NATO DEEP Dive
Vol. 3

Edited by:
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All transcripts have been edited for clarity.

Table of Contents

Episode 41 – Hadelin Feront and Combating Extremism Online, June 2023 8
Episode 42 – Greg Hinds and Interpol at 100, July 2023 13
Episode 43 – Seamus Hughes, 'The Document Digger,' July 2023 18
Episode 44 – Karl Kaltenthaler: In the Situation Room, August 2023 25
Episode 45 – Guillaume Soto-Mayor and the Cost of Coups in the Sahel, August 2023 33
Episode 46 – Anne Craanen and Tech Against Terrorism, September 2023 . . . 40
Episode 47 – Caroline Rose and the Captagon Challenge, September 2023 . . . 49
Episode 48 – Ravi Satkalmi and the D.C. Capitol Police, October 2023 55
Episode 49 – David Loyn and the Retro Taliban, October 2023 61
Episode 50 – Andrei Soldatov and Surviving Putin's Russia, November 2023 . . 68
Episode 51 – Sajjan Gohel Part 1: Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist, December 2023 . . 76
Episode 52 – Sajjan Gohel Part 2: Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist, January 2024 . . . 84
Episode 53 – Meghann Teubner & Kelli Foy and Mainstreaming Extremism, January 2024 93
Episode 54 – Joseph Votel and the Threat from Iran and Beyond, February 2024 103
Episode 55 – Mahmut Cengiz and Terrorism After October 7, February 2024 . 111
Episode 56 – Alexander Vindman and Curbing Russian Expansionism, May 2024 116

Foreword

Dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to present to you the book NATO DEEP Dive Vol.3, 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 June 2023 and May 2024. All the podcasts are available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. I am convinced that NATO DEEP Dive Vol. 3 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.

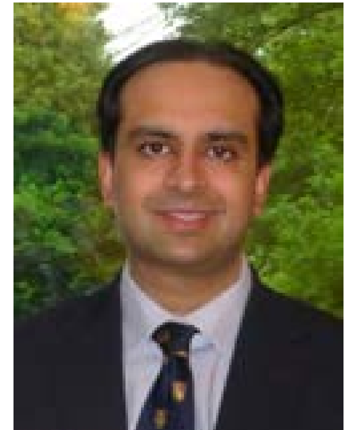
I would like to mention that DEEP Dive seeks to engage and draw on the experiences of academics, journalists, and policy practitioners. The goal is also to learn more about the interviewees to provide a unique perspective on what has shaped their careers, as well as to discuss their current and future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

Mariusz Solis

NATO DEEP Coordinator

January 2025

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 41 – Hadelin Feront and Combating Extremism Online, June 2023

Key Reflections

- **There are major concerns surrounding the convergence of misinformation, borderline content, and foreign interference that can lead to violent extremism.**
- **Failing to anticipate the next iteration or innovation that movements and groups can take could lead to the mainstreaming of extremist ideas within society and the broader political spectrum.**
- **Terrorist and violent extremist actors use end-to-end encryption and encrypted services for sharing propaganda, recruitment, and planning attacks. There remains a lack of data on these phenomena, as those technologies are still relatively new.**
- **Compromising the integrity of end-to-end encryption and internet security is not an option. There are, however, other types of data, such as metadata, which can be leveraged to disrupt terrorist and criminal activities provided the harvesting of that data is done within clearly defined legal frameworks.**
- **It is possible to regulate virtual currencies to prevent malicious abuse by actors who seek to circumvent banking systems in order to coordinate fundraising, including crowdfunding.**
- **There are concerns regarding the ways that artificial intelligence (AI) can be weaponised, especially through disinformation and the blending or the creation of content that could be used to undermine trust in governments.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

HF: Hadelin Feront

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with Hadelin Feront who serves as part of Meta's Global Counter-Terrorism Policy team.

Hadelin leads the company's efforts on regulatory affairs, transparency, and end-to-end encryption. In our discussion we talk about a range of issues including online disinformation and radicalisation as well as foreign interference and the growing prevalence of artificial intelligence (AI).

Hadelin Feront warm welcome to NATO Deep Dive.

HF: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

SG: Let's look at online communication technologies. They've made it easier for us in our daily lives, but they've also been utilised by terrorists to communicate across borders and have been also used to amplify propaganda. If we address terrorism and extremist content online in the last few years, what would you say are the key areas of concern that we need to be observing?

HF: Thank you, Sajjan. The one area of concern for me is at the moment the convergence of misinformation, borderline content, and foreign interference that can lead to violent extremism. I think this is a phenomenon that we have seen increase over the last few years. And it is a blending phenomenon that makes it harder to detect, and also harder to enforce against because it doesn't conform to habitual notions or definitions of terrorist content or violent extremist content. And so, we have a situation in which industry as well as policymakers are playing catch up by trying to develop ad hoc policies to counter these types of new approaches to propaganda and online radicalization. And this ends up leading to situations where those policies might be effective in some cases,

because they've been developed and tailored to specific movements or groups. But eventually they end up not being applicable at scale. And so, we fail to anticipate the next iteration or innovation that those movements and groups can take. And of course, we are handling this sort of blending of different and hard to define concepts and ideas. It leads to a mainstreaming of extremist ideas within society and the broader political spectrum. And I think that is a challenge to our political culture and institutions, as well as to security.

SG: You spoke about the challenges to political culture, we know that increasingly, we find that all kinds of terrorist groups, of various different ideological beliefs, lurk online, through the dark web, through encrypted messaging. What are the challenges when it comes to dealing with those entities that utilise the dark web, that utilise encrypted messaging for communication, for plotting, for planning?

HF: Yeah, thank you. That's a great question. In terms of end-to-end encryption and encrypted services, terrorist and violent extremist actors indeed do use end-to-end encryption. I think it's important to focus on what is the use that they do have. One is for sharing propaganda, another key use is for recruitment, and the third use case is for attack planning. The question however, is how big is this phenomenon? And that's where unfortunately, there's still a lack of data, in part due to the fact that those technologies are new, but also [due] to the fact that they are encrypted and therefore it is a different kind of technology where you won't have the same type of data and the same volume of data that you might have on public surfaces.

So, this is why we see increased interest in researchers about how we can understand terrorist and violent extremists' use of end-to-end encryption? Meta, of course, then Facebook, commissioned research, in 2020, by Tech Against Terrorism on the use of end-to-end encryption by terrorist and violent extremist actors. And this is a very interesting report in many ways, because it illuminates what the factors that play into terrorists' minds [are] when they're considering using encrypted services and messaging services.

So, what do we learn about the perception of terrorist actors? Well, that they basically will choose a particular app or messaging service based on how they perceive the platform to be secure for them. If the platform has strong policies against terrorist use, if there are controls around the way that users can report content, block content, typically this will undermine the trust, if you will, that terrorist actors place in a particular app. So, that's important information, because, of course, policymakers and industry alike are in a very tough debate about what the right approach is to counter this use, even if it's marginal. And I think the first step in that debate is to recognise that end-to-end encryption is becoming a key pillar of internet security and privacy. That is the first step because it is providing society as a whole with incredible benefits. And this was underlined recently in a 2022 report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in the UN, that found that end-to-end [encryption] makes a key contribution to fundamental rights in our current era.

So, I think that recognising those benefits, it's important to state that compromising the integrity of end-to-end encryption and therefore of internet security, internet privacy is not really an option. And therefore, we cannot have a technical solution as some policymakers say, where you have, you want to have, end-to-end encryption on the one hand, but you also want to have scanning or backdoors. And those are technically not feasible, currently. However, what we know is how we can deter terrorists from using encrypted services. And we know how to disrupt the use that they may make of those services. How do we deter? By having strong policies, by having strong security features, by empowering users to report and to block content that would violate those policies.

And how do we disrupt? I think this is, for me, the key notion, by tackling discoverability between bad actors, connectability between those actors, and the virality of the URLs or other content that they may try to share via encrypted messaging. And of course, this requires a concerted approach by industry and regulators alike and law enforcement agencies, that we need a targeted use of what we call metadata, but within the safeguard of clearly defined legal frameworks. What this does is it enables companies basically to compare data points between public and encrypted services, to identify high risk users and interactions and therefore to take mitigating action.

SG: These are all very interesting and important points that you bring up and it actually leads me to one of the questions I wanted to ask you, which is what is the role of tech companies when it comes to algorithms that suggest catered content to a specific user, but which could also potentially lead to a process of radicalization?

HF: I think the role of industry on the one hand, what it seeks to do is to help users curate content based on their preferences. We have an enormous amount of content. And everyone recognises that, due to this volume, it is impossible for individuals to sift through that content and find that which is most relevant to them. That is the basic use case at the beginning of how we apply, across the industry, algorithms, to organise and curate content and help users find information that is most relevant and useful to them. I think that is an important starting point.

Now there has been a lot of interrogation and debate around the engagement models that that certain services and companies use and allegations that some of these models prioritise content that would be extremist in some way, or at least, encourage people into behaviours and speech that is hateful for example. I think this is a fundamental misconception in that debate. Why? Because all of the companies that have been asked to testify as to how to use algorithms have very clear policies against, for instance, any behaviour online that would be illegal, any speech that would be hateful, and certainly against terrorist content. So, what happens is that, as the industry has built the control mechanisms to counter this type of content, the vast majority of that content is removed from platforms before people even see it.

However, what has been, I think, more delicate, and harder to address, for instance, is the type of content I was mentioning before, that blends things that are not illegal, that are not violating the policies of those companies, at least in the latter of those policies, and therefore, that it circumvents the enforcement mechanism, and which can also game the algorithm to create echo chambers to feed into people's preferences. And we have to recognise that this is an issue, this is a real problem. But it's a problem, I think, at two levels, it is not just an industry problem. It is a policy challenge for industry and regulators alike, because it goes down to the question of how do we define content that encourages a form of extremist thinking and behaviour as we know and you are, of course, a preeminent expert on terrorism, we've never been able to agree on a definition of terrorism, and I would argue, much less on a definition of what type of content leads to violent extremism for instance.

So, it's a policy challenge that is for industry and regulators alike, but it's also an enforcement challenge, because we need to be able to counter this type of extremist engagement and echo chambers without undermining fundamental rights such as freedom of expression. So, we see here the magnitude of the challenge, and this is only talking about sort of major industry players, but what about also enabling smaller platforms to crack down on those kinds of echo chambers? There are certain platforms that are built around the model of being an echo chamber for extremist content. So, as we often say in the field of countering violent extremism, I think this is a whole of society challenge that requires a whole of society approach.

SG: You spoke about policy and enforcement challenges. One aspect that very much now is a key word when it comes to the virtual world is cryptocurrency and given the potential of cryptocurrencies to serve as a vehicle for both illicit financing as well as for terrorist organisations to continue to fund their activities, is it possible to regulate virtual currencies to prevent malicious abuse by actors? I noticed that it's certainly coming up in multilateral forums such as the G20, but I'd be interested in your take on this.

HF: Yes, I think it's possible to regulate, and I think efforts are already underway to…as different countries, the US, the EU, think about cryptocurrencies at the national level, also at the regional level, I think we are seeing already an awareness that this new technology could be used by terrorist organisations, or even more likely at this stage criminal organisations, in order to circumvent the mechanisms that have been built over the years within the traditional banking systems to prevent those criminal and illegal activities. So, it's possible; however, at the moment, in the case of terrorism, there's little data indicating sophisticated financial plots involving digital technology. And we continue to see a preference for simplicity, especially within the jihadi groups, communities, and

networks. So, a preference for cash handouts, for transfers using services such as Western Union, and most often involving small amounts of money.

That being said, there is other ways that the internet can be used to coordinate fundraising. I think gap areas include crowdfunding as well as online shops, in particular things like merchandise, what I've called the DOI lifestyle, dangerous organisations and individuals' lifestyle, because the accessibility of online shops today is unprecedented. But also, the scale is global, really, it's not confined to the big platforms; anyone can build an online shop and promote it. And I think this is an area that is extremely difficult to police, and that will require cross-industry coordination on a global scale. There is however potential for increased use of cryptocurrencies by terrorist organisations as they become more mainstream. I think a key challenge in terms of regulating cryptocurrencies will be to mature those regulations and keeping pace with the development of those currencies that will continue to evolve, continue to innovate, and I think it's in the loopholes or in the rapidity with which they evolve that some loopholes may emerge, that criminal organisations and terrorist groups will seek to exploit.

SG: Talking about the potential of exploitation, artificial intelligence is something that we keep hearing about; it's growing, it's proliferating, it's becoming more sophisticated. Is AI potentially a double-edged sword in that could it be used, on the one hand, through predictive software to aid efforts when it comes to counter-terrorism, and at the same time, could it be utilised by terrorists to weaponize their agenda online?

HF: I certainly think there is a legitimate concern around the ways that AI can be weaponised by various actors in ways that we do not yet fully understand or anticipate. And of course, just yesterday, there was an open letter signed by more than 100 AI pioneers and specialists including, of course, Elon Musk, who are now calling for a temporary halt on the development of AI technologies for the very reason that in the race to build the next big AI model, we're not taking into account the harms they could cause sufficiently. We're not even able to anticipate how they could be weaponised because we do not fully understand how those AI models function, so-called Blackbox AIs. Certainly within that letter, we also see something that I've mentioned before, which is the concern around disinformation and the blending or the creation of content that could be used to undermine trust in government, and therefore to radicalise, without us having the ability to detect that this content is actually fake, because AI is able to create the appearance of validity, of legitimacy. So that is where, at some point, we have an example of how an advanced AI can surpass humans to create things that we are unable to counter. So, I think that's a very important area of risk that we need to be aware of, and we need to be very cautious in how we will approach, in particular, regulating AI. In terms of artificial intelligence being used to counter terrorism, I know of course of different programmes and initiatives that seek to use AI almost in a predictive fashion to understand where the next risks will emerge. But similarly, to what we have just said about the potential for AI to be weaponised, I think here, there is another risk, which is how accurate would these predictions be in models that we don't fully understand and that are not necessarily trained on a representative sample of data. In the case of terrorism, we have limited fragmented data, and therefore we have a natural challenge in terms of being able to train an AI to a level that would prevent glaring biases and therefore inaccuracies in the results.

