see other groups gathering their strength and making the next move. And that would be, in my opinion, not only a catastrophe for the people of Afghanistan, but for the world.

So, my only concern and my only prediction that I have is exactly that. That if attention is not paid to what is happening in Afghanistan, we have to be ready, in the near future, to experience another catastrophic event that can impact Afghanistan, the region, and the international community.

SG: Well, it's very disturbing what you're saying and, unfortunately, it's probably all too true as well. There was one thing you said that I thought was important and that you spoke about the potential rise and return of not just al-Qaeda, but IS-KP, which is the ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan. The thing I've noticed in the country is that, when it comes to the terrorists and the extremist groups, nothing is ever black and white, there are many shades of grey. And we often hear that IS-KP are the enemies of the Taliban. But then there are also some people that are saying that, actually, IS-KP has been infiltrated by the Haqqanis and that sometimes they will even work together for their own agenda, even if it means fighting other Taliban factions. What do you think is the answer to understanding IS-KP? Are they completely separate from the Taliban? Or are there elements that actually will cooperate with factions such as the Haqqanis?

LR: Well, I think with ISIS in Afghanistan, we have to keep in mind that the ISIS in Afghanistan is not the ISIS in Syria and Iraq. There are no Arabs, there are no other foreign nations who are involved in ISIS or the Khorasan branch of ISIS in Afghanistan. And it consists of former Taliban members. And, as you said, some of the Haqqani Network's, members who created this group, and obviously former Taliban militants who left the Taliban are now fighting under the flag of ISIS in Afghanistan.

So, any kind of coalition between these groups, given the reality that they're actually coming from members of the Taliban, members of Haqqani—creating their own groups and fighting against each other—of course, in any time, and any place where they think that their interests are served by getting back together again, then they would do that. So, the ISIS in Afghanistan, actually, to my opinion, is mostly rising to power as an opponent to the Taliban, as more of a power sharing type of deal that is going on with the Taliban.

And let's also remember that there were reports of some sort of clashes between Haqqani cabinet members with the Taliban cabinet members over some of the decisions that they were taking in governing Afghanistan. And some recent proof of that is Stanikzai, Abbas Stanikzai's opinion, about the hijab, where he disagreed with the decision of the Taliban government, for the Afghan women to cover their faces in the media.

So, they already have disagreements with themselves. And Haqqani probably can use ISIS as an option to the Taliban, if the Taliban does not agree with Haqqani in terms of what Haqqani wants to do in Afghanistan. So, they always want to keep an option open for themselves there.

SG: And those options are ultimately at the expense of the Afghan people who continue to suffer.

Well, Lina it's been a real pleasure to talk to you and get your insights on Afghanistan, and especially the impact that this has on women in Afghanistan. And we all hope and pray that the situation can somehow improve for the Afghan people because if they suffer, eventually we will all suffer, because terrorists will find a home there, as they have done in the past. And it's important to remember that Afghanistan is not just a local issue. It is an international issue. And I'm so glad that you've been able to spend the time with us to talk about this.

LR: Thank you.

SG: Thank you, Lina. And I hope you can join us again in the future.

LR: Sure. Thank you so much for having me. Thanks a lot.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

We conclude this podcast with Lina reciting a poem she had written some years ago about when the Taliban first seized power in the 1990s and their subsequent brutal reign. Lina's poem, entitled *Buddha*, is eerily relevant today and serves as a warning that the Taliban could once again erode Afghanistan's proud history, heritage, and directly undermine the rights of women whilst spreading insecurity.

LR: *Buddha,*

Listen to my voice,

That rolls, reflects and echoes in the sad and broken valleys of your land,

Listen to my voice, as I murmur your pain that is closely woven into mine,

Buddha,

Listen to my tale of senseless and insane destruction of a civilization,

Bear with me, as I tell you the tales of terror, fear and horror of your land,

As I tell you the saga of helpless Afghans,

As I mourn the tragedy of your destruction, and the fall of a great nation,

Buddha,

Your ruins and my head both did not crunch the thirst of barbarians,

How ridiculous that your silent, peaceful existence and my spark of ideas and logic,

Posed a deadly threat to THEIR hollow, poisonous existence!

Buddha,

Your ashes and my beheaded body,

Went unnoticed and forgotten,

Just like the death of thousands before you and after me,

In the precious land, sadly ruled by ignorant unruly.

Your place is empty,

Like an eye drawn from its socket,

When my mother went blind,

As she sobbed herself to sleep each night with the vision of my beheaded body.

Buddha,

Your destruction will always remind mankind of the suffering,

Of women beaten, men beheaded, and children imprisoned.

Though your tenacious statue is no more,

We can declare with pride, honor, and glory,

That Buddha suffered alongside his people to ensure,

The world witnessed and will remember forever the agony of the Afghan nation.

Buddha,

They tell us You intended to fall in the land of lunies,

Not as a gesture of surrender and submission,

But as a rebellious voice of voiceless,

Against,

Oppression,

Tyranny,

Injustice,

Cruelty,

Ignorance,

And SHAME!

Lina Rozbih's bio

Lina Rozbih is a civil liberties activist, acclaimed award-winning journalist, writer, and poet. She is currently the Senior Dari Editor and Anchor with Voice of America. She is the author of The Promise of Paradise, a collection of poems depicting war, women's rights issues, and refugee life.

Episode 18 - Tom Wuchte and the Importance of Multilateralism, June 2022

Key Reflections

- **The importance of multilateralism and cooperation has become even more relevant in the post-pandemic era.**
- **The future of multilateralism rests on how it coalesces around addressing common security themes, which were not being thought about 20 years ago.**
- **Multilateralism needs to be strengthened to address non-traditional security issues such as climate change, poverty eradication, and free and fair elections, because these are drivers of some of the major international security concerns.**
- **Diplomatic multilateral agreements are the only way to prevent and end conflicts, to preserve the international order and obligations.**
- **The debate over what constitutes a foreign fighter has become more complicated due to events in Ukraine, which can be exploited by some entities, making it harder to reach consensus and agreement on terminology.**
- **The dilemma of foreign fighters and their families in Syrian camps remains an ongoing challenge. Resolving it will require unprecedented global cooperation.**
- **The lack of democracy, civil society, and effective rule of law, coupled with ungoverned spaces, exacerbates and leads to the growth of potential terrorist organisations.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

TW: Tom Wuchte

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Tom Wuchte who has served as the Executive Secretary for The International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IIJ). Prior to that, Tom was the Head on Anti-Terrorism Issues at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) where he helped to strengthen the role of the organisation as an effective framework for addressing the terrorist threat and in close co-ordination with the United Nations and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF). As a seasoned diplomat, Tom also had been with the U.S. Department of Defense as well as the U.S. Department of State. He was the Special Coordinator for United Nations Security Council Resolution 1540 and received the U.S. Department of State's Highest Award for Excellence in International Security Affairs for his efforts to work collaboratively with international partners.

Tom Wuchte, many thanks for joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive*.

TW: Thank you Sajjan, it's great to join this podcast. I have a long association with NATO, going back to my days in the early 2000s, working with conventional arms control, and continuing on,

most recently, in my role as the executive secretary for the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IIJ). But it's my pleasure to be here and I look forward to having a discussion with you.

SG: We are very pleased to have you with us.

Let's start by talking about multilateralism and global security in the post pandemic era. What's the status of it, now that we are in this new normal, as we learn to live with COVID-19, and the challenges that exist with that? How has multilateralism been impacted, and where do we see it going?

TW: That's a great question. And one which I'm deeply interested in, both in my professional and personal capacity. I often have said over the years, as a person steeped in multilateralism, and I don't say that with any hubris, but I've been in both NATO meetings over the years; the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); many other regional organisations; when I was working on United Nations Security Council resolution 1540, which focused on non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and now at the IIJ, where we have a vast variety of partners. And multilateralism is really a key part of moving the international agenda forward.

I would take note that I recently worked on a book with one of our advisory board members, that was called *COVID-19 Pandemic, the Threat and the Response,* with a co-author, Sophie Drake. And the article that we focused in on, was called 'Multilateralism and Global Security, Post-COVID-19.' And it looked at the importance of multilateralism, both coming into the pandemic, because I think we know the international global situation, during a short period of time, from 2016 to 2020, had some struggles with the importance of multilateralism and how it should be approached. And then the pandemic, of course, I don't speak with any authority, I am a counter-terrorism expert and a multilateral expert, but the pandemic, of course, raised the interest and the necessity for a strong multilateral cooperation. The post-pandemic thing, when I sat down and was approached to write this article, it was the very early days of the pandemic. And like many articles, they take some time to get published, and it only came out a couple of months ago. And I started to think, last summer, maybe this article was outdated. And in reality, it's ended up being prescient, and I'm not saying that about what we wrote. But I think there are many articles about the importance of multilateral loans in post-COVID. And that problems as complex as the pandemic, need good multilateral cooperation.

The state of multilateral cooperation is, and will probably continue to be, very difficult on different levels. There are many multilateral partnerships that we have, my personal involvement has been what we would call the traditional multilateral organisations: the United Nations, NATO, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). But there are other multilateral organisations out there that are working similarly to have a consensus-based approach to things, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the BRICS alignment.

What I think is the importance of multilateralism going forward is how does all of this coalesce around addressing some common security themes, which were not probably what we were thinking about 20 years ago. The multilateral community came together very strongly and very organised after 9/11. And a lot of people now, it's been 20 years for 9/11, and if you are somebody that was born 20 years ago, it is something in history to you. For somebody that watched the unfortunate attacks that happened with 9/11, it's still very fresh in your mind.

But it has become difficult for multilateral cooperation in some of the traditional organisations because we have not got good cooperation and collaboration with some key partners, that we would want to have, to move agenda items forward. I found it over the last several years, somewhat frustrating, working in multilateral environments that, seemingly, areas, which 20 years ago had been of common interests, whether it was reduction of small arms like weapons, something like the Open Skies Treaty, were easily to coordinate and cooperate among all the partners that were in there. And now, there's been a challenge to getting everybody to want to join in on the discussion, and it's hard to move multilateral issues forward if there's not just some general consensus.

And the last thing I would say, which maybe can come up later in the podcast is, the article that I put together actually picked NATO, the UN, and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as examples of where multilateralism needed to be strengthened. If we want to address, what I called non-traditional security issues, climate change, poverty eradication, free and fair elections in democracy, because these ultimately are drivers to some of the security concerns which we are wrestling with now, at least in the world that I'm working in, particularly in counter-terrorism. And so, I give the state of multilateralism a tough balance right now to try to bridge some serious international disagreements. And I hope that we can come back together and make multilateralism the preferred method to solve very complex problems. Because if we can't agree on that level, it'll be very hard to then do some of the bilateral things that we need to do among nations.

SG: Well, you've raised a lot of important points, let's unpack some of that. So, if we look at multilateralism, especially in the build up to the crisis in Ukraine, there was this concern that multilateralism failed, in the sense that Putin was not stopped from carrying out his invasion of Ukraine. And perhaps what's interesting is that one of the conflicts that tested the strength of multilateralism, and in many ways perhaps now renewed the status of NATO and the European Union, has been the Russian invasion of Ukraine. So, can multilateralism bring an end to Putin's conflict in Ukraine? Or is this something that is now beyond the goals and the purposes of what multilateralism can do?