SG: To expand this aspect of AI a little bit more, Russian President Vladimir Putin once predicted that the winner of the AI arms race, as he called it, would be the ruler of the world. In many ways, it kind of suggests his own megalomaniac tendencies. And it seemed to suggest that it was more a concern on state actors as opposed to terrorist groups misusing artificial intelligence. Do you think that is the larger concern…hostile state actors utilising artificial intelligence for propaganda, for disinformation, for controlling a narrative in a very warped sense?

HF: No, I would disagree with that assessment. I think the biggest risk, and we have seen this in recent weeks since OpenAI made available ChatGPT, is the fact that in the marketplace, because of competition between major industry players, that by the way are far more advanced in artificial intelligence than state actors….Of course, there is a need to make those services available as quickly as possible, to put it on the market as quickly as possible. And I think therein lies the risk

that actors, like state actors, but also extremist actors and criminal organisations, may seek to, as we have described, weaponize artificial intelligence and create a range of issues that we will have difficulty to identify and to counter. That is not to say, however, that artificial intelligence does not have an enormous potential for good. And what I hope to see in the in the coming months and years is how state actors, but also civil society, will be able to leverage artificial intelligence to counter problems that we have enormous difficulty in comprehending because of their complexity, such as, for instance, climate change, such as urban mobility and growth, such as trade in illicit goods or criminal activities. I think, therein lies an enormous potential for artificial intelligence to help us meet the challenges of our current era.

SG: It's very interesting, and I guess it's also somewhat of a relief, as well, that Vladimir Putin doesn't get to control the narrative on everything as he perhaps wishes to. A final question, Hadelin, for Meta, what would you say are the likely challenges that we will have to factor in and engage with when it comes to a lot of the topics that we've spoken about? Where do you see, if you had a crystal ball, the challenges that we're going to have to face that perhaps are not imminent today, but will be down the road?

HF: Well, I think for the industry, and states and civil society alike, the main challenge that I see in the next 10 years is as the internet evolves towards a more even, more decentralised and, to some extent, fragmented version of itself, the question of internet governance will become ever more central and ever more difficult also to achieve at scale in a way that is consistent. We have seen recently with the war in Ukraine, but also with the COVID pandemic, an increase in the so-called splintering of the internet. We have seen tendencies in some countries to claim digital sovereignty. We have seen an increase in internet outages and blockages in different countries in order to handle societal instability. I think these are signs, indications of the type of internet that we're heading towards increasingly that is characterised by fragmented regulations but also different strategies in terms of how this internet is leveraged for government and society alike. And so, as technologies, such as artificial intelligence and the metaverse, become more mainstream, we will also see a more difficult discussion and debate between industry, between national regulators on how to police and how to govern these expanding and layered realms of digital worlds and capabilities. So…as we multiply the layers of the internet that we can use and engage with, of course we multiply also the risks. And that's why governance, I think, will be key in terms of us being able to successfully identify emerging risks, but also create the safeguards that we need to continue to ensure a safe and productive use of those amazing technologies.

SG: Absolutely. There's a lot of important food for thought that you have left us with. Let me just thank you, again, Hadelin, for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive and hope to have you back in the future.

HF: Thank you so much, Sajjan. It was a pleasure. And likewise, looking forward to our next talk.

Episode 42 – Greg Hinds and Interpol at 100, July 2023

Key Reflections

- **Interpol facilitates information sharing throughout its 195 members, allowing each nation to better understand the evolving threat landscape.**

- **When Interpol was founded, it was acknowledged that organised crime and terrorism transcends borders. As a result, the organisation prioritises border security, ensuring that threats, including returning foreign terrorist fighters, are stopped at their source.**

- **Another core value that underpins the work of Interpol is capacity building. Whilst the organisation strives for a unified, robust response across the 195 membership, not everyone is equal in their capacities and capabilities, making training, support, coordination, and equipment sharing essential.**

- **Interpol has 19 different databases; it is important to have a central repository of such information to better coordinate amongst different member states and achieve the most effective and efficient responses.**

- **Interpol brings member states together with mutual interests so that they can then collaborate and work together to develop appropriate solutions bilaterally or multilaterally when various challenges arise.**

- **There are currently 71,000 Red Notices, over 7000 of which have been made public, for wanted offenders. The goal is to encourage communities to participate and offer any information they may have on these individuals, and to foster cooperation between relevant members.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

GH: Greg Hinds

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with Greg Hinds, the Director for Counter-Terrorism at Interpol.

In 2023 Interpol became 100 years old and has 195 members making it one of the largest multilateral organisations in the world. I talk with Greg about Interpol's ongoing efforts to tackle international terrorism, as well as looking at border security, enhancing capacity building, and the tools Interpol uses to enhance global cooperation.

Gregg Hinds, thank you for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

GH: You are welcome, it's great to be with you, finally.

SG: It's very good to have you here. So, we're sitting on the sidelines of a big counter-terrorism conference in the U.S., where we were both speaking. I know how busy you are, so I'm glad to have that opportunity with you. Before we get into the work of Interpol, let's clear up a rumour. Is it true that the character that The Rock plays in the movie Red Notice is based on you?

GH: Well, I'd like to boast that, yes, The Rock was trying to emulate myself but no, unfortunately

not, it was an FBI agent, a rogue FBI agent. And so perhaps we can get an Australian maybe Chris Hemsworth, or even Hugh Jackman, Wolverine and Thor characters, or even Margot Robbie, out of Suicide Squad, it might be good to have a little Aussie infusion into our next Red Notice series.

SG: Okay, I think these are very good suggestions, absolutely.

So, you're the director of counter-terrorism for Interpol. Can you talk about Interpol's evolving role when it comes to counter-terrorism?

GH: Thanks, great question. As its director, it's been really important for us to actually really set a strategy and purpose for the work that we do. And Interpol has just launched its global CT strategy at the end of 2022. And that three-to-four-year agenda is really trying to make sure that our mandate, which is around supporting member countries, which is 195 member countries of Interpol, supporting them with the evolving and complex nature of terrorism. And we wanted to do that through international police cooperation. And through that, we've got four objectives and we see this as really trying to keep it simple, in a very complex and evolving CT threat landscape.

One is around information exchange. So, making sure that we are sharing information across the 195 member countries, to ensure that the pieces of the crime puzzle are more likely to come together. Secondly, we want to actually build a better threat picture, by understanding the threat and the evolving nature of that landscape, we are then better placed to actually work with the membership in the preventative space. And then if something does happen, how do we actually support them with other activities. Thirdly, we want to make sure that we provide the technical expertise where we can, in supporting our memberships and making sure that we're drawing on expertise either within and across Interpol, or through our partner agencies and making sure that we're providing, if you'd like, a unified response to where the weaknesses or vulnerabilities might be. And then lastly, we also want to be a global voice for law enforcement. We're involved in many fora, and we want to make sure that we are absolutely representing the interests, the needs, and the priorities of our membership, with partners and stakeholders in this regard.

SG: You've raised a lot of important aspects of what counter-terrorism entails when it comes to Interpol and I'd like to break some of that down, because it's so significant what you're saying. Let's talk about, for example, border management, it's a massive issue around the world. How does Interpol help, especially when it comes to counter-terrorism?

GH: Once again, this is really the nature of why Interpol was set up. So, Sajjan, we're actually commemorating, celebrating, Interpol's 100 years this year. And back in 1923, it was recognised by 20 member countries that crime and terrorism transcends borders. And so, who was going to be best placed to actually look to bring and connect the dots of criminality that actually transcends these borders. And so, Interpol was established.

And so, the forward thinking of the membership was looking at the very transnational nature of serious organised crime and terrorism. And so, one of those is border security. And then with border security, I think certainly through a CT lens, we look at this through both the physical and the virtual lens, we want to make sure that we're working with our membership and stopping threats at its source. So, whether it's foreign terrorist fighters, whether it's the enabling support that comes with them, whether it's financing, whether it's the weapons and munitions, we want to make sure that they are stopped at their source. And so, if it's not, we want to make sure that we've got border security that is robust attendee and once you get that information sharing that on that as the trigger alerts will be played when either GS commodity is moving across the border. When a foreign terrorist fighter or their neighbours are moving across the border, we want to put the information in the hands of decision makers, those frontline officers who can make informed decisions about the responses they can make. That's through a CT lens.

We also have broader impacts in relation to border security through our integrated border management tas**KF**orce that's led by Interpol. We're also a vice chair, in the UN's Global Compact Working Groups, for law enforcement and border security as well. So, we're wanting to make sure that we're,

once again, networking our networks and working holistically across the issue with our UN partners, but also with our 195 membership. In doing this, we focus on strengthening national and regional arrangements and we hope that that's having an impact globally as well.

SG: So, I assume capacity building is a very important part of this, especially as you were mentioning how Interpol has grown and expanded.

GH: So, capacity building really underpins a lot of the work that we look to do as well. We want to make sure that, once again, we have got a unified, robust response across the 195 membership, and not everyone is equal in their capacities and capabilities. So, working through our foreign policy interests, so trying to match foreign policy agendas with law enforcement priorities and actions, that's one of my challenges and it's one of the areas that I really look to focus on: being a bridge between the policy conversations and operational action. And this is where we wanted to make sure that we focus on better understanding what those capacity and capability gaps might be, and then working with those in building a plan, in trying to build at the individual, and also at the institutional levels, areas of work that need to focus on building capacities and capabilities, whether that be through training; whether that be through operational support and coordination; whether that be through gifting of equipment; whether it's actually training; or whether it's even mentoring and supporting cases that are actually active as well. There's a way and means in which we tailor, depending on the kind of priorities and the country's needs and requirements, in the type of support that we provide. So, wanting to make sure that we have a bespoke approach to supporting our membership in that regard.

SG: I want to move to criminal intelligence analysis, because this is a key part of what Interpol also does. Can you expand on what that actually entails?

GH: Yeah, so Interpol has a large set of databases. But we want to make sure that we're also providing data analysis. And as I said, from the outset, we're looking to make sure that there is an information exchange, sharing of that information and of course, the role of Interpol is actually trying to make sure that we are bridging and joining those dots and gaps. And so, there's a lot of analysis that goes in behind that information that actually goes into our systems to support either requests for information that are coming in, in relation to particular individuals or particular groups, or modus operandi of particular terrorists.

And then secondly, we're also looking at ways and means of trying to actually provide a much more operational support posture in this space as well. So, it is really important for us, because we know intelligence will drive our investigations. And of course, by understanding the threat, we're hopefully better placed to provide the necessary support that we need for our members.

SG: These aspects that we're talking about, are they related to the databases that Interpol has and develops, and then how does that get utilised?

GH: So, Interpol has 19 different databases, and that the information that's shared is growing on a daily basis. So once again, because of that information exchange, that data is enriched on a daily basis. So, it's really important for us to be making sure that we're also keeping across the information that's coming in. And so, the analysis of that is really, really important, as I said, in better understanding the threat, but also looking at ways and means which we can better support the priorities, needs, and requirements of our membership. And some of the databases include nominal information, so that's persons information, stolen and lost travel documents, stolen motor vehicles. We've also got those that sit across a forensic space as well and biometrics across DNA, across fingerprints, across facial imagery as well.

Out of that, there's 125 million records in Interpol's 19 databases. And what happens is we have 16 million checks per day of our systems, and that results in approximately 4000 hits against those databases as well. So once again, this is the importance of having that centralised repository of information across different data sets and looking to use that in a federated manner and trying to make sure, once again, the decision-making at frontlines can be made in relation to when there's

been triggers or alerts that have been actioned or activated at border crossing points and other investigations as an operational activity.

SG: Well, the level of information that gets processed for those databases is phenomenal. Every time we talk about law enforcement and counter-terrorism, forensics and biometrics keep coming up, and they seem to be very essential as assisting the role of law enforcement for prosecuting. Could you provide also some more perspective on how important forensics and biometrics have become?

GH: One of our three B's approaches is biometrics, and you're right, Sajjan, it's really, really important for us to make sure the biometrics element is spot on. We've got minimum standards in relation to what's good practice in relation to what happens across fingerprint collection, facial collection, and even DNA.

So, it's really important we get this right, and it's really important that this information is then flagged against the warnings and alerts and notifications, because this is where we don't want to be having false positives. 60 million checks a day, 4000 hits, we want to make sure that we are actually having impact and effect in countering serious and organised crime and terrorism across the globe.

SG: Absolutely. I was asked this question to ask you, actually, so tell me about fugitive investigative support—what does that mean?

GH: I mean, it sounds sexy, doesn't it? It sounds a little bit like Red Notice, that we are actually out there hunting down these individuals, and I'd love to say that I do it on a daily basis. But what this actually means is that with this information that comes into our systems, we have a team that actually supports trying to track these individuals as well. And when there have been hits, that we're making sure that the countries that actually have a vested interest in this are connected and joined up so that they can start making informed decisions about them. So, I'll give you an example: so even just as late as yesterday…our fugitive support is looking at two member countries that were interested in an individual that actually had been involved in drug trafficking. The day before that, there was an individual that was actually wanted for murder. So part of our fugitive support to our membership is actually making sure that when there is a trigger or alert that occurs against our systems, that we are connecting the relevant police forces, and then bilaterally or multilaterally, they can start looking at the ways and means in which they need to progress that investigative or operational effort. So that really is important for us, and we see almost on a daily basis Interpol is actually bringing member countries together on matters of mutual interest.

SG: Let's conclude on kind of what we started on—the term "Red Notice." We've spoken about it, it comes up a lot, it's always associated with Interpol, but I don't think necessarily everyone fully understands what that entails. And if I'm not wrong, there are other colours as well, right?

GH: There is a number of colours, yes. So just with Red Notices, it's a really important tool for us, and it probably is one of the best things that Interpol is known for. And basically, a Red Notice is information that's communicated about a wanted individual that is sought by a particular member country for a particular specific crime type, where there are extradition proceedings that underpin that as well. So, this is actually where the seriousness of the crime warrants basically an international arrest warrant, if you like, for a better term, in relation to the Red Notice. And upon activation, that allows the member country where the individual has been detected to then liaise with the country, and Interpol's role is actually making sure that we have those connects that where there has been a trigger of these alerts...that we're working with the member countries involved in relation to bringing these people to justice. And so, the Red Notice is a really important tool in doing that.