TW: Well, that's a tough question. Clearly, I would say at the outset, the organisation where I work is more in the traditional line of international organisation where we are apolitical, and we try to be neutral on all of these issues. So, we have not spoken out about the global context of the Ukraine and Russia aggression between the two. But what we have emboldened and sort of tried to stress is the importance of collaboration and cooperation to solve some of these problems.

So, if I were to look at the ultimate solution to something like the conflict in Ukraine right now, I think it zeroes back into that, in the end of the day you have to have diplomatic multilateral agreement to end the conflict, because it's the only solution that will allow us to get back to what one would see as a traditional international order where we have state to state relations and treaties are recognised and the obligations are followed through. And I see from my perspective, working in the counter-terrorism field, this causes concern to me and the longer term in that we spent a lot of time reaching agreement on how to address very thorny issues, such as counter-terrorism and it requires a multilateral framework where everybody agrees on the need to work together to cooperate. And a lack of cooperation makes it very, very difficult to actually implement the actions that you've decided to do to reduce the threat from such things as terrorists.

SG: So, as we speak about the Ukraine crisis, as we talk about the issue of terrorism, we have seen Russia encourage the use of Syrian recruits in Ukraine. And then you also have the very murky Wagner Group, which is a mercenary outfit that's tied to the Kremlin, which has recruits on the ground in Ukraine. This raises a problem and a definition issue over what constitutes as a foreign fighter. Has the Ukraine crisis, complicated the issue about addressing the definition of foreign fighters, or what you could describe as foreign terrorist fighters potentially, as well?

TW: I'm very concerned about that, as somebody that worked through the foreign terrorist fighter issue in the early 2010s, up until recently. And I would like to say also, again, I think one of the things that multilateralism is important about is that you have to look at it from all sides. And the call for foreign terrorist fighters or fighters to go into the conflict region right now, in Ukraine, is actually coming from both sides of the issue. There have been calls for Western foreign fighters to also go into Ukraine. I don't make a judgement about how we handle that. But what I do, cause great concern about, is the definition of foreign terrorist fighters was really carefully crafted in two UN resolutions.

I'm often fond of not trying to say that I expect the international world out there to be able to rattle off the numbers of UN resolutions. But there are two that anyone that works in the issues of security, counter-terrorism, foreign terrorist fighters, would immediately say, and it always rolls off the tongue, UNSCR 2178, which was adopted to address the outflow of foreign terrorist fighters into Iraq and Syria. And then resolution 2396, which was largely to address the return of foreign terrorist fighters back to the countries of origin. That's a very general description of two very big resolutions that had many other elements in them, so I don't want to imply that that was the only thing that they were about. But clearly, they took a very careful and agreed way in the Security Council, and so to adopt a resolution in the Security Council, there is a great example of effective multilateralism. You have to have agreement among the Security Council members, or at least not a veto, to allow resolution to be passed.

It propelled the international community to come to agreement on what it should do to stop the flow over, such things as making sure that through risk based analysis, as somebody that looked like they were travelling from a country of origin to Iraq or Syria, why are you applying for a flight that takes you from point A, B, and C and ends up in Syria? What's your purpose? Administrative measures are to take the passport back and not allow them to travel. And then issues like foreign terrorist fighters returning from the area of conflict in 2396. Very carefully crafted to address those that were fighting in the ISIL Daesh context in those countries.

Now, what causes me concern, to reach consensus and agreement, the international community and diplomats and people that work on this. They have very good memories about what has happened. I am concerned that when we have another discussion, maybe 5/10 years from now about a new resolution on the issue of foreign terrorist fighters, people will point to what is the definition? Because now we have people coming in from a conflict zone that is not Iraq and Syria. Does that change the definition of foreign terrorist fighters? I don't know what the outcome of that is. But we've opened up a discussion that I think will come back to be a point of, maybe if people don't see that the next resolution fully suits their needs or their understanding of issue, they'll point to this and say, well, that's a different way foreign terrorist fighters were used previously regarding Iraq and Syria, ISIL Daesh. The jury is out on that, it's going to be a long time before that comes back up. Because the fortunate point is we have a relative calm in the issues of the outflow of foreign terrorist fighters, the traditional areas that we were concerned about, after 9/11, and the occupation for the caliphate, and with ISIL Daesh and now the return of these foreign terrorist fighters,

there's a process going through to repatriate into their countries in a way that makes sense for the laws and the prosecution of them. That's probably something to discuss maybe a little bit later.

SG: Well, let's pick up on some of those themes. Because one thing I know that the IIJ has been looking at is this issue about prosecuting terrorism cases and preparing people for how to deal with that. Have we had successes in prosecuting foreign terrorist fighters such as say, those that were involved in the battlefield for ISIS, or al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria? And what are the challenges that still remain in getting successful prosecutions?

TW: Yeah, there have been successes. I don't have any that I would like to be listing off, off the top of my head, just for some sensitivities. But governments have used a multiple wave collection of evidence to prosecute people, I think it would be simple things which, of course, terrorists have now somewhat become more alert about. But getting the cell phone of the individual or finding the cell phone of somebody, getting the data off of that, that becomes evidence in the prosecution. The social media posts, that was the beginning, when all the foreign terrorist fighters were going into Iraq and Syria, people were putting ourselves out there, proud that they were a foreign terrorist fighter in there. They soon learned that was probably not the best idea, because that became evidence.

And then I mentioned briefly, we do have a workstream now, in the IIJ, looking at battlefield evidence, which is the collection of evidence, literally from the battlefield, that could be used in the prosecution of foreign terrorist fighters, for people returning from the conflict zone. Now, there's a lot of effort being done on battlefield evidence as an example because you asked if prosecutions are successful, in the end of the day, like all criminal affairs, and I have often fond of saying that the approach to prosecuting a terrorist is to treat it as a criminal activity. That ultimately is what it is. There's not a special category, so to speak, that it's not, it's just still a crime to do these types of things. And so, that prosecution does require, and that's what we teach our colleagues in our peer-to-peer learning method, that prosecution should be done proportionately, it should be done with fair access to trial, that the evidence is collected properly. This takes time and some of these cases will take several years to bring to trial to do that. And that also opens up the issues of detention. How long do you keep these people in detention? That also leads to incubators of further violence and radicalisation because people are surrounded by other like-minded people. But at the end of the day, I think there's a good process and a track record to bring people to successful prosecution.

But the last point I would make on the collection of battlefield evidence, which is an issue, which we're deeply interested in, is that when you're a military person on the battlefield, and you pick up things in sort of an evidentiary way, that's not necessarily the first thing on a military person's mind, how does that evidence eventually end up in a civilian court. And so, we're trying to make sure that's understood in a sort of approach to share the experience, both with what the military people are doing, and then the civilian prosecutors and how to get it there in the bright chain of custody. Now, I think that the broader issues are that many of the collection methods on battlefield evidence, it's the same evidence collection you would see in a civilian crime scene. So, if there was a non-military bomb that went off in a community, you would still be collecting evidence from that bomb attack and turning it over to prosecutors. But these are some of the very thorny issues that are being addressed.

But I'm particularly impressed, and we really like this workstream of ours, to help our partners,

primarily our focus region is Africa in the Middle East, is to understand how to handle this between the military and the civilian prosecutors. And the last point I would make is, Sajjan, that not all countries have normal day to day contact between military people, and officers enlisted and lawyers on the civilian side. I mean it's often two different worlds, they operate in different environments, and putting them together in some of our training is one of the main efforts that we need to do, to make sure they understand how each of them approach this issue.

SG: Well, tied into this, we have an enduring headache, which is the foreign terrorist fighters who are currently in these camps in Syria. And then you also have their wives and their children, who are now grown up to become young adults. And one thing you mentioned is that, in some ways, these places can also serve as incubators for extremism. How do we deal with the families of ISIS fighters who themselves are getting radicalised? And countries are reluctant, understandably, to take them back. Where do we get a resolution on this?

TW: I think where we get a resolution on this will be an effort that's going to take a tremendous amount of international cooperation. And it goes back to the beginning of our podcast where we talked about the importance of multilateralism. We have worked lightly on the issue of returning families of returning foreign terrorist fighters, and how to approach this in a way that doesn't exacerbate the issues of self-radicalisation. Because you rightfully note, staying in the camps, surrounded by people, and sitting in conditions, which may create an environment where they reflect on frustration about what they perceive as their own treatment to go back to their countries right now, leads to feelings of disempowerment toward their future in life.

Now, there is a large body of work in the international community and counter-terrorism on effective approaches to counter-terrorism in the juvenile justice context. And to make sure that this all is done in a way that doesn't exacerbate this. Now, it's already been, if I count on my hand, probably it's been about five years now since the conflict has lessened and now the camps are there and we're wrestling with how to get people back as returning families. Many of them were children in the conflict, they will soon be young adults. What's going to lead to radicalisation is the reception and the processes they receive when they go back, whether it's to their own country or they go to a third country that's willing to take them. And that they are integrated into society in a way that is positive and successful for them. I'm concerned that if this process goes on 5/10 years from now, and they continue to be in a situation where they're not well taken care of, and not well integrated, they will have grievances, self-perceived or perceived maybe in reality, that will lead to what we call in at least the context of the IIJ is addressing homegrown terrorism.

Will this become another generation of people that are self-radicalised, sort of in an individual capacity because they're frustrated with their situation in life? I don't know what the outcome of that was, or will be, but it causes me, as somebody that's been working in this for 15 years or so, a lot of concern, because I don't know where to go with this.

And I can also only add to this. I recall the migration issues in the mid-2010s, when people were coming up from the southern region, and many of them were settled into regions, for example, my good colleagues in Germany took almost a million people. How they are integrated successfully into society, that's the success story that we want to have. And we don't want to have a success story, which is that they are left unattended to and not given an opportunity. I mean all of us want to have a good opportunity in life and these are really thorny issues, I think we're going to have to see how they pan out literally over the next generation.

SG: What do you say to those that feel that some of these people are now so ideologically extreme and dangerous that it would not be possible to reintegrate them back into society, and that they actually pose a threat and risk to the public?

TW: You know, I think that is clearly an issue which needs to be handled with each individual case, in the issues of rehabilitation and reintegration. And we just finished our own process on this, developing what's called a multi-stakeholder referral mechanisms curriculum and guide, looking at how do you work with your community to integrate people; psychiatrists, school officials, employment agencies, your own security apparatus, but it's many people to do that. Each individual person has to be attended to, and whether they're such a risk to be admitted back into society, that is really a judgement that has to be done. What I often found to say, it's really best at the local level, because they really have the most contact with the individual. And what I try to avoid in our approach, and also in thinking about this is sort of a one-size-fits-all approach; you often hear that in the international diplomacy world, but it's true. I mean, you can't sit back and say, "All people are ultimately going to be self-radicalised, and we shouldn't let them come back into society." That's not a good outcome for anybody. What I see in the future of the counter-terrorism community is more emphasis on local action and local solutions is where it's going to be done most effectively. It's very hard at a very high level, to understand what's really going on when this person comes back to their family, and what are they really thinking? That's really a psychiatrist or a social worker in some community, where they're now living and working and trying to reintegrate themselves back into society.

SG: Tying this into what's going on in Afghanistan right now, in many ways, you see similarities to the challenges that emerged in Syria and Iraq post-Arab Spring where there is insecurity, the rule of law has collapsed, there is this concern about the rise of misogyny and extremism. Do you see a potential of Afghanistan becoming a theatre for foreign terrorist fighters? And if so, what lessons can we learn from the theatre of Syria and Iraq? And then tying that into lessons for multilateralism. So firstly, is it a concern of yours? And secondly, what can we do to perhaps prepare better than we did previously?

TW: That's a tough question, Sajjan, I have to say, honestly, that the current work of the IIJ is not involved in Afghanistan, per se. But I would sort of take a step back from your question and say that the lack of democracy and effective rule of law exacerbates and leads to the growth of potential terrorist organisations developing. I think that we should all be concerned about the fact that we invested an enormous amount of time and energy in the region, such as Afghanistan, or Iraq for that, where many terrorist organisations found, one could say, safe haven, or an ability to work in ungoverned spaces, to organise themselves, to then lead terrorist attacks outside the region of where they're being at. I mean, that is a long part of the battle we've had in the last 20 years with counter-terrorism; ungoverned spaces, spaces that have poor rule of law, poor oversight of the military situation, lead to the ability for terrorist organisations to organise themselves and operate sometimes with some impunity in the West. What has COVID shown us right now, is the inability to travel very easily and the inability to be in contact and organise in a face-to-face manner—it's been a period of relative quiet.

What do I worry about, as I think about this? Counter-terrorism issues often are kind of like one of these sine waves if you were a maths student, and it has peaks and valleys. We're somewhat in a valley right now, in that overt terrorist attacks that draw international attention, such as the Charlie Hebdo attack, almost 10 years ago now, which is hard to believe, how quickly these things happen…there has not been such an attack, and I hope there is not another attack like that. But those

are the sort of the match that lights the fire for international cooperation. The ones that become very frenetic and very active in addressing issues in reaction.

To go back to the beginning of the podcast, from a multilateral perspective, what do we do with a situation like Afghanistan right now, which we didn't envision probably two years ago that it would be back to a space where we didn't have a lot of understanding and control and work, to how to shape the process to create a more democratic and accessible society, that out of that could come the rise of new terrorist organisations or new threats.

Because eventually, as we come out of this pandemic, a lot of the issues which we haven't had to address the last couple of years, will come back, and that's the sad reality, is potentially another terrorist attack that you're just not expecting. And then everybody will look, in the state governments…why do you need to be prepared? Because senior government officials will always be asked three questions: What did you know? When did you know it? And what is your reaction to this problem? And if you can't answer those three questions quickly and easily, then you are on unstable ground, in the perception of your constituency in your own country, that you didn't think this through, and you weren't prepared. But also, as somebody that's done this and also been in the military myself, you can never prepare for every contingency, but the track record is that something will happen again in the international community that will make us say, "We need to pay attention to counter-terrorism." Maybe I can talk a little later in this podcast where I think I see this going in the counter-terrorism community, given that the pandemic and COVID has made us rethink maybe what some of our international priorities should be in the future. But we can get to that maybe a little bit later in the questions.

SG: Most definitely, I do want to touch upon that. You said a lot of important things just now. One thing that occurred to me was the importance you place on democracy and that that is a very powerful tool, accompanied with the creation of civil society movements, rule of law, that can actually counter the rise of terrorism. Is that something that really, we don't necessarily pay much attention to, that democracy is, in many ways, it's not the cure, but it plays a very important role in stemming extremism and ungoverned spaces from emerging that you were also talking about?

TW: I mean, absolutely, no disagreement with that. Where I get maybe frustration is not the right word, but where I have wrestled with this is that the often siloed approach to some of these issues is…I mean, look, counter-terrorism officials are not democracy builders, other than to espouse in our work the importance of fair trials, access, and a government that includes everybody in the decision making process. I mean, these are very basic things that we discuss in all of our work. But we don't have the resources, the mandate, or the time to focus on democracy building in a country, or to say, "Maybe you should think about doing this a little bit," but the effects of it are seen.

Where I do have a direct impact is in the counter-terrorism world; we work tremendously with civil society, on many levels, and countries that have a robust democratic society also have a robust, well-organised, and accessible civil society network. And when we talk about lessening the path to radicalisation, the people that are most in touch with what's going on at the local level are almost always non-governmental actors and civil society, as I often like to say, doing the Lord's work in trying to change the environment for things as simple as something you wouldn't think is counter-terrorism-related, but access to a sustainable water supply, and that the village elders take that as a priority, that makes those people less inclined to be dissatisfied, and say, "Well, maybe I should go on the path of radicalisation to become joining one of my terrorist organisations." These

are really important issues. I strongly believe that many of the resources that we put into some of our training and capacity building, it's often a different pot of resource money, but it should be really empowering and helping to support the resources needed for civil society organisations down at the local level.

Countries that don't have a strong democratic tradition often have—it would be an interesting study to do, I don't know any facts and figures on it—but anecdotally, what we see is countries that don't have a very robust, democratic setup have a very small civil society footprint. And then when you want to engage in those countries for issues like deradicalization and the fight against terrorism, there's not so many people to work with at the civil society level, and you're often left to work with the government structures…then you're led to necessarily structures that are most trusted by the local communities, because they may not have really, again, the understanding of the importance of civil society to work through these local issues. So, it's a very thorny question, but I'm really a big fan of including civil society in every step of this way, and I hope that the next five to 10 years in this issue of multilateralism and counter-terrorism further strengthens the whole civil society work that's being done out there by some just incredible individuals and entities.

SG: And you raise so many important points there, Tom. I couldn't agree with you more on everything you said about the essential need for civil society movements, and how it is actually so important to strengthening counter-terrorism. And it's just a reminder in some ways as to what we're seeing in Afghanistan and how the Taliban are eroding those very civil society movements, especially those that protect women's rights, which is a warning sign of what potentially may occur down the road. If we look at another region, which is North Africa, there are ungoverned spaces there. There is the issue about illegal immigration and human trafficking. How much of a role does that play in the insecurity in southern Europe? And has that also directly challenged multilateralism?

TW: I sit in a region which has a tremendous migration flow from the south up to the north. In the counter-terrorism community, 10 years ago, we—again going back to this issue of silos—we tended to treat migration and human trafficking as separate issues and didn't want to see them conflated with terrorism. I still think based on everything I've seen over the last 10 years, it's difficult to find a direct correlation between terrorist organisations, terrorist travelling, and issues with irregular migration and refugees. That said, it is an issue, which one of our main efforts that we've been doing at the IIJ is the role of parliamentarians in addressing this. And unfortunately, it has often been conflated for what I've seen as somewhat expediency, that, like regular migration or refugees could potentially be perceived as a terrorist threat. I think that the more we can separate that as an issue allows us to focus on the core issue, which is people that are living in extreme poverty, and you give the example of North Africa, they are searching to get out of that situation, so of course, they're migrating.

Only in the last couple of years has at least the work in the IIJ—and I didn't talk earlier in the podcast, we're an inspired institution from the Global Counterterrorism Forum, which is 30 like-minded countries—they have started to have discussions, because what I would call classical counter-terrorism work has now had to look at tangential issues. And I think it was a very excellent work recently done, they called it the Nexus memorandum, but it looked at issues like terrorism financing, migration, sexual violence, that maybe aren't classically tied to what we would consider returning foreign terrorist fighters in the conflict zones, but these are exacerbating issues to us being able to address a stable, secure environment that allows us to move forward.

What I'm concerned about, you asked about the ungoverned spaces, is if the entire international community doesn't have the wherewithal to allow migration in a good way, in a safe way, these people that are then sitting in ungoverned spaces, unable to either go back to their country because they don't have a job, or to move forward as a potential refugee or a regular migration issue, they are subject to the forces of radicalisation. It is an extremely complex issue, it's not covered by…I mean, counter-terrorism world is not involved in trying to adjudicate migration issues, but they are now all part of the bigger hole, which is, what do you do when you rethink multilateralism after the challenges we faced in the last two plus years of the pandemic. And I think without doubt, if the pandemic becomes endemic, which seems to be the general consensus right now, people will start moving and travelling again. And I don't know what 2022 portends, but if a situation gets more stable, 2023 could be a lot of people migrating, who are finally able to get out of probably being in these so-called lockdowns after two, three years. How will we handle that? And what will be some of the second- and third-order issues which will come out from that? I don't have a crystal ball, but I certainly think about it, and I certainly worry about it.

I want to say one last thing which didn't come up in this: we talked about migration, we talked about camps, uncovered spaces—five years ago, we were doing what I call the traditional counter-terrorism capacity building work. A lot of it was based off of these two resolutions I mentioned to you 2178, 2396. But we just started a work stream. Because you mentioned gender and sexual violence as a construct of terrorism, terrorising people through sexual violence, in the context of terrorist work. Five years ago, that wasn't on our radar, but we are flexible, we're trying to think about how the international community is shifting. And the other issue that we're looking at, it's called "many things by many people." But we're looking at racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism. And this is often called right-wing extremism. We just saw it with the unfortunate attacks in some of the places in the United States. That also wasn't on our radar five years ago, but that's also an extremely important issue because if things like racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism are not well-handled, the so-called left-wing extremism can point to that and say, "You've spent many millions of dollars in many years addressing the path to violent extremism by terrorists. What are you going to do about racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism?" which is a whole subset and a different subset, but they all feed on each other, because that makes each side feel that they're being persecuted. And that also is a grievance that leads to terrorist attacks. So, I mean, we've got our work cut out for us.

SG: Absolutely. And I guess that leads to the final question. In many ways, you've covered a lot of the angles. But to give you the final word on, where do you see the primary security challenges that could emerge, the challenges that worry you, that keep you up at night?

TW: Climate change, extreme poverty, lack of food resources, the continued growth of not seeing democracy as a model that is most effective to engender a free and open society that allows people to live and prosper, and an overemphasis on traditional security concerns, because there's x amount of resources, and there's the same number of issues, but we've said many, many times, the importance of counter-terrorism. But the question that I've posed in a recent meeting I went to is, is counter-terrorism an issue which needs to be given right sizing, given these other threats that I call non-traditional threats, so that they are as equally resourced? My biggest one right now is climate change. Money is not invested to change that dynamic. It's going to create more migration, more poverty, and more people that could be leading on the path to radicalisation. How do we wrestle with that? That's a difficult question.

And multilateralism is the key, but what I see—and I really gave a lot of thought to this post-COVID multilateralism approach article—is should we ask ourselves that we treat these other issues like climate change, poverty eradication, etc., as equally pressing, resource-based issues that should be on the agenda of multilateral organisations? So, for years…and I'm a great fan of the Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe, but it is really focused on hard security issues. Are we ready to take the leap in multilateral work that climate change and poverty eradication are also hard security issues, and they should be equally resourced and equally on the agenda of these security organisations with pressing urgency to move these issues forward? That goes back to my interest in the role of parliamentarians. They, at the end of the day, have to decide what the priorities are. And multilateral organisations then need to take their guidance from their governments to see how they shift the agendas. But the agendas have been very set for very many years on some very traditional issues. Should we redefine what traditional security means. That's my final comment.