And just to give you an example, we've got over 71,000 valid Red Notices out there. And almost on a daily, weekly basis, I see Red Notices have been triggered, where it's actually been a connect putting member countries together and resolving, you know, criminals that have been trying to move around the globe and trying to actually move around undetected or avoid responsibilities for the crimes that they've allegedly committed. Now, importantly, of that 71,000 Red Notices, over 7000 of

those have also been made public. So, this is where law enforcement has decided that with the nature and extent of these particular crimes, they wanted the public to also get involved, as we typically do, at a national level, looking to involve our communities as part of the crime-solving process as well. And so almost 10% of our Red Notices have been made public to have the communities also support us in identifying those wanted offenders.

SG: This has all been very fascinating, getting the whole perspective about Interpol. I know I said that we'd conclude with Red Notice, but just a definite last question: is there an example of a case or an investigation that you would say typifies how Interpol works to the best of its ability, something that you've experienced whilst you've been there?

GH: Yeah, great question. I think every day we see where Interpol has been able to actually bring member countries together. And obviously going back to the tenets of why we exist is around how do we actually help membership be able to connect crime that transcends national borders? For me, I think from a CT perspective, what I've seen here is where our Project Watchmaker, which was around bomb-makers and bomb-making material, that a fingerprint that has been passed as part of our Watchmaker process, on a device that was found in a conflict zone, has actually been processed and put into the system and alerts been made. And individuals that have been travelling from second or third countries have been interdicted and been identified at border crossing points, linked back to a particular device that was used in a conflict zone that was part of a terrorist attack. And then being able to bring three or four member countries together, who actually had an interest in this particular activity. And this is what we see every day—bringing those pieces of that crime puzzle together, crime and the movement of people and goods, injurious products over borders. This is what we do really well, and as I said, it really underpins the mandate of connecting police for a safer world.

SG: Connecting the police for a safer world. Well, I think it's a very appropriate way to end this. Well, good luck in keeping us all safe. And thank you once again, Greg Hines, for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

GH: It's been my pleasure. Thanks very much.

Episode 43 – Seamus Hughes, ‘The Document Digger,’ July 2023

Key Reflections

- **When conducting research with court documents, a human understanding of the different patterns and quirks of individual prosecutors and courts is more valuable than using a computer or algorithm.**
- **Online tools such as PACER and courtlistener.com work as good starting points for research into court records. However, these systems are not the most user friendly and require some experience to get the best results.**
- **Court records can provide researchers with a sense of the priorities of particular administrations or states, allowing for comparisons of how certain crimes are prosecuted.**
- **If one knows what to look for, trends begin to emerge from court records research that can flag what to pay attention to regarding future challenges. This can be applied both to the behaviour of terrorists and that of hostile state actors.**
- **Law enforcement and security agencies today, particularly in the United States, are dealing with a fractured threat. This includes the idea of so-called “salad bar extremism,” where terrorists mix and match elements from different ideologies to construct a new hodgepodge worldview of their own.**
- **Building relationships with mentors and cultivating curiosity are key in terms of creating a successful career in the realms of national security, journalism, and other related fields.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

SH: Seamus Hughes

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I’m your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with the pioneering researcher, Seamus Hughes, also known as ‘The Document Digger.’ Seamus is a senior research faculty member at the University of Nebraska Omaha’s National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE). He previously worked at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), serving as a lead staffer on U.S. government efforts to implement a national terrorism prevention strategy. Seamus has authored numerous academic reports on extremism in the United States and co-authored a critically acclaimed book, Homegrown: ISIS in America. He also regularly provides commentary to media and press outlets and won a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting as part of a New York Times research team.

SH: Thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

SG: You’ve been described as ‘The Document Digger;’ how did you earn this tag?

SH: It’s not the coolest title in the world, but I guess I’ll take it as an academic! So, I started my career in the Senate Homeland Security Committee, and I was a congressional investigator. So, what would happen is, we’d do an investigation, we did an investigation, like a year and a half, into the attack at Fort Hood by Nidal Hasan, and so we’re investigating the FBI and the Department of Defense. And they would just drop documents, like boxes and boxes and boxes of documents, and hoping to hide the ball in one of those files, and that you hope you didn’t notice it. And it was me, and there was another guy named Jim McGee, who was an old school reporter, who was a Miami Herald reporter for 25 years, then Washington Post, and he became a congressional investigator.

And we would just spend hours and days and weeks even just going through every single document. And what I found is, when you look at documents, there's things right in the black and white that are important. But there are things that they don't say that are just as important. And so, you get a little bit of pattern in the system, you get a sense of the noise in the system, and then you can use that to pull the thread when you do actual interviews with individuals.

So, I think of documents as kind of the first step of things. I took that from the Senate, I kind of spent some time in the intelligence community for a few years, and then when I got out, I was trying to do an investigation into everyone who had been arrested in the US for ISIS related activities in the last 10 years, right. The problem is, I could not rely on the Department of Justice's press releases alone, because sometimes they wouldn't announce an arrest. Maybe they had a case that went south, maybe they pled out the guy, maybe he was cooperating, they just didn't want to talk about all of them. So, I had to go through all the 94 federal districts in each single document until I found more ISIS cases. And damned if I didn't find 40 or 50 cases that never saw the light of day. And as part of that, I found the weird quirks in the federal court system to be able to find things that most people unfortunately can't because the system is so God awful!

SG: Well, it's very much an earned tag that you have as 'The Document Digger,' and it is a cool title. I certainly am envious that I don't have one at all, but maybe over time, people will decide something for me! Your work currently, though, is all effectively open source. You talk about pulling the thread. But the thing is this is that it's not easy to find things, even if they are available online, because if it was, everybody would do it. So, do you have a methodology that you've sort of refined that you've had to get through a trial-and-error process? I ask this because for our podcast, which is by NATO's Defence Education Enhancement Programme, a lot of us focus on research and building capacity tools to learn how to do research. So, your experiences on this are very important.

SH: So, my default is assuming that everyone is lying, and work my way backwards. And so, I use documents to augment that thing. So, I never go into an investigation, assuming I'm going to know what the answer is going to be. I go into an investigation assuming it's a puzzle, and I need to put together as many pieces as I can to get a full picture. So, if I'm taking a look at, say, domestic terrorism cases in this in the U.S., what I'm looking at is Government Accountability Office reports in the last five years, I'm looking at Congressional Research Service reports that they've put out, I'm looking at FBI Inspector General reports, I'm looking at federal court records, and then I'm putting that all together and say, 'Okay, a little bit of peace here, the GAO report, that's in a weird footnote that no one really noticed. And if I combine that with the case that I saw in Southern California, damned if I don't get a sense of the full scope of Atomwaffen in the U.S.' And so, pulling those threads, putting together a mosaic, I see it as a puzzle, right.

Our job is—we deal with the worst of society, right, the skinheads, the ISIS guys, the al-Qaeda guys, that can eat you alive. And so, what I think is important for me, at least intellectually, is to just take a step back and say, 'Okay, well, what kind of thing can make this kind of more of a, not a game, but at least an intellectual exercise of how to do this?' And so, you should use the court records as basically the starting point of an investigation, and then and then augment that with interviews. I guess I'm dating myself a little bit, but I feel like I'm a bit old school in the fact that I'll pick up the phone if I don't know the answer, right? So, if I don't know the answer, I'll call somebody. And if they don't want to give me the answer, I'll get on a plane. If they don't want to talk to me in person, I'll wait outside until they're ready. And some of that is a little bit of the reporter in me and some of that is a little bit of just like, if I don't have the answer, it's going to kill me. And so, part of that is a bit of a drive to be not only the first but also to get it right. It's one thing to be first, it's another thing to get it right. And so, trying to make sure that the type of stuff you're looking at actually passes muster is important to me.

SG: So, court filings seem to be your starting point, and perhaps maybe the most important research material, how many pages a day do you consume?

SH: Oh, God, don't tell my wife! So probably, at any given day, I'll probably look at about 1500 to 2000 pages, and at least 30 to 40 districts. And so, you'll say to yourself, 'Man, that seems like a lot of time.' And some of it is, but usually it's not. I can very quickly get a sense of, when I look at a document, whether it's going to be useful for me or not, just because of the rhythm and pattern to it, right? I know how the FBI files their stuff, I know ATF files or stuff, I know if I have a prosecutor who I've looked at for the last five years, I know he likes to hide the ball in a footnote, and the other one doesn't, right? And so, knowing those kinds of quirks, makes things a little bit quicker on things. So, people always ask me, 'Why don't you automise this? Why don't you use a programme and figure

this out?' And you can, but sometimes you miss stuff.

So, some of my biggest findings have been: I found Julian Assange's indictment before anybody else, and that was because they accidentally filed it in a national security case, unrelated to Julian Assange. They basically copied and pasted their old Julian Assange indictment into another guy's case. And it was on the third page of a 10-page filing, and I just happened to be looking at that case, because I thought it was interesting that the prosecutor on that case was a national security prosecutor. That's it right. And so, you wouldn't be able to train a computer to know that type of stuff. And so, it also helps you to get a sense of patterns too. So, I know that DC convenes grand juries on Wednesdays, and I could probably sit on the docket on Thursday and have a good story. Or I know that there's a clerk in California, who is very busy and every Tuesday night, she gets around to unsealing all the documents in that district. And so, I know on Wednesday morning, I'm going to a goldmine.

SG: So, quirks in many ways are more important than algorithms when it comes to actually anticipating things.

SH: Right. So, I mean, when you look at the federal court system, at least at the circuit level, you have 94 different districts, right, which means you have 94 different local rules, which mandate how you can release public records. And so, in Massachusetts, it's 180 days before things get automatically unsealed. In the Western District of Virginia, it's 90 days. In Iowa, it's never. And so, you have to understand those local rules to get a sense of whether it's going to be worth spending your time in Iowa for a search warrant, or whether it's worth your time elsewhere. And then every once in a while, you get surprised, right? So, you're never going to find a search warrant in Florida, unless it's the former president's right. Sometimes they release things and sometimes they don't.

SG: You often use the PACER system, which is the Public Access Court Electronic Records. Why them? And are there other tools available that can also help in doing this research?

SH: Sure. So, PACER is the online repository for all federal court records in this country. The U.S. is unique in that it's relatively—and people will yell at me for saying this—it is relatively accessible. Meaning that if I wanted to get a court record in the UK, or Canada, it's a few more hoops. Whereas this actually has an online repository, you can kind of at least get some of the information, things like that. And so, it's the online repository for all of the documents. The problem is, it's a fee-based system. So, it's 10 cents a search, and then 10 cents a page for each PDF. As if PDFs get more expensive, the bigger they are or something. And it's basically a slush fund for the U.S. courts to be able to buy flat screen TVs and other things like that. And that's fine, that's just kind of how the system is set up.

And so, I always use PACER as kind of the starting point of some of these investigations, because there's kind of interesting stuff that's sitting there. And again, because it's not a user-friendly system a lot of the public doesn't know how to traverse it. And so, a lot of stuff just kind of sits there untapped unless you kind of dive into it. So, I use PACER. I also like a website, courtlistener.com/recap, which basically scans court records and lets you do keyword searches of things. So, for example, if I was doing an investigation into everyone who had been arrested for January 6, I would go to courtlistener.com/recap, and I type in the word 'cordoned.' And the reason I would is because the FBI—God bless their souls—are sometimes lazy when it comes to affidavits, and they use the same language in every single January 6 affidavit, 'Mike Pence was cordoned off from the crowd.' That is a unique enough word that if I searched the word 'cordoned' it pops up every January 6 case. And you can take that 1000 different ways, right? You can look at ISIS cases that way, you can look at ISIL, or you can look at ghost guns or fentanyl coming in from China, like whatever you wanted to, you get a sense of the rhythm of how DEA or ATF or FBI files or affidavits, you can get a sense of other cases that are out there.

SG: You spoke about January 6, you talked about, earlier, Julian Assange? What would you say are the stories that you've uncovered in the last few years, potentially those as well, that you feel have been the most consequential to your research?

SH: So, I use my Twitter account—basically whenever I find something interesting, I just tweet it out. And we can dive into psychoanalysis of why that is, but I found that when I tweeted out like the Julian Assange case, or there was a sitting congressman in Pennsylvania, and another one in California, who were both under investigation for campaign finance, or there was bombings at—alleged bomb-

ings—at JCCs around this country, or any number of other things, and I actually found that when I send it out there, it actually starts getting more leads. People will reach out to me and say, 'Hey, you found that let me tell you the real story behind it,' or 'You found that, you haven't found this, you should look at this document.' And so, I like getting out the information as soon as possible, because I'm just trying to fill the picture for me. I've got a little bit of information, it's probably not enough to run a story or run copy, but it's enough to start the wheels going. I also horribly don't care about credit, right? I don't know why that is, but it's just not my thing. Great if you give me a hat tip, but I don't really care. What I want to get is the story out there and get it out from there.

SG: So, I want to come back to the aspect that you don't seek credit or even attention for the research you do in a second. But there was one thing you mentioned that stood out. Well, a lot of things that stood out, but one of them was the thing about fentanyl and China. It keeps getting mentioned, but not necessarily everybody in the world outside the U.S. knows what that actually entails. Can you maybe explain more on that, and also how your research has sort of led into it?

SH: Yes, so that's more of the research I do for like the reporting side of my work. Search warrants in certain parts of the country are relatively open, and that I can see when the DEA seizes a warehouse in say, Ohio, and they'll trace back how that fentanyl showed up in that warehouse. And so, they'll walk through, 'Ok so, this is a shell company in China that transferred the drugs, this is how they transfer the money,' and things like that. And then you get a sense of how big an investigation is, right? So, you'll see on page five, that it's telling you that operation whatever ridiculous name that the authorities want to give it that day. And then you use that fact to look for other operation documents that have been filed. And then you get a sense of the web of progress against a certain thing.

What's interesting about court records too, is you could also get a sense of priorities, right? So, I could look at, say, border apprehensions during the Trump administration and border apprehensions during the Biden administration. And I can tell you whether resources are being used or not. Or I can tell you that in, say, Tennessee, they've been prosecuting the hell out of people for COVID fraud for under $20,000. Whereas every other district doesn't really bring those cases because they think it's too small ball. So, that tells me there's a U.S. Attorney in Tennessee that really cares about this issue, and he has made it a priority for his office. And so, sometimes you get a sense of those aspects too.