SG: Redefining what traditional security means—that's definitely food for thought. And I'm so glad that you brought in this dimension about climate change and its connections to international security and also counter-terrorism because that is something that we will have to address with greater pressing urgency, based on the fact that climate change is a reality. And it is impacting on all of us globally. Well, once again, thank you so much, Tom Wuchte, for joining us and NATO *DEEP Dive*, and hope to have you again on the show in the future.

TW: It's been my pleasure, Sajjan, and I wish you all the best, and I hope to see you in-person soon as well. Thank you.

Tom Wuchte's bio

Tom Wuchte served most recently as the Executive Director at the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law (IIJ). Prior to that, he was the Head on Anti-Terrorism Issues at the Organisation for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) where he helped to strengthen the role of the organisation as an effective framework for addressing the terrorist threat and in close coordination with the United Nations and the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF).

Episode 19 - Jennifer Hurst and International Law Enforcement, July 2022

Key Reflections

- **The Australian Federal Police (AFP) has sought to foster strong international partnerships that are critical in successfully countering cross-border criminal syndicates, terrorist groups, and hostile state actors.**
- **Global policing faces the challenges of borderless entries and crimes, evolution in the cyber realm, worldwide instability including the consequences of COVID-19, and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan.**
- **Australia is part of the Joint Investigation Team (JIT), which concluded that a Russian-supplied Buk TELAR surface-to-air missile system was used to down Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 in 2014. Several Russians stand accused of orchestrating the atrocity.**
- **Operation Silves in 2017 involved Australia's law enforcement and intelligence community disrupting the most serious terrorist plot the country has ever faced, with ISIS plotting to bomb a plane flying from Sydney to the U.A.E.**
- **Currently, espionage and foreign interference have become Australia's principal security concerns. Hostile state actors seek information about strategic capabilities, economic and policy priorities, technology, and defence. To counter this, multilateral partnerships such as with the Five Eyes and the Quad have become even more essential.**
- **It is vital to actively encourage, recruit, develop, mentor, and bring women through ranks of law enforcement and provide opportunities to advance their career pathways in counter-terrorism and national security.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

JH: Jennifer Hurst

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode, we speak to Commander Jennifer Hurst of the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Jennifer commenced her career with the AFP in 1985 and has been involved in numerous frontline roles handling international security issues including transnational terrorism and hostile state actors. During 2003, Jennifer established and implemented the AFPs first Joint Counter Terrorism Teams (JCTT) in Sydney, Australia, working in partnership with New South Wales Police and intelligence agencies. In 2005, Jennifer was selected for a secondment to INTERPOL in Lyon, France, undertaking the role of Assistant Director for Public Safety and Security, and assisting and supporting INTERPOL member countries with their terrorism investigations. In August 2015, Jennifer was appointed as Commander for the AFP's counter-terrorism operations, nationally and internationally. In January 2018, Jennifer was selected as the AFP's Commander for Europe, Middle East and Africa where she has provided strategic oversight and engagement for the AFP's activity in these regions. Commander Hurst was awarded the Australia Police Medal (APM) in 2005 for her investigational leadership in the areas of Counter Terrorism and Narcotics.

Commander Jennifer Hurst it's a real pleasure to have you joining us on NATO *DEEP Dive.*

JH: Thank you so much Sajjan, it's an absolute pleasure to be here with you as well.

SG: So, let's start with the work of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) as an international partner in global security. From my own observations, the AFP has taken the lead in numerous multilateral forums for cooperation and strengthening resilience from a variety of transnational threats. Often, that also includes engaging with academia with NGOs, and I've seen this first-hand in Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia. It's clear there's a methodology behind this, but could you perhaps explain why the AFP has been so effective in international law enforcement efforts and cooperation?

JH: The AFP has been around for quite a while now and we are the Australian government's primary law enforcement agency, so we naturally have a remit in international engagement. And probably, just as a bit of an opening Sajjan, we're all very, very experienced in law enforcement now and I think we very much understand that strong and collegial partnerships, internationally, are absolutely critical, because the leverage and the impact that we can bring to bear on any criminal syndicates, terrorist groups, operating, is much more powerful when we all work together. And I think from an AFP perspective, that's very much what our mantra is.

A lot of the investigations that we do now, have an international nexus, and I would suggest that there's probably very few things that we do, that do not actually have an international nexus. So, for us, our international partnerships, our relationships, our engagement is absolutely key. And I think it has never, ever been more important to strengthen our international engagement. So, that's sort of front and centre.

SG: To build on that, you spoke about the fact that most of the work the AFP is tasked with has an international nexus, so how does the agency's global remit work?

JH: From an AFP perspective, we really have a very unique international remit amongst Australian law enforcement agencies. So, we operate one of the world's largest and most diverse international law enforcement networks; we've got 200 members that we currently have offshore; we cover 35 International posts across 35 countries; and we also do some work, in our missions, when we go in and assist from a capability perspective and lifting their capabilities in their policing services. So, globalisation is just one of those things that we're all tackling now. And the movement of criminals across international borders is easy for them, they can do it relatively easily. So, we need to be able to be operating collegiately and together, to actually bring about maximum impact.

I think, with the AFP, we've always approached our position, offshore, as something that's quite humbling. And it's a privilege to be working in these countries, and respecting that they have sovereignty, and we are just there, assisting them, providing them support, and vice versa with some of our investigations offshore. So, internationally, we really do hold this as—there's a cliche that the AFP uses— 'the jewel in the crown' of what the AFP does. And we have been very successful, because we are very respectful of our partners and what we do offshore, but also very much of the

understanding that we can't do any of this alone, we cannot operate alone in this current environment, which is complex, it's global, and it's very, very challenging. And the only way that we can bring maximum impact to what we're doing, is by working together. And it's interesting, actually, I was reading something that our Commissioner [Reece Kershaw] — he did a speech just recently—he has just taken over as the Chair of the Five Eyes Law Enforcement Group (FELEG), which is a really critical position, and the AFP is really privileged and quite proud that we've now taken over the chair of that for the next two years.

And we're talking about a very powerful group there, Sajjan, these are heads of our Five Eyes law enforcement partners, working together to leverage collective legislation, capability, and intelligence to maximise the impact on the criminal environment. And our commissioner was just talking, recently, about taking over the Chair of the FELEG and he made a really, really interesting point. And he said, we have all of these syndicates that are operating globally, and they work together, and they get things done globally with relative ease, unfortunately, for us as law enforcement. But he made a particular point. And he said that the largest syndicate that operates in this world is the law enforcement syndicate. And you know what? He's absolutely right. Law enforcement, as a collective, operating together, as a syndicate, this is where we have maximum impact. And we can bring a lot of leverage and power to play. So, law enforcement internationally is probably the largest syndicate that operates, and we just need to be very, very in tune that we need to be doing this together and working together as much as we possibly can.

SG: You touched on so many important points, and just demonstrates the breadth and scale that the Australian Federal Police are having to deal with in terms of the challenges and I want to unpack a lot of those as we continue our discussion. But before we get into that, specifically, let me also factor in your own role in this. So, what made you decide to work in law enforcement?

JH: Well, it's funny, actually, I've, even as a small child, I wanted to do one of two things, Sajjan, I wanted to be a police officer, or I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher. Now, I don't know where the alignment comes in relation to that, but I'm sure that there could be some crossovers there! But I joined the AFP way back in 1985 and I've got to say, I've had the most amazing career, and I've had the most amazing experiences in law enforcement and by joining the AFP in the breadth of work that we do and what we are responsible for.

But I think if I sort of unstitched a little bit, why did I want to join law enforcement? Primarily, I think it's that wanting to serve; that public service; that protection of the society and community that were primarily involved in working with; and helping people through, probably some of the most challenging and difficult periods of their life; and playing a really important role in supporting our community and our society, where things have happened and they need the support, they need the assistance from law enforcement. So, I think that it's just a deep-rooted feeling in myself about wanting to serve and protect and support. That's really strong with me and it's not just from a community perspective, it's how I actually overlay just my work as a commander in the AFP as well and that's what I apply as well, to my thinking, in relation to the people that work with me, my teams, it's just my thinking, it's just who I am and what I'm all about is that protection and that wanting to serve and support people.

SG: How do you feel policing has changed over the years, from your perspective?

JH: If I look back to when I joined, in 1985, I've got to say, I think back then, and where we are now, in relation to just the complexities of what we're dealing with now, I mean, it's quite extraordinary. As I was thinking about the podcast today and sort of thinking about some of the things that really have changed, and just the whole globalisation, the flow of people now, that we never had back in 1985; borderless entries; borderless crimes; the cyber area that we're in now; the movement in technology; the global instability that we are now seeing that's manifesting itself in a whole range of different crime types that we never had to think about back when I first joined.

And it's just that change, the changing threat environment constantly, the criminals and the syndicates, the terrorist groups that are operating offshore now, trying to avoid law enforcement detection, all makes our job significantly harder. And the advances in technology, the communication platforms that these people are using, it's a really hard task to actually keep up with what the criminals are now using. So, the environment is so much more complex, the scrutiny that is now applied to law enforcement agencies as well has never been stronger than when I first joined it, that dynamic has really changed now.

And if I talk a little bit about COVID-19, a current issue that we're all starting to come out of now, I think that there's going to be flow on effects for that for years to come, if I'm perfectly honest with you. Some of the things that we're currently seeing now as a result of COVID-19, is that absolute uptick in relation to the people that have been online, and the number of people that have been online, during COVID-19, they've now been targeted, as vulnerable individuals—by whether that be terrorist groups, or criminal groups—targeting them, targeting the most vulnerable because of the sheer volume of people who have been online during COVID-19. And I think there's other flow on effects that we are yet to see [such as] criminals and other groups changing their modus operandi and how they've actually done business during COVID, because trust me, whilst there might have been a slowdown slightly, they were still doing business during COVID-19, that didn't stop, they didn't really suffer too much as a result of that.

If I have a look at the moment in relation to what we, from an Australian Federal Police perspective look at, we have 70% of all of our transnational and serious organised crime targets either living offshore or having links offshore. Now, that's significant. If we look at the terrorist threat, at the moment, still very well-established networks causing us all great issues. And they've got the ability, now, as I mentioned, with the online uplift over COVID-19, they've had the ability, and they've had the time, to radicalise individuals online. And that whole domestic threat picture has now increased, I think, as a result of that.

So, whilst I've touched on a lot of areas there, I think what is fairly evident is just what we're dealing with now is vastly different to whatever would have come across our desk 30 years ago. We are living in a very complex environment at the moment. And it's even changed as well, the people that we're now looking to recruit, and maybe we can come on to that a little bit later on. But we've got some very smart, intelligent, capable, diverse people with multiple talents and skills that we now employ to help us actually tackle the threats that we're now dealing with.

SG: So, certainly, it's very much a complex security environment, as you mentioned. And this leads me to discussing your own role in aiding international security. You have a unique vantage point in that you were involved in investigating two separate and very different threats on the aviation industry. One entailed the downing of a civilian airliner by entities supported by a state actor, and the other was a plot from a transnational terrorist group.

Let's look at the former first. So, you were involved in the investigation into the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, over Ukraine, which everyone remembers. And that occurred back on the 17th of July 2014. And that happened whilst this airliner was flying over eastern Ukraine and it was hit by a missile. All 283 passengers and 15 crew were sadly, tragically, killed. This included 38 Australians. How did you first get involved in this case?

JH: Yes Sajjan, this has been an incredibly complex and challenging investigation. The downing in relation of MH17, the AFP notes as Operation AREW. It has required a relentless commitment to task with many partners looking to bring justice for the families of the victims involved in this absolute tragedy. On 4 August 2014, a joint investigation was established under Eurojust provisions and that was the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Ukraine, and Malaysia later joined in December 2014. Now, just to give you some context, that Joint Investigation Team (JIT) is still running Sajjan, and the Joint investigation has just been extended until March 2023.

There have been some really key developments over the course of many years which the investigation team is extremely proud of, and we are proud of them. In September 2016, the Joint Investigation Team publicly announced the first results of the investigation, and that was MH17 was shot down by a missile launched by a Buk TELAR that came from the Russian Federation. On 5 July 2017, not long after that announcement, the JIT countries announced their full support for a Dutch National Prosecution. This in turn allowed alleged offenders involved to be prosecuted in the Netherlands under Dutch law. Then, on 19 June 2019, the Dutch Prosecution Service, charged four alleged offenders with murder in connection with the shooting down of MH17. That was three Russians and one Ukrainian. International arrest warrants have been issued for all the four accused. The trial commenced in The Hague on 9 March 2020, so several years after this tragic event with none of the accused in attendance. The court is currently deliberating and may deliver the judgement later on this year [2022]. The JIT investigation remains ongoing to identify further suspects. The AFP remains absolutely committed to this task, Sajjan. Very committed, very dedicated people we have involved in this. We have deployed in excess of over 500 personnel since July 2014 in support of this investigation and we remain part of the investigation team.

I think for all of us that have been involved in Operation AREW, as we call it, this has been a very, extremely complex investigation for a whole range of reasons. And it's been very, very challenging for those involved. I've been involved with a number of international press conferences over the last couple of years since I've been here in London, and I've overseen our people that have been working on this in Kyiv, and also in the Netherlands. Due to what's going on now with Russia and Ukraine we've actually moved our people out of there, they are now all based in the Netherlands. But we've done some fantastic work, and we're still involved in that investigation. And we now have three that remain in the Netherlands still working as part of the JIT. So, it has been long standing, it's been something that I've overseen since I arrived in London as the commander in this region, since January 2018. And obviously have been heavily invested in.

SG: It's just a reminder of what a tragic incident that was and remains something that requires resolution, especially for the family members who lost their loved ones under the most horrific circumstances. Perhaps it's an obvious question, but did Russia try to interfere in or impede the investigation?

JH: I think we've seen a lot of open source in relation to that. And what I can say, Sajjan, is that they probably haven't given us all of the assistance that we would have liked, is probably the answer that I would give to that particular question.

SG: Absolutely. So, the other major security issue that you've had to deal with was known as Operation Silves. On 29 July 2017, an Australian counter-terrorism operation foiled the most serious ISIS plot the country has ever faced. Two brothers in Sydney, guided by operatives in Syria, had tried to bomb an Etihad plane flying from Sydney to Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, which was going to carry some 400 passengers. They also tried to build a chemical weapon to disperse a lethal gas attack against members of the public. These were very serious plots. How close were the plotters to executing this attack?

JH: So, just on that particular operation. So, just to put some context here, there's probably not a lot I can say on the particular operation at the moment, Sajjan. The matter is actually still before court, and it's subject to some suppression orders. But to provide some context, so I was actually one of the CT commanders back in Australia at the time this operation started and I've got to say, I've been working in and out of counter-terrorism now, probably, since the best part of 2003, so I have a real passion for working in this particular crime type and I absolutely, really enjoy it I'm very, very passionately committed to it.

But this was one of these operations where, when we saw what could have happened, it really shook me, I guess. It was probably one of the operations I've been involved in where I sort of sat back and thought about what could have been. And if this had have happened, and as you rightly say it's been reported, quite largely, in open source about there was an attempt to put an IED onto an aircraft that was leaving Sydney, by these particular individuals. If that had have happened, that would have been an absolutely tragic day for everybody concerned. And it was just something that really caused me just to sit back and think about what could have been, because, yes, absolutely, it was close to happening, it was probably close to happening more than any other, or as close as any other, plot that we have foiled over the years. And, you know, we were able to take some disruptive action, which went our way, fortunately, and we located what we needed to as part of that, so it didn't ever go ahead. But absolutely, it was close to happening. And, for whatever reasons, they delayed what they were doing and that was probably fortunate for us that we were able to intercept at that stage.

But we've all spoken about what the current threat looks like, and we often speak about lone actor attacks, low sophistication of weaponry, cars or knives or something else that might be opportunistic, which would be quite easy for an attack to occur anywhere in the world. But this one was, if we think back to 9/11 days, this was close to that type of thing that could have happened, and it's not that we've ever taken our eye off the ball, in relation to that possibly occurring again, but I guess this was a bit of a wake-up call to say, this is what these people are still thinking about: blowing up an aircraft, working with people overseas. It seems to have some reminders for all of us, I think, about 9/11 and the tragic events over there. And if this had happened over Australia that would have just shaken us globally, we are in an absolute wake-up call that we've still got people out there that do have the capabilities, or the interest, or the wherewithal, or the motivations and the guidance from those overseas. This is still happening, and we can't afford to take our eye off the ball. But that was just something that really shocked me, I guess, to the core, to think about what could have happened. And as I said, I've been working in this field for a very long time, but that particular operation, yes, it did have an impact on me.

SG: It's again, another reminder, as you mentioned, 9/11, about the terrorists' pathological obsession that they have in targeting the aviation industry. And this was just a few years ago, this wasn't a decade ago, two decades ago, it was quite recent in many ways, and the full ramifications of it are yet to fully transpire. You're drawing that linkage, Jen, with 9/11; it brings me to the issue about what's happening right now in Afghanistan, where the country has come under control, again, by not just the Taliban, but in particular, the Haqqani Network, which is an internationally proscribed terrorist group, allies of al-Qaeda. Does it concern you, does it worry you that when you have this situation unfolding in Afghanistan, the fact that the pandemic, ostensibly, is now becoming part of the 'new normal' where people are beginning to travel, that we could have a situation where foreign fighters will emerge from the theatre in Afghanistan and pose a similar threat to the one that we had seen with ISIS in the past and al-Qaeda previously, and potentially the return of al-Qaeda, and maybe new groups that we haven't been able to anticipate, but ones that could emerge in the vacuum that is created in Afghanistan and possibly Pakistan too?

JH: Totally agree. I think Afghanistan, and what happened there with the withdrawal and now the Afghan government as it is, I think that's a real concern for all of us, if I'm being honest with you. And I think that not even just from a terrorist perspective, but I think just generally from a whole range of possible criminal activity that's going to emerge out of there. But absolutely, I think that it's a real concern, a concern that we all need to monitor and to watch. And absolutely, I agree with you about al-Qaeda. I think that just from my observations is that we've had ISIS for many, many years now. And I think that al-Qaeda has, they've certainly been there, they've certainly not gone away, I think they've just managed to sit under the radar and watch while ISIS had all the attention. So, I think that what we need to now do as law enforcement, and with our intelligence partners, is now have a look at that changing dynamic and what that currently looks like in that environment. And as you rightly say, looking at what other potential splinter groups who may or may not be in support of either of those groups, and what that might mean for us as law enforcement.

I think definitely we're looking at the attraction of people to go from Australia and to travel over into the conflict zone, that's still something that we're very concerned about, we've certainly got legislation that we can actually use to stop people from doing that, and that's really beneficial from an Australian perspective. But Australia does have quite a number of Australians that are in the conflict zone, some that we're not even sure if they're still alive or not, but they're certainly of concern to us regardless. So, we still have Australians over there, and if they were ever to return, the threat that they actually pose, whether that be in Australia, or whether they might travel elsewhere and be a security threat elsewhere. But certainly, that's a concern to us, and people still looking to that interest, that motivation that they're looking to be part of, the new Afghanistan or what might be evolving there in a new threat environment.

SG: What's becoming clear in our discussion is the variety of threats and challenges that Australia has to face. So, the country is in a, and I use the word again, very unique, geopolitical position. It faces the same threats that Europe has had to endure, with its nationals being recruited by groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. And then Australia is also a key ally of NATO, in countering Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. And then on top of all of that, there are these growing tensions with China. What do you believe will be Australia's primary security priorities in the years to come? Is it going to have to be a balance between dealing with transnational terrorist groups and state actors? Is one going to end up taking the priority? Or is this going to have to be that difficult juggling act of constantly trying to balance both with the resources that are available?

JH: I think you've just hit the nail on the head, Sajjan. I think we do have a number of threats that are currently existing and the resources that we need to apply to them, and not only the resources, but also the capabilities that we need to apply. Because as I mentioned, at the start of the podcast, how much things have changed over the 30 years that I've been in law enforcement, and we look at the complex environment, really challenging environment that we're operating in now is vastly different. And we need to keep up with that. So, we need to keep up with our resources, and we need to also keep up on our capabilities as well to match what's going on in the criminal environment. I think that if we come on to — there's a lot in open source in relation to some of the countries that we're all concerned about in relation to state and non-state actor threats. And certainly, Australia is not immune from any of that. And, I think one of the things that actually surprised me, as I've sort of looked into this a little bit more when we're talking about terrorism, and the threat that that still poses for all of us, and also the state and non-state actor threats that were that we're all experiencing, from an Australian perspective — and I'll just provide that overlay — from an Australian perspective, what we're seeing now is that espionage and foreign interference has supplanted terrorism as our principal security concern at the moment. It's actually demanding more attention, and it's demanding more resources, and it's currently outpacing the terrorism threat. So that's really interesting, when I've sort of unpacked that and had a look at that.

I'm not suggesting for a minute that the terrorism threat in Australia has lowered because it hasn't, but what we're dealing with now is an increasing threat around espionage and also foreign interference. And the problem with this threat is that it's pervasive, it's multifaceted, and its potential to do such serious damage to our sovereignty, values, and national interest. So, it really goes to the core of the Australian principles and way of life. But our experience is not unique though, Sajjan, we are not the only ones that are actually dealing with this. I think it's shared across a number of like-minded countries and our concerns in this space. And I think that multiple countries now are seeking to conduct espionage against Australia. I mean, that's just what we're seeing in Australia at the moment. They're seeking information about strategic capabilities, economic and policy priorities, research and development, and also defence capabilities. So, you know, when you look at that, and what we need to actually counter that and try and detect that, it's very, very challenging.