SG: That's really interesting. In many ways, as we were discussing earlier, you don't hold on to this information like some sort of prized possession. You share it, and very much on social media. You're not interested in getting personal credit on many of the stories you uncover. Why is that? Why are you okay with just throwing all of this out there in the open?

SH: Because I like a good story, I think, more than anything else. I don't have the bandwidth to tell every story that I find. And there are people who do it much better than me. And so, my favourite thing to do, and I do this weekly, is I'll farm out probably about a dozen stories to local reporters that I find in the district dockets. And I'll say, 'I found this little thing, I think it's a story, do you want to run with it?' And then they have to go do their thing. And a reporter in Silver City, North Carolina can do a better job of a local HUD official taking bribes than I could in DC making phone calls. They know the area, they know the people, the players, they can make the phone calls, they can advance the story in a way that I can't. And so, for me, I just want to get the story out there.

There's also times where you decide it's not baked enough. And so, there's been plenty of times where I've kept things that I thought were interesting. But to get a search warrant is a very low threshold compared to rising to a criminal complaint. And so, sometimes you may have to decide that there's not enough there to blast this out and make someone have a very bad day, when a local TV reporter shows up at their house. And so, some of that is a judgement call. And to be fair, sometimes I've made the wrong mistake on things. Sometimes I made it right. It just depends. And I hope I learned in the last 15 years, how to do it right.

SG: You spoke about farming out stories to others that may be local to a story that's directly connected to their part of the US. Do you also get asked by academics and journalists to actually help them do their research?

SH: Yes, so…every year, I train about 2000 journalists and researchers on how to use PACER. A lot of that is online training. And so, I provide, every quarter, kind of a free training to anyone who's a local reporter. Like I said, I grew up with a mentor, this guy, Jim **MC**Gee, in the Senate who loved

reporting. And I, as such, now love reporting too, and I see these news deserts developing, where you'd have whole swaths of states not having any reporters. And I think to myself, that's not fair; at the very least, I should give them some level of tools, so that they know what they're doing on these types of things. So, I try my best to train people as much as possible. Also, if I get hit by a bus tomorrow, I don't want that knowledge to just go away. I want as many people as possible to know it, so that we can get some transparency in the system.

There's also better experts than me on stuff, right? I had the transcript of Richard Reid [who] was the shoe bomber. During the early 2000s, he was going to set off a bomb on a shoe on an airline as part of an al-Qaeda plot. I wrote up very quickly what I had, but I also farmed that out to a bunch of terrorism researchers who had studied Richard Reid's every move for years, because they'll see that weird thing on that one page that I thought was inconsequential, that they know is a big deal. And so, let's get that information out as much as possible.

SG: Yes, and speaking of al-Qaeda, my book on Ayman al-Zawahiri is coming out later this year. And I'm actually kind of almost wishing we'd had this conversation last year because I could have potentially utilised your skill set in seeing if there was something I missed in some court record, but I'm also now nervous in case there is something that was getting missed, because I'll probably end up crying that I did miss out on something that you potentially can find!

SH: I won't show you anything, but listen, a lot of researchers will reach out to me and say, "I'm writing a book on Sayyid Qutb" or "I'm writing a book on Anwar al-Awlaki. Can you find me every case that mentions him or her?" And I'll track it down, and then that adds a little bit more colour to a book, or a little bit more context to a book, and so I'm always happy to do that. Like I said, for me, it is mental floss—meaning that I spend my days looking at the worst of society: beheading videos, horrible atrocities against civilians. And so, if you can give me a puzzle and say, find me every Anwar al-Awlaki case in the US in the last 10 years, and I can spend half an hour, 45 minutes just doing that and kind of clearing my line in doing so, great. And again, it keeps me a little bit fresh when I'm doing actual research for terrorism stuff.

SG: Well, that's very creditworthy to you. Watch this space; there might be a lot of mental floss heading your way! Speaking about the terrorism dynamic, can you talk about where you see the terrorism threat today, not just, say, in the US, let's start with the US, but also broader, globally?

SH: So, in the US, it's kind of an interesting time. Think of it like a fractured threat. 5, 10 years ago, the FBI and most terrorism researchers, and actually just law enforcement in general, was largely focused on ISIS at the time, which made sense; it held territory the size of the UK, it had 50,000 people travelling there, it was a serious organisation that needed to be focused on. Now what you're seeing is basically a fractured threat. And by that, I mean…if it was 90/10 jihadism to domestic terrorism, it's now about 50/50. And so, the FBI has 1000 active investigations in all 50 states as it relates to ISIS. They've got 2700 active investigations for domestic terrorism, which is this catchall phrase for white supremacists, neo-Nazis, anarchists, left-wing, right-wing, everything in between. And then you had this really interesting bubbling up of what some have called kind of composite violent extremism. So, this is the idea that these kinds of people choose their own adventure: a little bit of incel, a little bit of white supremacy, a little bit of even Hezbollah, they throw it all together, and they shoot up a mall.

And that's kind of where I find the most interesting dynamic, when we look at the threat picture in the US, is we don't have structures to deal with that. The idea behind the 9/11 Commission was we've got to break down the silos and get us all working together. And in one respect, we did that for information sharing. In the other respect, we didn't because we set up other silos. So, we have experts on al-Qaeda, we have experts on ISIS, we have experts on Hezbollah, we have experts on domestic terrorism. And so, if you see these new cases coming up, and the guy is talking about Chads and Stacys, he's an incel. But he's also talking about Anwar al-Awklaki, well he also likes al-Qaeda and ISIS. And if you don't know those two different worlds, you are going to miss something. And we haven't set up these threat pictures to understand that we're dealing with basically…what the FBI call "salad bar extremism," where they kind of choose what they want. And that makes this dynamic a little bit harder.

It also means the tripwires we've set up post-9/11 may not hit on some of these guys. They're not necessarily reaching out to people overseas or known, respected terrorists. They may not be on the normal platforms, and so it becomes a little bit harder. From the law enforcement perspective, they can understand groups. You give them al-Qaeda, you give them the Oathkeepers, they'll create a

bulletin board with yarn everywhere, and everyone's connected to who, old-school mafia kind of takedown thing. But if you look at the attacks that have happened in recent years in the US, they tend to be individuals who had no connection to known groups, right? Think of the Buffalo shooter or things like that. And so, they don't hit against the tripwires. They're also more difficult for law enforcement to wrap their head around on how to address it.

SG: With your work, can it provide a window in assessing the future challenges? Obviously, you're looking at current ongoing cases, and you're finding nuggets throughout your research, but can the work you do maybe demonstrate a pattern of terrorist dynamics that we don't necessarily pay much attention to, but because you're looking at all the cases, you're seeing plots, you're seeing investigations, does that together form a bigger picture, like you talked about the mosaic earlier? Does it form a mosaic as to what we could have to deal with down the road?

SH: I think so. People that are extremely online as researchers, they will notice these trends very quickly, but folks that are kind of tangentially so may not. And I'll give you an example. When we were doing the Fort Hood investigation 15 years ago, we looked at all the cases where Anwar al-Awlaki popped up before Nidal Hassan. And you saw a sharp rise, probably about a year before that, where individuals were always citing him or always reaching out to him. And if you had looked at those 15 cases, you'd be like, "Okay, Anwar al-Awlaki seems like a really important guy in the homegrown violent extremism world, we need to pay more attention to him, or his lectures are having residency, so we need to dive into that." And so, you do see that play out in a lot of these other cases now, which people have the most influence and also which platforms. If you look at the recent filings, it's going to be all Discord all the time. So that tells me, if I'm a researcher, let me get away from Facebook and Twitter for a little bit, let me try this platform, and let me dive into that area because this is where my guys are going. And so, you do get a pattern in the system.

Maybe I'm overthinking this, but sometimes I find a lot of the FBI analysts and agents, they know a lot, they've been on these cases for years, and they want to tell someone. And so sometimes, they will put some interesting stuff in footnotes in public documents and hope that someone sees it. So, a great example of that would be, there was a Boston case of two guys who got arrested for attempting to travel to ISIS, one of them had been killed by the police because he had a knife. And in the memo for that, they had a footnote that mentioned that another guy in New Jersey had travelled to ISIS and had become a high-level commander in ISIS. There was no need for them to put that footnote in. I then took that footnote, cross-referenced it with the videos they've referenced, and found that the Zulfi Hoxha from New Jersey was the American in all of these ISIS videos and was a commander in those aspects, and then wrote an Atlantic piece kind of exposing his background on it. I've never talked to the Boston guys that worked that case, but I kind of feel like they wanted to get that information out, and they were hoping somebody would pull the thread on it.

SG: That's a really interesting dynamic and sort of, I guess, a case study of how we can actually work and come together. Do these principles of research, can they also be applied when you're looking at, say, hostile state actors and their potential role? Is there a way of seeing a pattern emerge with them in a similar way that we've been talking about terrorism?

SH: Particularly the court records, yes. If you look at how Iran uses actors in order to push information through, you have a number of cases like that. If you wanted to get a sense of, say, how Hezbollah is funding their operations, you'd look at cigarette smuggling in North Carolina. Or if you wanted to get a sense of how Russia was trying to encourage disinformation during the election, you would look at a number of other cases where they're kind of adding into Facebook comments in random court filings in Illinois. And so, you do get a sense of it. You also get a sense of whether the priorities have changed. And listen, sometimes it's false positives, right? Sometimes you see more cases because the FBI is focusing on the cases more. And sometimes you see more cases because those state actors are acting more or acting differently than they were. So, if you look at, say, Iran and the plots they've put against dissidents, or John Bolton, or things like that, so those are types of cases you didn't see, say, 10 years ago. You saw mostly more of a kind of fundraising, smuggling gun type of operation, and less of an operational tempo behind it. And so, the question then becomes, have we changed our law enforcement approach to refocusing on that, and we're catching things that we hadn't caught before? Or is that state changing the way they're doing things on this? And so, you have to be aware of that when you're doing it, and you have to caveat the hell out of it when you write your analysis, but it's worthy of looking at.

SG: Most definitely. Final question: we have a lot of budding researchers that listen to the podcast.

You've provided such a wealth of your knowledge and experience and how you go about doing things, but if you were going to encapsulate things, if you were going to provide advice to people that want to be the next Seamus Hughes, what would you guide them, advise them on doing?

SH: Two things, I think. First is find mentors. The reason I've been relatively successful in things I've done is because people took a chance on a punk kid when he was a 20-year-old intern in the Senate. And they put them under their wings, and they taught him as much, and they let him make mistakes, and they pulled him aside and said, "You made mistakes here, but this is how you get better" and things like that. And having those mentors was vital. And not just one, but a bunch of them from different experiences. I have one who was a former reporter, I have another one who was kind of a former congressional staffer his entire life, I've got another one who's very good at other things. And so, getting all those things together, you get a sense of how to be a more holistic researcher. Now, I spend a lot of time on PACER but don't get pigeonholed in one area. I know that court records give me a little bit of a window, but I know if I don't get on a plane, I'm not going to see the full picture. If I don't go talk to someone and actually see what happened in an operation, I'm not going to get a sense of the whole thing.

And the other thing I would say is just be curious. And don't assume that you know the answer before you start. I never ever write a report with a conclusion already done. When I walk into an analysis of, say, homegrown terrorism in the US post-caliphate, I thought I knew where it was going, I looked at the data, and I said, "Actually, it's going the opposite way," and not being afraid to say that. I'm giving way too many examples and way too many suggestions, but I would say, don't be afraid to be wrong. I've written an op-ed that said that it's important to have a material support to terrorism clause for domestic terrorists; I wrote it for The Washington Post. About a year ago, I wrote another op-ed saying we should not have material support to terrorism clause for domestic terrorism. Why? Because I got convinced that I was wrong, or I got convinced that it wasn't worth the political fight to do so. And being okay to have different opinions or changing your mind on things is actually quite important. I never want people to read my analysis and know what it's going to say before they read it.

SG: Well, these are all very important suggestions and words of wisdom, pearls of wisdom, I should say even, it's really important what you're saying, and especially about mentors. I think I could definitely endorse that as well, because I don't think I'd be where I am without the mentors that I was able to have. And hopefully, that can also then continue when someone gets into that position of authority, that they can then in turn guide others as to how to do the work. And your experiences have been really important for that.

SH: One thing is I block off a couple hours every two weeks to talk to young researchers and people in the field. So, if your podcast listeners are listening to this, and they want to get a sense of national security careers, or journalism careers, or things like that, just reach out to me, and I will make time, because people made time for me 20 years ago. And so, you should feel free to do so.

SG: Well, definitely. I'm sure a lot of people are going to take you up on that. Be careful what you wish for, I should just say!

Well, Seamus Hughes, you've been really, really gracious with your time. It's been fascinating to talk to you, to get your understanding of how you do your research, and hopefully you'll consider coming back to DEEP Dive in the future.

SH: Of course. Thanks for having me.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

Episode 44 – Karl Kaltenthaler: In the Situation Room, August 2023

Key Reflections

- **Despite the Wagner Group's mutiny, Vladimir Putin still relies on the private military company and its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin to act as arms of the Russian government in other parts of the world, such as Africa.**
- **Russia's agenda in attacking grain stores at ports on the River Danube is to cause hardship in the Global South as a means of putting pressure on Western governments to end sanctions in response to potential concerns of a famine.**
- **There are concerns that Iraq's new government has sectarian elements with ties to Iran. Pro-Iran Shia militias are utilised to advance Tehran's political goals.**
- **The Taliban is not a coherent entity, but rather a very fractious organisation consisting of various factions, wherein moderate elements have less power than the hardliners.**
- **The Afghan Taliban benefited from Pakistan's support in their return to power in Afghanistan. However, much to the Pakistani military's chagrin, the Taliban have not clamped down on the TTP, who have proliferated and come back to haunt Pakistan.**
- **Pakistan's government is firmly controlled by the country's military and intelligence establishment. Politicians who attempt to step over red lines will be punished.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

KK: Dr. Karl Kaltenthaler

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with Dr. Karl Kaltenthaler, Director of the Center for Intelligence and Security Studies at the University of Akron.

I speak with Karl about the global geopolitical picture, from Ukraine to Africa, to Syria and Iraq, and from Iran to Afghanistan and Pakistan. We unpack the myriad of challenges facing the international community right now.