And we have a number of Australians who are targeted or are currently being targeted by foreign intelligence services. And these are people that are either current or former high-ranking government officials, they are academics, they are business executives, they are members of diaspora communities. It's a whole range of areas that are actively being targeted by foreign intelligence services. So, these are really great threats to us, and obviously things that are really demanding a lot of attention at the moment. If we have a look at — we just, as you may or may not know, we just had an election in Australia. So, in the recent government election that we had in Australia, our domestic intelligence agency detected and disrupted a foreign interference plot that was attempted by a foreign government and their intelligence agencies. And it was an attempt to actually identify and target vulnerable individuals through inducements and cultivation, to advance their own interests of the foreign government. So, it's absolutely alive in Australia. That is for sure. And it's something that's going to be with us for a long time, I think.

SG: It's interesting hearing that perspective about the threat from state actors. In the beginning of our conversation, you spoke about how important partnerships and relationships are for Australia when it comes to dealing with counter-terrorism. Does the principle still apply when it looks at dealing with the threat from state actors, because of course Australia is a key member of the Five Eyes which you mentioned earlier, which is in partnership with the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand. And then Australia has also become a very important cog within what's known as the Quad, which is a strategic relationship with the United States, India, and Japan. Do

those multinational, multilateral, partnerships become even more important when you are dealing with the state actor threat?

JH: Oh, absolutely Sajjan. I think that just goes without saying, particularly when you're talking about Five Eyes and the Quad, that absolutely goes without saying that this is something that we're all dealing with, and we all need to work together on and to learn from each other, learn from each other's best practice in relation to detecting this, because it can go largely undetected. But the influence and the issues that any form of foreign interference or espionage, when it's targeted against a particular country, the damage that is done is not just necessarily within that country, it can be broader than that as well. So most definitely, those relationships, the engagement, particularly across the Five Eyes is absolutely critical in this space, Sajjan.

SG: Very much so. One final question, the final part of our discussion involves the vital role that women play in law enforcement for international security, for protection of the value system that you mentioned, and you yourself are a key example of that. And I noticed in many conferences that there are so many women in law enforcement that are pivotal and essential to providing that security, that have been responsible for foiling and disrupting major international plots, and it's frightening to think what would have happened if they had not been allowed to be in those positions. Are we heading into the right direction for having more women in this field? And what can be done to encourage more female participation?

JH: It's a really good question. And I'm actually going to start off with something that I only just remembered when I was preparing for this. When I was working in counter-terrorism, back in Australia, before I came out to undertake my role here in London, so I was one of the commanders for counter-terrorism, a senior executive role within the AFP and working with all of our Australian law enforcement agencies in that space. And I was out with an assistant commissioner from another one of our state law enforcement agencies one day and a good partner and friend to the AFP working in the area of counter-terrorism. And he said to me one day over coffee, he said, "Jen, do you realise" — and this was, now think about this, Sajjan, so this was 2017, just before I came to London in 2018 — and he said to me, "Jen, do you realise that you are the only female senior executive working in law enforcement in the area of counter-terrorism?" I was the only one, Sajjan, as a senior executive female working in the area of counter-terrorism, and I was the only one in Australia across all of Australian law enforcement agencies. Now, the thing that struck me there was I actually hadn't even thought about that myself. It was actually brought to my attention by an assistant commissioner colleague of mine who's also working in the area. So that actually did cause me to sort of think about that. But I just remembered that actually when I was thinking about our podcast today, and I just wanted to start with that, because things have changed. And that's a good thing.

And certainly, from an AFP perspective, we are actively seeking to recruit, develop, mentor, and bring women through, into law enforcement, into the AFP. We are really doing a lot of work in relation to that. And when we think about it, as law enforcement agencies or officers, we need to be representing the communities that we serve. And if we're thinking about just straight men and women in the community, we're talking about a 50/50 split there. Well, I don't think that law enforcement agencies are really overly reflective of that. And not just women in law enforcement agencies, I think from a whole range of diverse cultures, you know, we need to properly represent the communities that we serve. So, it's not just women, it's a diverse cultural experience. And people from different nationalities, we need to bring them in, because that's where we get the most value. That's where we get to represent the communities that we serve. So we are, you know, very

much in the AFP looking at that as a collective and how we attract women into the AFP to start with and how we can actually support them through that journey, whether that be looking at some flexible options if need be if they have commitments. But this is not just for women, I think we're looking at how we actually have that proper work-life balance across the AFP. And currently in the AFP, from a sworn officer, so a police officer perspective…23.3% of our staffing level is currently women. And by 2028, we're looking to actually increase that to 30%. Well, I'd like to think that we could probably do better than that by 2028. And we need to do a lot of work to actually encourage this.

But if I think about the role of women in law enforcement, I mean, you've even touched on it in some of the things that I've had the fortune of listening to you talk about, Sajjan, particularly in relation to Afghanistan and women's rights being eroded there, and what impact that has, because you simply do not have a woman's voice at the table. And applying those soft diplomacy skills in a very male-dominated arena, and having that different opinion, as I say, just bringing a different voice to the table, I think it's quite powerful. And that's what we miss when we don't have females, I think, around the table. And working in the area of counter-terrorism, we are trying to do a lot more work to bring women through. And one of the current initiatives — which I'm so pleased that this has been accepted, and we're working through it now as a Five Eyes collective — so as part of the Leadership in Counter Terrorism (LinCT) programme and conference that you've been part of — so that's the Five Eyes group there that work together. And they've actually just signed off and agreed to a new programme that they're going to be implementing, and it's called "Women in Counter Terrorism." And the UK and Australia are really leading on that at the moment, and I'll run through sort of what they're looking to do, I'm sort of involved in that on the margins here in my position in London, but we're actually going to be bringing on obviously the US, Canada, and also New Zealand into this so we can make it a collective exercise.

But it's really looking at encouraging women coming into CT policing and advancing their career pathways through either counter-terrorism and or national security. And what we're looking to do with the programme is to harness the support and the influence of senior women across the CT environment and offer training, support, coaching, mentoring, and what's really interesting and really exciting is that we're looking to do secondments. So, we are looking to exchange women into our CT areas, for anywhere from 6 to 12 months at a time, to actually get that experience and build their experience and knowledge. So that's what we're currently doing. And I'm really pleased that that's starting to get a little bit of traction now. And, in fact, I know I've got a meeting in the next couple of weeks to discuss that even further. But I'm really pleased that we're doing that, it's such a critical role. And I think we need to encourage women to get the experiences that I have had, for example, and probably understand and unpack a little bit why women are a little bit put off by working in this area, particularly in counter-terrorism. It is high-stress, it is high-pressure, absolutely. But I think that this is where the mix comes in when we talk about diversity, that actually helps with the stress and with the pressure by bringing different voices and different opinions to the table. It is, you know, it can be quite a male-dominated environment. But we also need to look to see how we can change that as well.

SG: These are such important points that you're making, and that initiative of Women in Counter Terrorism led by the Leadership in Counter Terrorism (LinCT), that's fantastic. And I think that will hopefully play a very important role in encouraging more women at high-levels to be involved in counter-terrorism and international security. And it's so essential, because we've seen women play an intrinsic role in disrupting major plots that could have been devastating economically, politically, socially. There were women that were critical to providing the intelligence that led to the location of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. And then we've been talking about your experiences in disrupting

plots and foiling the roles of state actors. So, it's so important in this age now, where we address this and see what can be done to redress the balance, or the lack of a balance that has existed in this field. So very important points that you've mentioned, Jen. Is there anything else in our discussion that you wanted to touch upon or add that we haven't looked at so far?

JH: Well, I don't think so, I think we've probably covered the most significant areas, and just examining how things have changed in the 30 years since I've been in law enforcement. But you know, probably just to sort of finish off, Sajjan, we've spoken a lot about the AFP, our international role, what we do internationally, and how important those partnerships are. Can I tell you that, for me, personally, and also professionally, some of the most rewarding work I've ever done is working with our partners and our stakeholders internationally and working together to actually bring about a resolution to a problem or work together on an investigation or work together on an operation. I often talk about particularly the CT family, and the CT family internationally is huge. And we rely on each other, when times are tough, or when things are happening or an attack has happened, or investigation is ongoing. You know, it is often that I would get messages from my international friends and colleagues that I've worked with over many years, offering me support in whatever might be going on in Australia at that time, or in any role that I might be undertaking. So that, you know, I just think it's so incredibly rewarding to be working in the international space and working with so many wonderful people that are working towards a common cause and just looking to protect and serve our community.

And I look at the attacks that go on globally, and particularly here in the UK, with the multiple attacks this poor country suffered in 2017, just before I came out here. And every time an attack happens somewhere in the world, we feel it. We feel it as law enforcement officers working in the area of counter-terrorism. And I felt, even though I was back in Australia at that time, my heart went out to the people that were caught up in these attacks, the devastating consequences of that. But my dear friends and colleagues here in the UK that I knew were working night and day to bring about some justice for those people that were caught up in dealing with the aftermath of such horrible, horrible attacks on our community and the people that live here in the UK. So, every attack that happens anywhere in the world, we feel it, we feel it as the counter-terrorism family, as the counter-terrorism law enforcement family. And this is what makes me so passionate and so incredibly committed to the work that I do, and why I just love working internationally with my partners, my friends, my colleagues, and people like you, Sajjan. I mean, it's been an absolute pleasure to have met you back in 2018 I think we first came across each other. And honestly, I consider you a dear and trusted friend, and I really enjoy our conversations and just having that connection with you as well and just people like you, I think it's amazing.

SG: Oh well thank you, Jen, that's very kind of you to say. And look, the feelings are totally reciprocated, you've been absolutely critical to helping to coordinate counter-terrorism efforts, you brought in multiple stakeholders, not just within law enforcement, but beyond, you've engaged with academia, with the NGOs, you've always tried to find answers to problems, to see what solutions can be done. You've been relentless, even during the pandemic, you were keen to constantly communicate with people, find ways of dealing with potential threats that were going to emerge, and you very much represent the finest qualities and aspirations of the Australian Federal Police. And we are going to miss you in London. And just wanted to say thank you again for agreeing to be on the NATO *DEEP Dive* podcast, and my gratitude to you and also to all your colleagues in the Australian Federal Police for doing what you do, not just for Australia, but for global security, because Australia is very much a positive actor in that international cooperation. And I think the podcast hopefully will provide greater insight to those that may not necessarily always be aware of what Australia does, but hopefully now are able to get a better insight into just how much Australia plays

in terms of international support and coordination and cooperation.

Commander Jennifer Hurst, thank you very much again for joining us on the NATO *DEEP Dive* podcast.

JH: Thank you so much, Sajjan, very kind words, and I appreciate it very much. It's been an absolute pleasure, and I'm very flattered that you invited me onto the podcast today. So, thank you so much.

SG: It's our pleasure.

Jennifer Hurst's bio

Jennifer Hurst is a commander in the Australian Federal Police (AFP), where she has worked since 1985. She has been involved in numerous frontline roles handling international security issues including transnational terrorism and hostile state actors. She established and implemented the AFP's first Joint Counter Terrorism Teams (JCCT) in 2003 in Sydney, Australia. In 2005 she was selected for secondment to INTERPOL as Assistant Director for Public Safety and Security. She was appointed Commander for the AFP's counter-terrorism operations in 2015 and selected as the AFP's Commander for Europe, Middle East, and Africa in 2018.

Episode 20 - Asanga Abeyagoonasekera and Sri Lanka's Collapse, July 2022

Key Reflections

- **Structural changes were made to the Sri Lankan constitution by the Rajapaksas, a sibling regime. Nepotism removed the checks and balances and independent institutions were politicised including the judiciary, police, and military.**
- **The Rajapaksas accumulated significant debt through large borrowings mainly from China, as well as investments on strategic projects that did not bring any tangible returns and exacerbated already existing problems.**
- **Sri Lanka needs to immediately recalibrate its foreign policy and once again pursue a rules-based international order. Sri Lanka is an island sitting at the geostrategic location of the Indian Ocean region.**
- **Sri Lanka needs to re-engage with multilateral security mechanisms like the Quad, which can also provide support in curbing the terrorist threat in South Asia and enhancing international security.**
- **The political vacuum and economic instability in Sri Lanka could enable organised crime to flourish. The island nation may also be used as a hub for narcotics coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan by sea. International cooperation and greater intelligence sharing are more essential than ever before.**
- **The largest tourism markets for Sri Lanka were from Russia and Ukraine. Putin's invasion of Ukraine amplified the economic problems of Sri Lanka post-pandemic, and the resulting rise in global oil prices compounded Sri Lanka's economic crisis.**

Transcript:

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

AA: Asanga Abeyagoonasekera

SG: Hello, and welcome to *DEEP Dive*, brought to you by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel. In this episode we speak to Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, who is the Strategic Advisor on Geopolitics and International Security at The Millennium Project in Washington D.C. Asanga is the author of several books including Sri Lanka at Crossroads: Geopolitical challenges and National Interests as well as Conundrum of an Island.

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, thank you for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive

AA: Thank you for having me.

SG: Let me paint the scene, if I may. Sri Lanka is a beautiful island nation, off the coast of India. It's been very welcoming to tourists. When Hollywood needs a forest, it films there, iconic movies

like *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, I believe one of *The Jungle Book* movies also was filmed there. Sri Lanka is not often in the news for bad things in the past. Although there had been that long battle against the Tamil Tigers in the civil war, there was also the devastating 2004 tsunami. Yet with the Tamil Tiger insurgency defeated, Sri Lanka began to look like a success story by the standards of the region.

Just a few years ago, it had been elevated from a lower middle class income country to an upper middle class income country by the World Bank. Its GDP per capita was about the same as countries in Eastern Europe such as Ukraine and Moldova, and only just slightly behind Brazil. It was a thriving tourist destination and was the success story of South Asia. Yet now we're looking at a country with runaway foreign debt, skyrocketing costs of foreign imports, a collapsing currency, falling exports, shortages of food, fuel, and medicines. Where did this go wrong? Did this country sleepwalk into disaster?

AA: Well, I think to answer your question, yes Sri Lanka was seen as a trading hub from ancient history. The word serendipity comes from Sri Lanka, because the island was called Serendib one time. So, it's a geostrategic hotspot in the Indian Ocean, sitting in the sea lines of communication—the east west sea lines of communication.

The problem emerged due to multiple factors; Gotabaya Rajapaksa's regime's inward policy prescription—irrational prescription—was the main cause for the problem. I would say there were other factors also, which he inherited from the previous regimes, which is the debt, the large amount of borrowings I would say. Those borrowings mainly from China, as well as sovereign bonds, as well as many other countries also. But the Chinese percentage of borrowings as well as the investment that was made on strategic projects did not have any return—minimum return.

So, I've studied the Chinese BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) projects in Sri Lanka, as well as, the larger footprint, the Rajapaksas welcoming the Chinese footprint. The growing footprint in Sri Lanka became a concern to the foreign policy, Sri Lanka had a very balanced foreign policy from its past, non-aligned, and we call it balanced. Now, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was Gotabaya Rajapaksa's brother who was the president from 2005 to '15, ended a war, as you mentioned, a three-decade civil war in 2009. There were many issues, structural changes that were made to the Sri Lankan Constitution by the Rajapaksas, bringing power to the executive presidency. First initially by his brother, and then followed by Gotabaya Rajapaksa from an amendment, which he made soon after he became president, moving power from the legislature to the executive, removing checks and balances, the independent institutions, such as the Bribery [and Corruption] Commission (CIABOC), such as the Police Commission, were taken under him. He altered the model, I would say much more than his brother did, Mahinda, by inviting 27 military officers into civil positions, including the foreign secretary of Sri Lanka. That I think created one of the biggest concerns because for the first time the civilian military balance we had, was disturbed. And, for example, the archaeology department, again, a military appointment was there in the archaeological [department] and poverty alleviation, [and] on agriculture, to grow vegetables.

So, it was something very new for the Sri Lankans. And also, the regime was very unique because it was a sibling regime. President, as well as the prime minister, who was his brother, which was Mahinda Rajapaksa, the former president, followed by many others. He expanded his family, the finance minister was his brother, another brother, another was in charge of the telecommunications used, Mahinda's son was involved in that. And then not only the brothers, but also their chil-

dren also. So, it was a family rule, controlling all the main key ministries, which had internal issues where the senior ministers started questioning the autocracy that Gotabaya built and resigning one after the other. And the corruption issues, the charges that were made by the attorney general, for example, there were charges on a floating armoury issue, with more than 1000 indictment charges raised by the Attorney General [and] was dropped by Gotabaya.

So, the interference with the judiciary was another area, which I saw in 2021, when I wrote *The Coming Anarchy in Sri Lanka*, because the judiciary managed to keep at least some sort of democracy moving forward, some sort of sensibility, with rational judgments given. But when the executive started interfering with the judiciary, such as my writing in June 2021, *The Coming Anarchy* I highlighted the president pardoning a political criminal, who was sentenced by the judiciary and he gave a presidential pardon to him. So, what I mentioned was, [if you] keep on interfering with the judiciary like this, you will lose the credibility and integrity of the whole of the institutions and bureaucracies especially. And you're moving the country toward an anarchic situation, which happened exactly within a year, [on] July ninth was when the people came out and protested.

So, not only the economic issues, economic issues were considerable, but then political issues were also a serious concern because all the protesters are saying, 'we want a change in the political culture, we want to end nepotism, we want to end corruption.' So, it is a political culture change that the protesters are requesting. Apart from the hardship that they're going through, for days in standing for fuel; the highest inflation rate in the world after Zimbabwe, the second highest is in Sri Lanka; the daily wages, there are many Sri Lankans, the larger percentage of Sri Lankans [are] daily wage earners, so they've been affected. As well as their income being affected, the schools have been closed, the government sector is completely dysfunctional. So, it's a complete dysfunctionality, I would say.

SG: Well, you, in much detail, unpacked a lot of the problems that the Rajapaksa dynasty had created and mentioned very rightly that it was not just the economic, but it was the military, it was the judiciary, there was a strong dynamic of nepotism. And we've seen that dynastic Rajapaksa rule come to an end. Gotabaya Rajapaksa has resigned. Whilst abroad, fleeing to the Maldives initially. And he was the eighth president of Sri Lanka and his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa who you were also talking about was the sixth president. It's not that dynastic politics is specifically only for Sri Lanka, it's quite common across South Asia and many other parts of the world, but could we say that this pivotal moment now in Sri Lanka signifies the end of dynastic politics or are there other potential ruling families in the past that may see an opportunity to take advantage of the situation?

AA: I can't call it an end, because of the South Asian context. When you look at it culturally, as well as when you look at how South Asia—South Asia is a very unique region, I captured in my book *Conundrum of an Island,* where security sensitivity is a serious issue. I found that, there was an article which I wrote called *Bombs and Elections*, in which I found that South Asia is very unique to any other region in the world, where, within a week or two, you have bombs, or within a month, you have a bomb, then the whole political [sphere], the campaign's, redirect towards an authoritarian ruler or a family ruler, who wants to establish [themselves].

So, what happened in Sri Lanka was exactly the same because 6.9 million votes which Gotabaya got, they got two thirds of the parliament majority. So, in 2019, it was following the Easter Sunday bomb attack, which killed 250 People in Sri Lanka. So, his campaign was launched one week after the Easter Sunday bomb attack. So, basically, the campaign was to guarantee security, that

when he comes there won't be any mistakes like this, and highlighting the issues that the previous government had on the security concern, because he was the former Defence Secretary, the ideal candidate for the situation. And then he managed to win the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, which is a larger percentage now who's protesting as well as who got rid of him, together with the minority community.

So, South Asia has that uniqueness on the fragile security situation and fragile states can be used to breed terrorism, as well as certain clusters of terrorism, the Easter Sunday [terrorists] if you trace back there were clusters in India. So, we found many security lapses. And then intelligent sharing was a serious issue, the intelligence that was shared by India to Sri Lanka, [which were] multiple warnings prior to the attack, were not shared with the United States.

So, a mechanism like the Quad and security sharing mechanisms from the Quad that have materialised, are positive trends towards curbing the terrorist threat in South Asia. So, I think the multi-pronged approach is what is required. Regionalism is lacking in South Asia, although we have 'minilaterals' like Maldives, Sri Lanka, and India on intelligence sharing, which was signed after 10 years of negotiations, those are achievements, but then you need a wider regional approach on these security concerns.

But Gotabaya Rajapaksa did a lot of policy blunders as well as disturbing countries. If you look at—I can give a good example—the Easter Sunday report, on the presidential report, basically the report mentions that the Indian intelligence that was shared was just information only, it was not intelligence. That is absolutely wrong because it was intelligence. And they managed to even mention the day of the attack. So, they were accurate in intelligence. So, there was a kind of distrust between nations like India. The Rajapaksa's usually have a tendency of tilting towards China, which happened in the Gotabaya Rajapaksa regime. And our foreign policy was even tilted so much that the foreign secretary spoke of the human rights violations of another country, which is China, on Xinjiang, saying that there is no human rights violation in Xinjiang. Sri Lanka has never taken such positions in the past. So, the reasoning of that is because reciprocally, they expect China to defend Sri Lanka's human rights concerns in Geneva.

So, I think the loss of the foreign policy tilt, as well as, the loss of many projects, such as the US Millennium Challenge Corporation Fund, a grant of 480 million, Gotabaya then had a commission for that, to evaluate the MCC grants. So, the report came out saying that there is a national security threat from the grant. These are all illogical, irrational decisions that he took. So, I think right now, you would have all these issues that he [made], the policy blunders were part of his. I would say he lost his position because of all of this.

SG: Interestingly, you've spoken about the Quad, which is this alliance with the United States, Japan, India, and Australia. Sri Lanka, as you mentioned, is a very important country geo-strategically, and it seems to have moved from various different positions when it comes to its relationship with, say Quad nations and then its relationship with China. Where do you see Sri Lanka pivoting itself in the future, now that the Rajapaksa regime is over? Will it try and keep a neutral position? Or do you think its future is perhaps aligned with one particular group or nation?