Dr. Karl Kaltenthaler, warm welcome to NATO DEEP Dive.

KK: Thank you for having me.

SG: So, let's look at the fallout of the Wagner Group and Vladimir Putin. What does this mean for the Ukraine war and Wagner's future when it comes to conflicts abroad, such as their engagements in Sub-Saharan Africa?

KK: Well, first of all, I would say it's not completely clear what the fallout is going to be over the long term of what some people described as an attempted coup by Wagner. I'm not sure I fall into the category of analysts that think of that as an attempted coup. It may very well have been an attempt to get rid of some of the people in the Ministry of Defence that Prigozhin felt were very responsible for limiting Wagner's battlefield capability and leading to a lot of casualties. So, one of the things that I've seen, since the events that were so dramatic with Wagner going up the highway towards Moscow, is that the fallout hasn't been as extreme as some had predicted. It's clear that there was

a deal cut between Prigozhin and Putin and we don't know what the details of that deal are. Clearly some Wagner forces redeployed into Belarus, but there are still some Wagner forces that remain in Ukraine, although a lot of those have been moved away from the battlefield itself. So, around Bakhmut, where they were primarily deployed.

So, I think the thing I would say is that Putin still depends on Wagner, he still depends on Wagner, particularly in Africa and in the end probably will eventually depend on Wagner again, to some degree, in Ukraine. I think, probably, Prigozhin told Putin, 'Look, if you don't fully supply my forces in Ukraine, we're just not going to commit to the battlefield the same way we did.' But the thing that really strikes me is that there's been a great deal of consistency in how Wagner's forces have been deployed outside of Russia, and one of the things that we see is the forces that have been sent to Belarus have really been doing two things [that are] very useful to the Russian government. One of the things is they've been training the Belarusian army. The other thing is that they're clearly training to be deployed into Africa. So, these guys are not sitting there in some kind of exile where they have to give up their weapons and they're not meaningful, they're still very much acting as really the arms of the Russian government.

SG: That's very interesting and the context that you provide and the relevance that Wagner still has to Vladimir Putin in particular. I guess time will only show how that continues, or the faultlines that may emerge, or new faultlines that may emerge. In relation to that, Russia has attacked grain stores at the river Danube ports. Is this a tactic that we can assume will continue? And what will be the global consequences of this? Because very often we hear that Ukraine is the breadbasket of the world.

KK: Yeah, I unfortunately think that these attacks will continue. Some have predicted that they'll taper off. What we're seeing is an unevenness to the attacks, some days are worse than others, and that's to be predicted [and] to be expected. I think the consequences of this will be felt mostly in Africa, because as you pointed out, yes, Ukraine is a very important supplier of grain, particularly to the developing world. And the way I interpret what is going on, and I don't think I'm alone in this, is that the Russian government has come to the to the decision that the best way to get out of some of the sanctions that have been put there by the West, is to really cause hardship in the Global South, and that will put pressure on governments in the West then to react to famine, which is most likely to happen in some of these African countries. And then they'll relieve some of the sanctions on Russia. So, this is a very hard-nosed tactic on the part of the Russian Government to really precipitate a food crisis in the Global South to get out of some of these sanctions.

SG: You mentioned the word 'hardship.' We often forget that Russia remains active in Syria too, a country that has not recovered from the civil war, that is also going through hardship. Recently, a Russian fighter jet flew very close to a U.S. aircraft over the skies of Syria, which was an incident that actually put the lives of the four U.S. crew members in danger, according to the Pentagon. What is Russia's game plan in Syria? And can they afford to be involved, even now, because of their interference in Ukraine?

KK: It is costly for Russia to continue to be involved in Syria. From the Russian perspective, Syria is a very, very important ally in the Middle East. It's an area where Russia can show off its power; it's an area where Russia can say, 'Look, we're committed to our allies.' And that's important for Russia because Russia has so few allies. So, staying committed to the Syrian situation, I think, is something that the Russians will continue to do into the future. They've clearly upped their pressure on the Americans to leave. I think they think there is not a strong appetite in Washington to potentially get into a conflict with the Russians in Syria. And that's probably correct. But I also don't see the US administration deciding, 'Well, the Russians are threatening our aircraft or they're harassing us on the ground [so] we're going to withdraw our few remaining forces in Syria.' That's just not going to happen.

The United States views Syria as a very, very important aspect of stability in the region, partially

because of ISIS, also, partially because of Iran. The few U.S. forces that are deployed down in the south, and some of them that are up with the Kurds, they're in a supportive mission. They're not carrying out large scale combat operations, but that supportive mission is very important to keeping ISIS at bay, [and] also sending a signal to the Iranians that the United States is not going to simply abandon its mission in Syria. And one of the things that we have to keep in mind too, is that you've got camps like al-Hol and al-Roj, which are extremely important as potential incubators for future ISIS fighters. And while the Kurds control those camps, they control those camps with a lot of American support. There's a lot of American money that goes into helping support that mission; there's Americans that are involved in trying to solve the problems of these people in these camps. Al-Holl camp has upwards of 55,000 people in the camp, the vast majority of which are essentially ISIS families and so, if the United States was to withdraw from that area, and kind of give up support for the Kurds in meaningful ways, you could see a breakout from those camps and have 10s of 1000s of potential new fighters for ISIS.

So, this is an important region, I don't see the United States abandoning it. The Russians sometimes miscalculate the fortitude of the American administration; I think they think the United States only wants to focus on China. And I can kind of understand that sometimes, because that seems to be the discussion of the day in Washington [about] what to do about China, but I don't see the United States really abandoning its operations and its mission in Syria.

SG: You make a very important point about the camps of al-Hol and al-Roj. They definitely have unfortunately, become incubators for extremism and may well breed the next generation of terrorist fighters that could plague very many parts of the world, including potentially if they returned to the to their home countries and we know in some cases, they are being returned, and the full consequences of that only time will tell.

Aside from Russia, another supporter of the Syrian Assad regime is Iran. We have recently started seeing the gradual return of the infamous gašt-e eršâd, which is the 'morality police', so-called 'morality police' on the streets of Iran. What does this mean in terms of women's rights inside Iran because women in Iran have been very vocal in protesting, calling for greater equality, and in many cases, they have been detained and even murdered by the establishment?

KK: Well, it's a very bad sign. It's an indication that the Iranian regime wants to get back to business as usual. I think they planned to do this from the get-go. That this was something that they were clearly going to reintroduce, because it's so important to their supporters. One of the things that you have to keep in mind is that the clerical regime, while it is unpopular with very large proportions of the Iranian population, still have supporters that they depend on, and they can't lose that kind of support, they can't look like they're weakening their resolve, or that they've lost their religious credentials. So, from my perspective, I look at them basically doing two things: One is cracking down very hard, and as you said, yes, arrests, murder, all kinds of intimidation, to get the protesters off the street.

And then they did their time, this was kind of the second part of their plan, to wait until things calmed down a bit, wait until the protesters are back in their houses, wait until the international attention turns away a little bit, and then we'll gradually reintroduce the kind of harsh policies towards women and others as well, that they had prior to the protests. So, yeah, it's very unfortunate for women and I have been in frequent contact with Iranians, particularly Iranian women, journalists who I've worked with, and there's a great deal of unhappiness with the status quo, and a lot of Iranians would just rather leave the country, than put up with the status quo because they're not optimistic that things change positively.

SG: Well, it's very disconcerting what you're saying. And again, another challenge that doesn't really get necessarily the attention it should do right now. If we look at one of Iran's other neighbours, Iraq, the country there has a very complex political mesh of different actors with different allegiances. Can

you demystify what is happening in Iraq right now and why that also should matter to us?

KK: So, this didn't get a lot of attention in the Western press, because so many other things have happened, the war in Ukraine, the deteriorating relationship between the U.S. and China, and other things, but Iraq has really undergone a very important change in the last year. And the changes that the government, that is in power right now, that came to form its present constellation of parties that have the coalition that run the country, didn't win the most votes in the last election. But it played hardball on the streets of Iraq. It also did some very smart things, in terms of blocking those who would have come to power, who got the most votes, they blocked them from coming to power by using particularly the judiciary, which is aligned with this government.

So, this government that has come to power, which is not backed by the majority of Iraqis, is very pro-Iranian. In fact, this government is the political representation of the pro-Iran Shia militias. So, this is a very sectarian government, a very pro-Iran government, a very anti-Western government, a government which, frankly, uses its armed wings to accomplish a lot of its political goals. So, this is a major change in Iraq, because the previous government, under [Mustafa Al-] Kadhimi, was very adept at balancing Iraq's relationship with the United States and Iran. And they viewed this as absolutely crucial for Iraq's future because if Iran becomes the dominant power at the expense of the United States, that could very well lead to the kind of situation that produced ISIS in the first place in Iraq.

So, the key question that I think about now, when I look at this present government, is: are we looking at a government that will create the conditions that will re-energise ISIS support based in Iraq? Will it alienate the Sunni Arabs in the country to the point where they say, 'Okay, we don't trust this government anymore, we have no faith in it'? Will it alienate the Kurds to an extent that the Kurds once again think about, 'Maybe we need to move towards independence'? But what we've seen so far is actually this government playing its cards very carefully. It has said that it's in no rush to get American troops out of the country, which came as a huge surprise, I think, to just about everybody who follows Iraq, in the United States. And this government has also not gone after the Sunnis the way some had expected.

But I would say it's early days. And one of the things that we have to think about is if there is any kind of conflict between the United States and Iran, it doesn't necessarily have to be in Iraq, somewhere in the Gulf, there's kind of a cold war going on there and sometimes it actually involves a little bit of shooting, but mostly it's a cold war between the Iranian forces and the Iranian government and the United States, but Iraq will become part of that conflict if it does break out, and that would very likely help ISIS to have a revival.

SG: Well, you've effectively answered my next question, which is that is this a sign of history repeating itself? Because we saw, under one of the previous Iraqi Governments, a slow diffusion of sectarianism, where Sunni Muslims were being disenfranchised, ostracised, the hard earned gains that were made previously all evaporated and coincidentally tied up with the Arab Spring and the knock on effects from the Syrian Civil War, which then, as you said, gave birth to ISIS. So, again, there are eerie signs that you're pointing out where history is potentially repeating itself. So, we'll have to watch that very carefully.

KK: Absolutely.

SG: Sticking with Iran, it has reestablished diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia, courtesy of China's diplomatic intervention. What does that mean in real terms, that Iran and Saudi Arabia appear to have mended their fractious relationship for now?

KK: So, that's a very important question. And there's a lot of people who are trying to figure that out. What does this actually mean? I've had the benefit of speaking to quite a few folks in the Saudi military establishment since this has happened. And one of the things I would say is we shouldn't make

too much of this. This does not indicate a sea change in Saudi-Iranian relations, it does not indicate that Saudi Arabia has decided somehow that it's ending its close relationship with the West in favour of some kind of a new, Middle Eastern focused foreign policy that includes Iran. Saudi Arabia still views Iran as a very grave threat.

What this is about, more than anything else, is getting Iran to help Saudi Arabia solve some of the immediate problems that they have. So, one of the things that's actually tied to this is the rehabilitation, if you want to call it that, of Bashar al-Assad. So, as you well know, the Iranians and the Syrian government are very closely tied. Bashar al-Assad depends very heavily on the Iranians, politically, militarily, and to a degree diplomatically as well. One of the things that Bashar al-Assad has done to really make life difficult for the Saudis and other countries in the region is to allow, if not facilitate, a huge amount of Captagon smuggling into countries like Saudi Arabia.

So, Captagon is a drug that has become, unfortunately, very popular among Saudi youth, Iraqi youth; different countries' young people have gravitated to this because it is a very popular stimulant, it makes people feel energetic and happy. And so, to a degree, this is part of it, that Saudi Arabia is saying to the Iranians, 'Look, we'll get better relations with you, we'll get better relations with the Saudis, please help us with this Captagon problem.'

So, that's part of it and that's not, I don't think, widely understood that it's issues of domestic politics or domestic health issues in Saudi Arabia that's driving a good deal of this. And part of it is just to create more stability in the region in general. It's really a no-lose prospect for the Saudis to work out a really basic, not very deep, deal with the Iranians to say, 'Okay, let's tone it down a little bit, you don't like us, we don't like you, but we'll tone this down a little bit, because we both have issues we've got to deal with.' But it does not signify any kind of really meaningful realignment.

SG: Okay, it's one of those interesting moving pieces that I think again will evolve in some predictable ways and unpredictable ways, but the drug aspect that you mentioned is certainly something that doesn't get enough notice at all. If we continue with Iran, they have just become part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the SCO. Is that an important development? Does that enhance the SCO as a growing and significant multilateral organisation, or is this something that again was perhaps not as important as some are making out?

KK: I don't think it's very important. That organisation really is not a very meaningful organisation. It's more of a talking shop than anything else. It's not really one of those organisations where you see decisions being made or executed that had been very important for any of the countries that are part of the organisation. So, I don't perceive this as being an important thing at all. Iran's trying to rehabilitate their image internationally. They're also clearly trying to get closer to China and Russia. They need a lifeline because they're in pretty desperate economic straits. They also want military help from China and Russia. So, it makes sense that Iran is really trying to develop more of a sense that 'Hey, we're a global cooperative power.'

SG: So, Iran is certainly moving its actors around as we've been looking at—Syria, Iraq, then of course the SCO, Saudi Arabia, and then with China as well. Let's move to Iran's two neighbours, Afghanistan and Pakistan, starting with Afghanistan. The Taliban in power in Afghanistan, they're seeking recognition from the international community. There's been some interesting events that have transpired recently, with some politicians in the West advocating that. Yet there are major concerns that remain that the Taliban continue to harbour al-Qaeda; a UN report was pretty clear and direct about that. How can the international community consider Taliban recognition whilst terrorist groups appear to be reconstituting in Afghanistan?

KK: Well, the issue of international recognition is obviously very important to the Taliban regime. And it's been very interesting to me that the Pakistanis who I worked with and talk to have changed their tune on that a bit. And what we saw was after the Taliban grabbed power, the Pakistanis were all over the issue of international recognition. You know, 'We need to help the Afghan people. We need

to make sure that Afghanistan doesn't become a source of instability.' And so, the Pakistanis were very much the cheerleaders of the Taliban regime in terms of getting them international recognition. They've backed off from that now. A lot of that has to do with the very fraught relationship that now exists between the Taliban and the Pakistani government, more importantly the Pakistani military and ISI, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate.

But in terms of the international recognition issue, the main reason that proponents of that idea have called for it is to try to help with aid and to get the necessary food and other forms of support to the Afghan population, which is suffering miserably. Almost the entire population is in poverty now by global measures, and it's a very desperate situation for a lot of Afghans. So, there's also been the argument that if you recognise the Taliban regime, you'll somehow moderate that regime and that they'll become more friendly towards their female population, not abuse them as much, they'll follow international norms more, they'll throw al-Qaeda out of the country. I think those voices are relatively few and far between, and I think the biggest enemy of the Taliban getting international recognition is the Taliban itself.

The Taliban has proven that, if anything, they're not going to weaken their stance towards restricting women's lives in Afghanistan. They're more hardline than they were before. And a big reason for this is that the Taliban is a fractious organisation, and I think not everybody understands that—that this is not a centralised, coherent organisation. This is a very fractious organisation; it's essentially a group of militias that come together under a single banner. And so, in order to maintain some kind of coherence, at least the militias not fighting with each other that are part of the Taliban, the Taliban regime, the government, the very central decision-makers caved into the hardliners. And so, the moderates in the Taliban are not going to have sway over the direction of the Taliban; hardliners will continue to dominate the types of decisions that that government makes. And so, I think any hope of that regime being recognised internationally any time soon is unrealistic.

SG: You mentioned a lot of important dynamics when it comes to Afghanistan, and one of them was the relationship with Pakistan. Pakistan, as we know, had long backed the Taliban, had given them sanctuary during the War on Terror years. Well, to quote, actually, a person who we had on the podcast previously, David Loyn, he used the term "buyer's remorse." And that leads me to what I wanted to ask you now. Pakistan's military establishment has long had those ties with the Taliban. They had hoped that by the Taliban returning, that the Taliban would then clamp down on the activities of the TTP, also known as the Pakistan Taliban, or the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. But what we've actually seen is the opposite. There's been a major upsurge in attacks in Pakistan, including on Chinese nationals that are working on the Belt and Road initiatives, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, CPEC. Why has it been so difficult for Pakistan to resolve this issue with the Taliban when they had decades of close ties, and can we expect more attacks on infrastructure projects and other big targets in Pakistan?

KK: Well, I'll answer your last question first. Yes, we can expect to see more attacks. The Pakistani Taliban seems to be growing stronger, not weaker. And there are very few good options for the Pakistani military, for their intelligence services, to really deal with this, short of some kind of military operation in Afghanistan. And it's interesting that we've not really seen discussion of that in Pakistan, any indication that the Pakistani military is really contemplating that. And they know full well, because if they go into Afghanistan, to go after the TTP, or there's other groups, it's not just the TTP—if they go after the Pakistani Taliban, they're going to get stuck in a situation very similar to what the United States faced. They're going to be in an insurgent war, which they very likely don't want to get involved in. There's not a tremendous amount of gratitude and love for the Pakistanis among even the Afghan Taliban, let alone the Afghan population.

To a great degree, the Afghan Taliban used the Pakistanis. And I think a lot of people thought that there was this ideological overlap and that there was this very close allegiance and cooperation between ISI, the Pakistani intelligence, which was the primary supporter of the Taliban, and the Taliban

leadership. It was never there. I've followed Afghanistan very closely for many years, and this is not surprising to me. I think the Pakistanis expected gratitude, they expected strategic cooperation, and they got burned. But this is not the first time the Pakistanis have gotten burned, right? Particularly the ISI—the ISI has created groups, literally created them, they played a role in organising the groups. And then those groups came back to then start to attack targets in Pakistan. So, we talk about the Taliban sometimes as being blowback for the American support of the mujahideen in Afghanistan against the Soviets. There's some truth to that, but it's much more complicated than that. This is blowback for the Pakistanis in terms of their attempts to use essentially religious zealots as a form of their foreign policy, their security policy. It's not gone well for them. It's destabilised the country. It's made the country much less secure. Now they've got a country next-door, which they had hoped would be not only strategic depth, but a country that they didn't have to worry about. Now, they've got a country next-door that is a major source of security concerns. And so, I'm not one to say, you know, 'You get what you deserve' to the Pakistanis, but I would say to them, 'You really shouldn't be surprised that this has happened.'

SG: Indeed. I definitely echo those thoughts. I'm reminded by that adage that you can never buy a Taliban, you can only rent one, and their rates change by the hour. And I think with Pakistan's economic challenges, they're realising they can't keep pleasing the Taliban. And when it comes to being used, yes, I think often the perception was the Taliban were being used by Pakistan; in many ways, it potentially was the other way around. You mentioned about the role of the ISI, and they have often been seen as not just an agency that's involved with terrorist groups, but also when it comes to politics in Pakistan as well. Pakistan's general elections are due to be held by November of 202 at the latest. Imran Khan, the former prime minister, international cricketer at one time, he's claimed that the military and the current coalition government are trying to prevent him from running because they fear he would win. With Pakistan, the political scene often tends to resemble Groundhog Day, where you have the military, the ISI, they create and nurture a politician, there's a falling out, they get removed, someone replaces them, and the cycle repeats itself. So, in your mind, Karl, as a final question, what is happening in Pakistan? What can we expect is going to happen?

KK: Well, Pakistan is a very, very unstable place right now. And despite the IMF bailout, Pakistan's economic problems are not solved. Pakistan's political problems run very, very deep. And I don't remember a time—maybe with Musharraf—we saw this level of conflict between the military and a politician, but probably not. This is more profound than that. I see Imran Khan not being allowed to run. His party is in shambles. There have been many defections from the party. And even if he is allowed to run—which, like I said, I think is unlikely, I think that's basically been made impossible for him—the vote would be rigged so that he wouldn't win. He's clearly angered the military establishment; he has picked a fight with the most powerful force in Pakistan. He's not going to win that fight. I think he has personally angered many in the Pakistani military and the ISI. His supporters attacked the military. That's just something that you would have never thought would have happened before in that country, and not just because of the military having so much support in the country, which a lot of people don't realise—the military is the most popular institution in the country. But it's also the most feared institution in the country, rightly so, particularly the ISI. The conversations I have with Pakistanis, except when they're here in the US or in the West, they're always extremely—how should I put this—careful to not say anything that's going to get them in hot water with the ISI. So, the fact that the PTI, Imran Khan's party, took such an open, negative stance towards the military, I think has finished that party off and has probably finished Imran Khan off as a politician, at least into the foreseeable future.

So, I think we'll see more of the same politically in Pakistan. It'll muddle along—well, more accurately, it'll lurch from crisis to crisis. But Pakistan is not going to be able to really solve its deep structural problems. And to me, Pakistan is a very good example of a country with a deep state, and the deep state is the military. And the politicians get to play politics, act like they're in charge, and then they step on the toes of the military, and then the military slaps them down again. And I think that's what we saw with Imran Khan. It can very well happen with the present government into the future, but I

doubt it; I think they know where the red lines are. Imran Khan is an example, in my view, of a politician who probably thought he was more powerful than he was in reality and stepped across a red line, and then has kept stepping across red lines. It's not good for Pakistan, because there's a lot of youth, and for what Imran Khan stands for, you know, he's not my favourite guy, but I'm not a fan of most Pakistani politicians, but for a lot of young people in Pakistan, he stood for change. And you know, now they see more, oh, okay; the establishment runs this country, the establishment is the military and their allies, there's not really much hope. And like I said with Iran, what I hear from a lot of not just younger Pakistanis, but Pakistanis in middle age, they desperately want to get out of the country. They are very pessimistic about the future of Pakistan. And I don't blame them. I don't see Pakistan turning a corner and becoming a stable, functioning political and economic entity.

SG: Well, that's definitely a pretty concerning and almost depressing note to conclude with, but I think it's a sobering reality that you present, and I would echo again what you said about Pakistan and the economic, political, military, social challenges that the country faces. In many ways, Pakistan should actually be a member of the G20; it has all the potential of being a G20 country, and yet, its economy is lagging behind even Bangladesh, which was a former part of Pakistan. So, concerning times in Afghanistan, Pakistan, but also in the Middle East. Karl, very grateful to you for spending this time on NATO Deep Dive and look forward to having you back in the future and providing us with more depressing updates.

KK: Well, thank you for having me. I enjoyed it.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

Episode 45 – Guillaume Soto-Mayor and the Cost of Coups in the Sahel, August 2023

Key Reflections

- **The coup in Niger was fuelled by a group within the military who were in dispute with President Mohamed Bazoum's governance.**
- **The populations of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, want to reinvent their country's relationship with external forces.**
- **Russia is not perceived as the saviour in West Africa, but has instead branded itself as being anti-West, exploiting ideas on the moral, ideological, and political levels.**
- **Jihadist groups in the Sahel are not just military actors, they behave as shadow governments dealing with issues pertaining to justice and education. However, this comes at the cost of local communities who are experiencing dire humanitarian challenges.**
- **Sub-Saharan Africa requires more global attention and respect. It is a region with a considerable amount of natural resources, technological and educational capacity, and great importance demographically, with one of the youngest populations on earth.**
- **Africa has been the priority for ISIS especially Mozambique, the DRC, northern Nigeria, and the Sahel. They are interconnected and extremely powerful on a technological, financial, and personal level. It is possible that these groups will conduct attacks further away from these territories.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

GSM: Guillaume Soto-Mayor

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I talk to Guillaume Soto-Mayor, a Non-Resident Scholar at the Middle East Institute, who is based in Senegal.

I discuss with Guillaume the insecurity in Niger and the wider picture in West Africa and the Sahel, as well as the role of the Russian private military company, the Wagner Group.

Guillaume Soto-Mayor, warm welcome to NATO Deep Dive.

GSM: Thank you, Dr. Gohel

SG: We're going to talk a lot about events in West Africa today. Let's start with Niger. Perhaps the most obvious question is why has there been a coup in Niger?

GSM: Thank you, Dr. Gohel. The question and the response to that question is multiple and I think it's multi-dimensional. The first thing I want to highlight here is that there are, of course, a number of elements that have led to the coup that are interpersonal and interinstitutional, that are connected to networks of power within the Niger states. And I would say [there was] like a clan within the army, within the top brass, that were quite angry and quite distant from the Bazoum way of ruling and also fearful that he would try to oust them from their positions. And they were quite critical to its counter-terrorism strategy as well, notably the liberation of a number of jihadists in the attempts that Bazoum

was having to obtain a ceasefire with the Islamic State [ISIS].

And the second dimension, which I think is the most important one, is that following the coup, the essential element is the popular support for it. And what we noticed, to the surprise of many, is that the popular support for the coup was quite immediate and quite strong throughout the country, and not only in the army or the capital where there is a tradition of political opposition towards the main political power. And why is that? Mainly because people are tired, people are tired of the kleptocratic, nepotistic, corrupted governance system, which was incarnated by the main political party called the PMDS, which was Bazoum' and the former president's political party, who had a grasp—a hold—on the entire economy, political administrative system. And I think that people now aspire for freedom, for another perspective, for another [form of] governance. They want something new, and it is to these aspirations that the coup leaders actually responded. So, those two factors: interpersonal and I would say a tiredness towards the governance system that, in my view, were the main push factors, which allowed the success of this coup in Niger.

SG: So, if we factor in those push factors that you mentioned, why have there also been coups previously in Burkina Faso and Mali as well? Are there common traits or are there differences in those countries?

GSM: Yeah, I think that the two elements I just mentioned, with respect to both networks of power, some political, some criminal sometimes, and sometimes the ways of governing become so criminal that the two are intrinsically linked, I would say. And second, again, an aspiration from the population for anything else than what has been proposed to them. And anything else can be a religious governing system; it can be an external governing system; it can be a Pan-African governing system. Very often right now, it is a mix of all of this that transpires.

And what is actually also the truth is that there's been, again, a tiredness in terms of the security situation in most of these countries. Populations are tired of seeing that actually what has been presented to them as the solution to their personal and family security issues that they would experience in northern Mali or in northern Burkina Faso, or in southeast Burkina Faso would be an external military intervention, namely a French military intervention or a UN peacekeeping mission. Well, those, in 10 or 12 years of presence, have failed to restore security. And naturally, the states of Burkina Faso and of Mali have failed also in that regard, but the population now wants again something new, they want to try an alternative. And I think there are definitely common traits behind the success of these coups in these three countries.

SG: How does this relate to these countries requesting French forces to leave their respective nations? Is there a dynamic that's connected to all of this? Is this based on personal issues by the coup leaders? What are the reasons?

GSM: Naturally, this is a very complex issue, which traces back to the post-colonial times and the military and political agreements that were signed between the French political power at the time with the newly independent states. And those agreements have rules and decided over the presence and gave legitimacy to the presence of French military forces in this region, to guarantee a form of political stability and security for the populations all over the region.

Well, in that regard, the French security forces were quite naturally cold in 2013 with the Serval operation to deploy and stop the jihadist expansion in Mali. And this intervention was quite well perceived at the time, because it was seen as kind of the rational and the natural security guarantee for the region and for the population. Well, this presence right now again, has failed in its objectives, despite what Barkhane or the French military are trying to push in terms of narratives. They were promising, to the population and to the states in this region, to stop the expansion and they failed to do so and it's not only their responsibility, obviously.

So, again, the presence has been long, and the cooperation hasn't been ideal, not always. Populations again, have been extremely angry, and this is critically important to understand, in what they perceive as being a lack of transparency and honesty in the communication of the French politics or

the French army with respect to their presence and with respect also to their military results or their sense of military results. And I think that this communication and the absence of an efficient line of communication between the population and the French army and the French diplomatic system has been the critical issue here, because they haven't seen that the population was just exhausted, and again, waiting for any occasion to try something new. It's not that they want Russia, or that they want China, or Türkiye, or anyone else. They just want to try something new to enhance their living conditions and this is something that I think we should understand.