AA: Sri Lanka needs to immediately recalibrate its foreign policy towards the balanced foreign policy we had. And that should be number one of the interim regime now, after the president leaves

the country basically, and he leaves his position now, the acting president, basically, as well as the Prime Minister, now, you should understand this is the fourth cabinet will be having in three months, so the dysfunctionality is very clear. And this is the first time a Sri Lankan president has escaped from military flight and given resignation to the Sri Lankan embassy in another country. So the situation is that the recalibration is really important, because we have lost trust with a lot of our friendly countries by coming up with this, what I mentioned earlier, the policy decisions that they took. Again, to give you an example on Japan. Japan's LRT projects, as well as Japan's East Container Terminal (ECT) project, Japan and India, the tripartite agreement, so Rajapaksa cancelled both of them. So ECT, again, they saw it as…all of these decisions, he tried to weaponize it to his own political gain, which is the ultranationalist sentiment which he was propagating. So he tried to sort of weaponize it, but then the foreign policy tilt was also an immediate recalibration of foreign policy, so a balanced foreign policy was required.

Some of the agreements we have signed, I would say were pretty much harmful for the country. I mean, the 99-year lease agreement, I have seen this agreement, because I had access to it as the Director General, I have seen multiple agreements in Sri Lanka, which has serious, I would say, long-term implications, because I call it, more than a debt trap in Sri Lanka, a strategic trap. There are three reasons I call it a strategic trap from China. First is the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC) involvement with the Rajapaksa political party, [Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, SLPP], the CPC as well as the SLPP. Now, about that particular point and the funding to the political party, so I have elaborated in one of my papers which will be published very soon on that particular area, which I have studied. The second is basically on the interference on the human rights issue, the reciprocal arrangements and the human rights concern, which I discussed, between China and Sri Lanka, again moving the country towards a dangerous tilt. The third is the military-to-military agreements, which is very concerning. One of the issues is, for example, the telecommunications network, 80% or more is owned by China, is run by, operated by China. So the surveillance for law enforcement as well as intelligence, so there is a concern, with military-to-military basically agreements, because Sri Lanka is an island sitting at the geostrategic hotspots, the Indian Ocean, the Indian Ocean security, which we have played earlier for a rules-based order, we have always contributed as a nation to a rules-based international order. Law of the sea, for example, Sri Lanka's immense contribution in the 1970s.

And so you see contribution towards democratic values and the alteration of the democratic model was happening during Gotabaya Rajapaksa's regime, with the military as well as with the external interference. So, you need immediate recalibration of the foreign policy and to support a rules-based order in the Indian Ocean, as well as to support the neighbouring country, India's neighbourhood first as well as the Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), the programme of Prime Minister Modi, which all the other nations are supporting. So, here's a nation kind of sandwiched between the BRI and the Indo-Pacific. But if you look at the, it's important…okay, BRI, we are part of it, but then we need to have a sort of toolkit to have the BRI projects more transparent as well as, I mean, those agreements should be made available to the general public. The protesters are asking for them; they said, we don't even know what's going on in this country, because the group of elites are controlling the signing. We sign an agreement on a Sunday, on a weekend. We don't sign agreements on a 99-year. So we did that also. So you could see that all these malpractices and all that happened, a constitutional…I mean, we did a change to our constitution again without any consultation of the general public. So the public and the protests are asking for consultation, accountability. Now, the president has run away again, they're asking for accountability.

I think the democratic nations should support Sri Lanka at this moment. There is a huge role for

the international community to play. I mean, I know that the US is giving technical assistance for institutions, but then what the British parliamentarian raised,

Ed Davey, he's the leader of the Liberal Democrat party, very interesting, he said Sri Lanka requires two packages: one is the economic package, which is from the IMF and all that, but then the political package, what I want to highlight is what he mentioned on the political package was accountability. So people are asking for the looted money, the corruption charges, all that. So Ed Davey mentioned that why don't we even discuss, talk about an international arrest warrant? I mean, obviously that's what the democratic leaders should be talking about right now. And, if they have looted the money, there's the corruption charges they should investigate. So the democracies and even President Biden did not invite Sri Lanka for the democratic summit because of the serious concerns of what's going on to the democratic fabric, as well as how Rajapaksa was interfering and creating this autocratic model. So, I think the Quad in the Pacific, all these mechanisms should have specific roles for these countries, because you need to tag them, especially we are in a volatile time because of post-COVID, as well as the war in Ukraine, a situation where countries can tilt towards autocratic, you know, bring in autocratic sentiments, as well as move away from the democratic norms and values. So, there is a huge role for the international community.

SG: Absolutely. One other aspect is that when there is a political vacuum and economic instability, organised crime tends to flourish. Now even prior to the fall of the Rajapaksa regime, Sri Lanka was having to deal with the challenges of narcotics coming from Afghanistan and Pakistan by sea, especially heroin and now increasingly methamphetamines. NATO DEEP recently produced a very detailed report entitled *Narco-Insecurity, Inc.*, in which it showed that, in many ways, Sri Lanka is one of the primary victims and targets of what is going to emanate from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Do you think that in this vacuum that now exists inside Sri Lanka that there could be further challenges that could be coming from both Afghanistan, Pakistan, not just in terms of terrorism, but in terms of narcotics as well?

AA: Definitely. Sri Lanka, that's why I mentioned that they could use Sri Lanka as a hub for transnational security concerns. I mean, it has been reported so much about the drug trafficking, on people smuggling, so, various other concerns…I mean, if you look at the Indian Ocean security, there is a role that Sri Lanka should play as sitting in the geostrategic hotspot in the Indian Ocean. So, the role is that, on the maritime security, they should be sort of, I mean, you know, the government of Sri Lanka should have a plan with India as well as neighbouring countries. How to sort of tackle these issues, one particular incident was, I mentioned about the Easter Sunday terror attack, the intelligence sharing is one very important area, but then when it comes for maritime security projects, such as in the European Union, the EU has about what's happening in Madagascar as well as in the western Indian Ocean can come into Sri Lanka also. So this is on maritime, you know, illegal fisheries as well as maritime on arms smuggling and various others, so it's very important that these measures as well as technical assistance come in to Sri Lanka. And it's a time that, while the political system has been reset and all that, while the people are asking for better political culture, more transparent, so it's very important to have this mechanism.

Also, the concern is law and order, yes, crimes. These obviously will be affected because of what's happening. I mean, Sri Lanka is almost a failed state, because if you look at the fourth cabinet appointed, so there's not functioning properly, the government is not functioning. So it moved from a fragile state, I would say, to a crisis state, and now I could call it almost a failed state. So we need to sort of bring back that sort of normalcy to the institutions as quickly as possible. So that it will not move towards a failed state where law and order is completely dysfunctional, and that's really important. So, there is a danger here also, because what had happened was Rajapaksa appointed

a prime minister, during his last few months, he appointed a new prime minister after his brother had to leave because of the protests. So the prime minister has only one seat in the parliament, and that's also a bonus seat, which was given. It's the first time again we are having a prime minister with one seat in the parliament. But then the credibility of the political model has to be re-established. The prime minister and the president should be people who are appointed by the people, elected by the people, not who come from bonus seats. And also those are really important, because if you make a sort of alteration to the credibility of the model, you will have a space for the military to walk in. This is the danger that I'm trying to highlight. I've been sort of mentioning in my…because there is a trend that it won't become like Myanmar, but a model similar to Myanmar can emerge from Sri Lanka—a civilian-military sort of rule, because what I hear for the last few days is like, okay, the protesters walked into the president's house, they counted the money, gave it to the police, so it's not a mob, if they were mob, they would steal the money. There were incidents like two guns were stolen from the military, so that sort of thing. So I mean, there is a danger in those, because what they're saying is like, okay, the prime minister's made a statement saying rebels have to be sort of identified from the protesters. And then instead, an emergency was declared and then the curfew, followed by curfew. So the next, I think, couple of weeks are going to be very crucial for Sri Lanka.

SG: Very crucial indeed. And in a connected point about how things are impacting on Sri Lanka, if we can pivot to the sort of the final question of our discussion, the final topic even, the Russian invasion of Ukraine meant that the world's biggest grain exporters were effectively taken out of the market, as well as Russian exports of fertiliser, which Sri Lanka's farmers were recipients of. Coming out of the pandemic, Sri Lanka was counting on the return of tourism, which is a vital industry to the island. One problem was that the first and third largest tourism markets for Sri Lanka were Russians and Ukrainians. Russia is also a major buyer of Sri Lankan tea. The realities of the war and the sanctions on Russia have somewhat upended a lot of these arrangements. Did Putin's invasion of Ukraine compound the economic problems of Sri Lanka?

AA: I would say to a certain percentage, yes. I mean, it did have an impact on the consumer prices because of the rise of the field prices. It did have an impact for the tourism industry. We had a large Eastern European tourist industry. That got affected from the war. Sri Lanka is one of the main tourist hotspots, and then we earn a lot from tourism, but the pandemic and then the Ukraine war had serious impact. So, the consumer prices, yes, there was an effect because of the oil prices, the rise of the oil prices. So yes, I would say the war in Ukraine did have an impact on the daily lives because of the consumer prices and the tourism industry. So those are the two things that were affected. On the fertiliser, well this has to be clearly understood, although the organic fertiliser switch was done by Gotabaya [Rajapaksa], there was Chinese shipments coming into the port. So a lot of people have not read that. They think that organic fertiliser, although he changed the immediate switch from chemical fertiliser to organic fertiliser was the main trigger point for the economic crisis, no, it was not the main trigger point. He made it a political, basically, a campaign to go on organic and you know, e-cars, or electric cars, etc. But then, while the Chinese shipment which came to the port, authorities found that was contaminated, and it's a very interesting read to understand. And then 24 hours before it came to Colombo, we [Sri Lanka] had to pay for that shipment, which I have analysed that. So it's not that he wanted to bring in organic fertiliser. Although it was a political choice he made overnight, switching did impact the entire agriculture industry. But with Russia, I would say only these two points were the main concerns, we do bring in fertiliser also. But the biggest impact was for the tourism industry.

SG: Interesting, and it's been very important to have this discussion with you on a very important country that perhaps won't necessarily get always the headline attention. But it just shows you

what happens in Sri Lanka can have much wider ramifications. And I think it's very germane to point out that Sri Lanka is not a dictatorship, like in the case of say, Libya, when the despot Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was violently removed from power back in 2011. Sri Lanka is a democratic nation with a thriving civil society movement that has very peacefully demonstrated its desire for change. And it's been very important what you've been saying, because it helps us to glean from the Sri Lanka case study about democracies and what could go wrong when there is economic turmoil, as well as when there is political interference in terms of the military institutions and the judiciary. So I have to thank you for providing all this insight. Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, thank you so much again for joining us on *NATO DEEP Dive*.

AA: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera's bio

Asanga Abeyagoonasekera is a Senior Fellow and the Executive Director of the South Asia Foresight Network (SAFN) at the Millennium Project in Washington DC and a Technical Advisor to the International Monetary Fund(IMF) in Washington DC, where he contributed to Sri Lanka's IMF Governance Diagnostic Report 2023.He is the author of several books including Sri Lanka At Crossroads: Geopolitical Challenges and National Interests, as well as Conundrum of an Island.