SG: Sure, well, I want to come back a little later to the role of some countries in events in West Africa. But before I do that, if we look at it from a multilateral level, is there anything that ECOWAS, or the African Union, or the Organisation for Islamic Countries can do in terms of resolving the tensions in the region that have been built up following the coup in Niger, but then also, with the fact that countries like Burkina Faso and Mali have also threatened action in case there's any intervention, so can, from a multilateral level, anything be done to alleviate the tensions?

GSM: I would be very rich if I could answer this question. My point here is twofold. First, we need to listen to the populations. We need to understand that they are new driving forces, that they are new elements that we need to respect. We need to understand that they want again, mostly, kind of a revolution in a sense, they want to reinvent the relationship of their own countries with external forces, deeming the fact not only that these external presences from the UN, European Union, even Russia, the United States or France, haven't been able to improve their living conditions, so that they also have a responsibility in terms of their own governing structures being inefficient and unable to provide public services. So, they look into external presence through this lens. The fact that, thanks to a certain economic or political support or geopolitical support, or military support, their own inefficient rulers have been able to stay and to continue to embezzle public resources and to live on their backs basically.

And so right now, there is not only an anger there is also a hope there is a hope of something new. And any counter reaction to that, any reaction that would actually criticise them for these aspirations, would be very harshly felt naturally. And so, we see a lot of reactions in terms of whenever the junta or the immediate coup leaders are being criticised, people actually feel that their aspirations are also being criticised. So, I think that right now, there is a question of analytical metrics, there is a language, there is a diplomatic approach that needs to be renewed. So, right now, job number one from external forces, from any international institutions or bilateral partners, is a really strong introspection. And from that, after this thorough introspection, start to build a new relationship from scratch. And I think that right now is actually the only way forward.

And the second element naturally is to try to alleviate or at least to lower the diplomatic rivalries that we're seeing throughout the region and between the main geopolitical actors present in this region, which I think are actually increasing the tensions rather than lowering them in this region.

SG: So, you talked about geopolitical rivalries and actors in the region. This brings me to my next question, which is that there's been a lot of talk about the role of the Russian private military company, the Wagner group. They are active in a lot of these countries that we have been discussing. How much of a role does the Wagner group play when it comes to these military coups? And in connection to that, how important is the Russian angle?

GSM: Thank you. I think you are making critically important points here. First, because we actually talk too much about the Wagner Group. We put too much emphasis on their importance. It doesn't mean that they are insignificant, naturally. It doesn't mean that Russia isn't an active presence in this region. It doesn't mean that Russia, which I think it did, exploited brilliantly the weaknesses of their geopolitical rivals' presence, and what is perceived as being the absence of results, and that they manipulated wonderfully or exploited rather wonderfully the anger, the political distress, and the political void that was in front of them. And so, I think Russia isn't perceived as the saviour, Russia is perceived as an alternative and it managed to introduce itself as an alternative on, not only a military level, and this is critically important, it also managed to introduce itself as an alternative on a moral,

ideological, and political level.

So, it also branded itself as an anti-Western, [anti-]democracies, [anti-]Western values, [anti-]Western ethics and political priorities force, in the sense that it is also anti-gender policies, to give a concrete example, that it is anti-LGBTQ+ policies, that it is also anti-external military interventions in its tradition, etc. That is also a paternalistic regime. And so, it created many bonds on several levels, and it was extremely clever in the way it did so. So, they just reinvented the relationship. And in that sense, I wouldn't say that Russia was, as it was presented sometime, the instigator of the coups, this is absolutely wrong, and I think it is also diminishing what is actually going on in West African societies and in this population, in terms of political consciousness, of social engagement, etc.

By putting the primary responsibility on Russia, we are actually being lazy in trying to understand what is really going on in these societies. It is very easy to put all the blame on Russia and actually they're responsible for many things and they put fuel on the fire on many occasions, but they're not primarily responsible. And so, I think we should be again quite nuanced here. And I think that by putting an over focus on Russia, we are paradoxically giving legitimacy to many of the coup supporters in their narratives. Because actually by putting this emphasis, we are saying to them, 'well, whenever you actually choose to be independent, whenever you choose a partner, we are actually going to fight it with every means at our disposal. So, when you are being truly independent, we are actually going to push against it for, naturally, what is perceived as being Western interests.'

So, I think this is the wrong strategy on every account. And I think we should be very cautious in the way we put, again, another emphasis on Russia's presence, which is real and they're conducting a lot of terrible military operations and massacres, and they are increasing inter-ethnic, inter-community tensions in the region, and they are embezzling natural resources and conducting criminal activities, etc. But again, they are not the reason why we're here today.

SG: In our discussion, it's becoming quite clear that you are talking about understanding the ground realities and by not understanding it, it can actually be counterproductive and that if one doesn't understand the ground realities, then it could actually conversely become very negative and it can then be exploited by other countries who may not necessarily have instigated it, but then benefit from the falling out of the situation, like Russia and the Wagner Group that you mentioned. If we look at another country that has been active and present in West Africa: China. Where does China stand when it comes to all these events in West Africa?

GSM: China is brilliantly silent when it comes to all of these events. They are in their traditional diplomatic stance against an external military intervention, but they are brilliantly silent as is Türkiye, as are also Gulf States and also, India or Brazil, other large external powers that are increasingly present across the African continent. And what we can see here is, again, the reinvention of geopolitical struggles and attitudes towards Africa, and towards several different regions of Africa. And I think that China, as we discussed, over and over with the Russian presence and the Wagner presence, is pushing its agenda, is present, is extremely efficient on all accounts, as are many other actors that are just mentioned, as is India, as is Brazil, or Türkiye. And so, again, I think we are not looking right at the situation and we need to understand that, as any other continent around the globe, we are seeing the presence and the influence of many different actors, and we need to take into consideration all of it and not just the ones that actually matter to us.

SG: If we address the role of non-state actors. One of the challenges that often gets neglected is the fact that you have both al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates that operate in West Africa, which has been one of the reasons why there's been so much international troop presence there in terms of it being advisors working in the background, helping frontline operations. Do the military coups that have taken place contribute to the instability in the region, which then aids entities, such as groups tied to ISIS, tied to al-Qaeda, to the jihadist entities benefit from the melee that these coups produce?

GSM: Yeah, most definitely. I think that they will benefit jihadist groups on many, many accounts, on many levels. The first, naturally, is that despite all the criticisms that we can have against them, the

French military troops, or the Americans and the other partners, have been by far the most efficient in fighting these jihadi groups on the ground; killing some of their leaders on several accounts, affecting their financial resources, their recruiting patterns, and so, of course, the absence of French military troops, or the retreat of the UN, or many other external military presences, will have an effect on the capacity of these jihadi groups to expand. We have seen that already in the Gao and Ménaka region, which are in the north east of Mali, when the French departed, these regions, which had been cleared, partly at least, of jihadi presence for some time, have been reconquered by the Islamic State [ISIS] in the Sahel in six months. And it's not the only factor, naturally, but it is among those that would facilitate their expansion.

The second element, naturally, is that the more those countries are unstable the more they actually suffer from the absence of external aid, for instance. The more dissensions there are between several parts of the country, at the political or social level, the more that the jihadist alternative ideological offer, and this is really important, they are not only military actors, these non-state actors are governing actors, right? They propose, they offer to the population an alternative governing system, an alternative justice system, an alternative security system or education system very often. So, they will be considered as being the stability. They will actually be the most secure option for many populations, for many communities across the region. And in that regard, the more unstable the political and social situation is, the more room they will have to diffuse their narrative and to legitimise their governing proposition, the governing offer to the population.

I think that yes it will, on all of these accounts, lead to these jihadi groups' expansion in Niger and Burkina Faso and in Mali. Actually, in Mali and Burkina Faso 60%, two thirds of the territory, is already under their control. So, the situation is dire in that regard and the humanitarian situation even more so because at the end of the day, it is the communities that suffer from it and not the governing structures.

SG: Interesting that you mentioned the fact that a lot of these jihadist entities operate almost as protostates in the areas that they influence and control. In many ways that's part of the safe bases strategy that the last leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had advocated, which was building local ties, marrying into families, earning trust, and then using that as an important asset to enhance their roots in these places. So, that's only going to continue potentially if there's more instability.

A final question, Guillaume, a lot of this, you've been talking about in our discussion, and some of this we were also having a chat offline as well, but I wanted to bring it into our discussion right now. Why should events in West Africa matter to us? Very often, many people talk about a situation in the Middle East, or North Africa, or Afghanistan Pakistan. Events in Sub-Saharan Africa, from the Sahel, Western Africa, don't necessarily get as much attention and sometimes there is a perception, and it's a wrong perception, that it doesn't concern us, it's not going to necessarily impact on us. But clearly, it does have knock on effects. Could you explain and expand on why this is so important for us to be paying attention to?

GSM: Again, this question is great because I actually would like to highlight here several things that truly matter to me even on personal levels. I've been living in this region for almost 10 years now, back and forth and working in this region. And I think first that we are not understanding how—of course my first answer to you would be how this region is important on an economical level, this is the obvious reason. It has a considerable amount of natural resources, it has a considerable amount of innovation capacity on a technological level, on educational level. It is the place where I think the world of tomorrow will be invented, if I'm being honest with you. It is naturally important on a demographic level, because it is one of the youngest populations on Earth and in that regard, again, this is where the world of tomorrow might be invented. And if this population continues suffering so much from, again, a large flurry of political and social struggles, the more it will impact us, and the natural link that people could see between this region and Europe, or even the United States more and more actually, is immigration.

And, and of course, with respect to the incapacity of many Western societies to integrate, but also

to welcome asylum seekers and refugees and migrants in respectful manners, and all of the political tensions that are linked to it, we can see how much also the situation in West Africa impacts Europe, on again, an internal political dimension. And we see that backwards, because years after years the European Union, for instance, has been increasingly spending money on trying to alleviate or to reduce migration flows originating from West and Central Africa to Europe, right? And that money actually, in my view, could be quite criticised in the way it has been spent. Because again, as [with] most of the international aid money we've been spending in this region in some regards, we could be doubtful of the actual effect and impact it [has] had to enhance the living conditions of the population, whereas, actually, it might have quite strongly benefited a small political and social elite in this population. And that, I think, is the last dimension I would like to highlight.

I could highlight to you how much also this region means on security matters, because as we know, Africa is the new priority for the Islamic State [ISIS] for quite some time now. It is the continent where they're being the most active, being in Mozambique, in the Congo, in northern Nigeria, especially, and now in the Sahel as well. And it is a place where they are naturally interconnected, extremely powerful on a technological, financial, and personal levels. And it is very likely that at some point, they will use these bases to conduct action a little bit further than these territories, right? Al-Qaeda has been present in this region for 20 years. They've been anchored again, as you mentioned, a very important point, they've been anchored socially following al-Zawahiri and other al-Qaeda leaders' instructions, they've been really melted and embedded within local societies and so it would be very difficult to actually force them out.

And actually, also we could speak on criminal levels, because organised crime in this region is exploding and is thriving. We can see, naturally drug trafficking, but not only [that], natural resources trafficking is huge, cigarette trafficking, counterfeit medicine, and those have a massive impact on local populations. But the more these criminal networks are being reinforced, the more they are actually also powerful in South America, in Europe, or in Asia, right? Because it is one of the places where they will get resources from. So, naturally, all of this is interconnected.

But the last point I would like to mention here is highly political. In Africa, West Africa especially, has been very often, in my view, kind of a premonition of what would come to other places. It is a place on earth, for at least the last 30 years, which has seen such a rapid evolution of their political systems; liberalisation in the 90s of its political and media and of its societies; a massive economic development, but it also has been suffering the consequences of the structural adjustment programmes in the 80s and the 90s, stronger than any region on Earth. It is a place where a lot of things are being reinvented. It is a place where, again, traditional lines; tribal, family, clan solidarities, and lines and comprehension of society do still matter a lot. Where religion is key, where people are highly capitalistic in many ways. There are a lot of dimensions that are again, Pan-African, but also sometimes very nationalistic.

What I mean with all of this is that these societies are being reinvented in front of our own eyes. It is both the end of a certain, in my view, of a certain ruling system that people are absolutely tired of, and also the reinvention of a new one that could emerge from it. Either we are going to be out of it, or we are going to be supporting it, or part of the story. But I think there is hardly going to be a way in between. And I think that right now, a lot of researchers as well should understand that the institutional lens isn't the only one. We shouldn't always look at societies in the way government's function, or talking only to the ruling party or the opposition party, right? I think that right now, what matters is that again societies are being completely reinvented.

So, we need also to reinvent the way we understand them, and talk to them, and try to cooperate with them, and support them in whatever they want to do. And it is the same for the military presence, actually. Military cooperation, and this is pretty much what all of the juntas have been saying, they want to reinvent military cooperation. They don't want to stop the cooperation with the French, or to stop the cooperation with the Americans. They just want to build another balance. And I think that right now, this is why this region is so interesting, and so important. It's because I think a lot of what's going to come is going to be decided there and invented there.

SG: These are such important dimensions that you've brought in, and you've really provided a tour de force of the ground realities of what has been taking place in West Africa. So, let me just thank you, again, Guillaume for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive and hope to have you back in the future to provide us with more updates as to what is transpiring in that region.

GSM: Thank you very much. It was my honour and my pleasure.

Episode 46 – Anne Craanen and Tech Against Terrorism, September 2023

Key Reflections

- **Tech Against Terrorism is a public-private partnership that works to counter terrorist use of the internet by working with the tech sector, international governments, civil society, and academia.**
- **After the 2019 Christchurch attack in New Zealand, tech companies invested in combating online terrorist activity. The threat also diversified with terrorists using smaller tech apps and tools.**
- **Terrorist operated websites pose a threat to society. They bridge the operational and propaganda uses of the internet for terrorists, as well as acting as an archive for terrorist content.**
- **Online misogyny in the online space has evolved. Individuals who do not fit into conventional misogynistic groups espouse equally damaging and offensive content. Algorithms can be manipulated to promote such material.**
- **Violent extremists and terrorists use deepfakes and memes that can be utilised to communicate with each other, building a sense of community and concealing offensive language from unknowing outsiders.**
- **The hybridisation of online threats has meant that different communities have been brought together. This poses a risk as people who may believe in more innocent conspiracy theories are sharing forums and online spaces with terrorists and violent extremists.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

AC: Anne Craanen

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with Anne Craanen, Research Manager at Tech Against Terrorism and host of its innovative podcast.

I discuss with Anne about the work that Tech Against Terrorism does as well as the evolving nature of how terrorists and non-state actors use the internet and online technology to further their agendas. Anne Craanen, warm welcome to NATO DEEP Dive.

AC: Thank you very much, I am very happy to be here.

SG: Let's start by talking about Tech Against Terrorism. How did it come about? And what does its work entail on a daily basis?

AC: Yes, it's a good question. So, Tech Against Terrorism, we're a public-private partnership, and we counter terrorist exploitation of the internet, whilst respecting human rights. And we were set up in 2017, partly by UN CTED, and our work is actually reflected in a couple Security Council resolutions that acknowledge the work of public-private partnerships and how important it is to work together with the private and the public sector. And that's really what Tech Against Terrorism does. So, we kind of work with everyone, I would say, that wants to counter terrorist exploitation, but will do so democratically. So, we work with industry-led initiatives such as the GIFCT, so the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism.

But what we really do is—what we've seen, and I'm sure we're going to talk about it later, but what we've seen is that bigger tech companies took action and have moderated their platforms and because of that, we've seen a migration to smaller tech companies being used. And so this is really

where we focus a lot of our efforts that go towards supporting the smaller companies, through providing them with mentorship, so basically, practical advice in terms of how to define their terms of service, how to write a transparency report, and any other practical things that we can do to support there.

Beyond the tech sector, we also work with governments, so governments fund us. So, for example, the Canadian government funds a project of ours, we've previously been funded by Spain, South Korea, the UK Home Office, basically any government that, again, aims to disrupt terrorist use of the internet, but importantly, whilst respecting human rights. And then finally we also work with civil society and academia because obviously when you talk about content moderation, there's a risk to freedom of expression and other human and digital rights. And by making sure that we work with civil society, we try to mitigate that as much as possible.

So, that's who we work with. And I would say our three pillars of the organisation are first, we have an open-source intelligence team. So, they actually monitor the internet and monitor where violent extremists and terrorists are exploiting the internet, which platforms are being used, which platforms are being used by which actors, because sometimes we see that social media companies or websites or whatever it is, can be exploited by, for example, far right terrorists, but not by Islamist terrorist actors. And so, it's important to understand who's exploiting which platforms, and that's really what our open-source intelligence team does. And I would say it really grounds everything else we do at Tech Against Terrorism, because [when] responding to the threat, obviously you need to understand what that threat is first, and that's what the open-source intelligence team does.

Then we have our more capacity building workstreams. So, this is where we have that mentorship process with tech companies. So, so far, we've worked with about 50 tech companies through our mentorship process. We also have something which is called the Knowledge Sharing Platform, which is basically an online website that we've built which has kind of everything you need to know in terms of moderating terrorist content online for both tech companies, governments, and other industry partners.

And then the third thing which is interesting about Tech Against Terrorism, which is what I do, so maybe I should have opened with that. So, I'm the research manager at Tech Against Terrorism, but I also lead on the Terrorist Content Analytics Platform, the TCAP. And this is a tool that we've built ourselves. So, basically, at TAT, we also work with developers, and this puts us in quite a unique position to be able to build our own tools. And so, we've built the TCAP, which basically alerts terrorist content to tech companies when we detect it on their platforms, and we've been doing that since 2020. So, those are the three main workstreams, I'll pause there if you've got any follow up questions, feel free.

SG: Sure, well thank you for firstly, clarifying everything that Tech Against Terrorism looks at and the partnerships that you build. It demonstrates the cross-spectrum approach that you've adopted. If we go into some of the specifics on the work that you all do, looking at open-source intelligence as well, being a critical component. So, how has terrorist use of the internet evolved over the years and what would you say are the current concerns?

AC: Yeah, it's a great question. I mean, I think it's changed massively over the last few years. And I think I already alluded to this, but what we really have seen is that after the attack in Christchurch, which was live streamed and obviously had a manifesto circulating, the bigger tech companies kind of came together and resurrected the GIFCT. And also, beyond that they obviously invested a lot of resources into content moderation. And so, we saw a real sort of cleanup of these bigger platforms. And on the one hand, that's obviously really good, because it drives terrorist and violent extremists to more niche spaces. However, what it also did is it diversified the threat because bigger tech companies are still being used, but they're sometimes also being used almost as what we call beacon platforms. So, they basically signpost to other, smaller niche platforms that are being used where you can watch a video or where you can read a magazine. And [with] the smaller tech companies it's a real issue because they often don't have the resources to first of all understand that they are being exploited, let alone that they know how to counter that exploitation. And so, this is a real [issue]. It's

kind of persisting still and we see a lot of small companies, and when I say small, I mean like file sharing platforms that have one person basically hosting it. And it can be really difficult for people to respond to sometimes the enormous level of exploitation that we see.

So, that's kind of the first thing, I would say the second thing is and there's a lot of debate about this, whether this will persist or not, but obviously decentralised platforms, are becoming sort of a new thing [used] by terrorists and violent extremists, which really makes it more difficult for us to, to realise who is hosting the content. Because how Tech Against Terrorism works is that it usually alerts material, terrorist material, to tech companies when we find it through the TCAP and then how it works is that that person usually—and we've seen about well, in the first year, we had a 94% take-down rate, now about 84%—but basically the people behind those platforms they take the material down, and with decentralised platforms, it can be very hard to understand who we need to alert, like who's actually hosting the material. So, it complicates matters further. And also a threat that we're seeing currently, over the last months/year or so, is that we're continuously seeing file sharing platforms being sort of created using open source code and particular open source code that is readily available on GitHub, for instance, and violent extremists and terrorists are basically creating their own file sharing platforms with this. And that's obviously quite a conundrum there as well.

And then, another thing that Tech Against Terrorism really is—it's one of our priorities at the moment—that we're strategically focusing on is terrorist operated websites. So, when you think of all tech companies, whether social media, file sharing, video sharing, and all the different [ones], because obviously there's a massive variety and diversity of platforms that get exploited. Let's say that we deal with that, then you still have terrorist operated websites. And this makes it even more difficult because obviously, we can't alert a website to the owners because they are usually the terrorists that own it. So, that's a no go. So, then we have to go to infrastructure providers and infrastructure providers, in order to take a terrorist operated website down, there's a lot more we need to do there because of human rights and freedom of expression. It has a way bigger impact shutting a whole website down than a piece of content.

So, that's obviously a very good thing, however, it can be very resource intensive to then write an entire brief saying, 'Well, this is why we are very certain that this is operated, or this website is operated by terrorists.' And so that's what we are massively focusing on because often these websites also have massive archives of terrorist contents. And so, that's obviously a massive risk. If you imagine that we were successful in, for example, taking all material off the social media companies, but you still have a website with a massive archive, that's obviously continuing that problem and we're not really solving anything. And what we also see is that they're used for internal communications, etc. So, they're a lot more exhaustive. When you think of why terrorists and violent extremists use the internet, you've got the operational side, for fundraising for attack planning, and more secure communications, and then you've obviously got more of the propaganda dissemination. And these websites almost bridge both, which is quite the danger there.

And then finally, in this day and age I can't not talk about it. Obviously, we are all paying attention to the use of AI, generative AI, by terrorists and violent extremists. This is obviously incredibly new, but we are seeing a more experimental use of generative AI by terrorists and violent extremists. Whether that is to, for example, sanctify particular actors, so basically, turning lone actors into saints or what we've seen recently, for example, is with the Nashville shooting, the police officer that basically shot the perpetrator was sanctified using generative AI. What we've also seen, for example, is Islamic State, translating their statements using AI. So, we're seeing a slow but experimental use of it. And obviously, I think that's definitely something that the whole of the industry will have to focus on.

SG: Did the pandemic change the way that terrorists use the internet. Obviously, we're moving into a post-COVID-19 world, hopefully, but at the same time, everyone's had to adjust and adapt to that environment. Is that also the case when it comes to terrorist groups?

AC: Yeah, I think it is, to be honest, I think there's still more studies coming out that actually assess to what extent COVID-19 has changed terrorists use of the internet. I would say that at the time, at first, at Tech Against Terrorism we were a bit hesitant with saying like, 'It's completely changed the

game,' because I think a lot of people were kind of jumping to conclusions and saying, 'Oh, gosh, now that everyone is sitting at home and is more online, it must be the case that all our young people are being radicalised into echo chambers online.' I would always warn against that in terms of, let's look at the evidence for that, let's look at the data. But now after COVID now we're seeing yes, there has definitely been an impact.

And I think it still remains a question of size. How many people are now being drawn into these spaces that weren't before. But there has been a UK study, I believe by the Department of Justice, that showed that, prior to 2007, there was a very low percentage of people that said that they radicalised with an online component let's say, whilst between 2019 and 2021, I believe 92% of convicted people said that, yes, the internet played a role in them radicalising online. And so that's a pretty overwhelming statistic, I would say.

And I think what it definitely has done, which is beyond terrorists use the internet, but it's also changed the threat and I think the hybridization of online harms that really has massively accelerated through COVID-19. Because you all of a sudden had a lot of, for example, conspiracy theories about COVID-19, where it came from, that it wasn't real. And then when the vaccine came, anti-vaxxers, for instance, and the conspiracy theories around that. And what we saw was that a lot of these conspiracy theorists or people that were interested in these theories, also all of a sudden found themselves in more extreme channels as well, more extremist and terrorist channels. And partially this was just because they started to interact online and these conspiracy theories often out link to other channels, etc.

But what it also was, for instance, after the attack on the Capitol, we saw that Parlour was shut down. And when Parlour was shut down, we then saw a massive uptick in telegram channels, especially Far Right channels. And then we actually found evidence of, for example, recruitment manuals in terms of how to take someone from an idea like a conspiracy theory to more Far Right, antisemitic, extremist ideologies. And so, COVID-19 has, without a doubt, completely changed that. And that merging of harms is definitely something that now has changed the threat online, but also how we should respond to it.

SG: Using the term you just mentioned, 'merging of harms,' lines are increasingly becoming blurred and harder to sometimes distinguish. How easy is it therefore, to determine what platforms online are operated by actual terrorists and what may look somewhat concerning, but actually are not necessarily breaking the law?

AC: Yeah, it's a great question. And I think there's a lot more we can do here to be honest because in our typology, what we say is something is either a terrorist operated website, so that is we are very confident that the website is actually owned by Islamic State supporters or members of Islamic State, for instance, or another terrorist organisation. We then sort of have the middle category, which we sometimes call fringe platforms or libertarian platforms, which are basically resurrected to really uphold freedom of expression, and usually they feel that they are sort of the product of censorship elsewhere. And this goes more towards—and I'm definitely not saying that the people behind this are terrorists or violent extremists in nature at all—but it's more that these websites can sometimes, or companies, might have a lot of terrorist and violent extremist content on the platform, just because they are so dedicated to freedom of expression that terrorists and violent extremists think well actually, 'let me try this platform because they might not moderate and remove what I have to say,' basically. And then there's the platforms that we all know that are obviously absolutely not run by terrorists and violent extremists and that get exploited against what anyone had in mind.

But I think you're right, I think the question is very interesting, because I think there is more to be done in terms of when is something maybe not a terrorist operated website, but when we have a strong suspicion that for instance, a social media company or another type of tech platform, is being hosted by people that might have very similar ideologies as extremists and terrorists. And then what do we do there? Because that sometimes can really be a challenge.

And I would also say that in terms of that freedom of expression, it's obviously incredibly important that, for example, through our mentorship process, we helped with very practical advice in terms of

how do you write a terms of service to make sure that the rules of your platform explicitly say this is how we define terrorism, this is how we define violent extremism, if you will espouse this material online that will moderate you off our platform. And infrastructure providers in a way are a bit lagging behind on that because that conversation hasn't been had as much yet, as with, for example, the social media platforms. And so, to really think through, what should be the threshold of evidence that we need to provide to infrastructure providers to make sure that they then can take a website offline.

And then I think we're stuck with the same issue that there's multiple ways of taking a website offline. It involves many different infrastructure providers, domain names, registrar's, it has a lot of different levels. And so, it can also be quite easy that if a terrorist operated website was to be, for example, no longer supported by a particular infrastructure provider, it could basically hop to another one. And so, for instance, what infrastructure providers could consider is, if you block a certain domain name, then what are the sort of alternatives that are very close to that domain name because they'll certainly try to—terrorists and violent extremists—will certainly try to re-upload that website using a very similar domain name, because if they change completely, then obviously their fans won't be able to find it. And so, there's a lot more that we can do there, basically. I hope that answered your question somewhat.

SG: Yes, absolutely. Another aspect of the consequence of the pandemic was that there's been a rise in online misogynistic doctrines of all kinds of ideological persuasions. Can you talk about the growing threat of misogyny and gender-based abuse online?

AC: Yeah, so this is definitely one of my focus areas. And I would say that it's always interesting to think through whether the pandemic has changed it. I'm not sure if it has to be very honest. I think it's brought it more to light. And I think especially, not just online, but if you think about, the offline developments that we've seen during the pandemic and after the pandemic. So, I mean, misogyny is obviously as old as the world, but events like the decision to overturn or overthrow the Roe v. Wade decision, the protests that we've seen, both for and against abortion, and basically sort of a steady decline in terms of men trying to control women's reproductive rights, for instance, and I wouldn't say that's just an online phenomenon that's very offline as well.

I think in the UK, where we saw during the COVID-19, the death of Sarah Everard and the more light that was shone on femicide, but also women's position in society. I think those offline events can have a real impact, first of all, on misogyny, offline and online, but also on the online ecosystem. For example, after Sarah Everard we saw on notable incel forums, for instance, loads of support shown towards the killer of Sarah Everard. So, I would say, offline and online, as always, they influence one another. And I would say that that's the same for misogyny, so I wouldn't just confine the change or the uptick in misogyny with just an online phenomenon.

But if we purely look at the online realm, I would say the manosphere has been there for a long time, made up of men's rights activists, Pickup Artists, Men Going Their Own Way, and then the worst, most notable case that everyone I think mostly is familiar with is incels, so involuntary celibate, which basically means that they blame women for denying them sex because they find themselves so unattractive and they have this perceived grievance that they can't have sex and therefore, in worst case scenarios, they become violent against women or men. And so, what is usually studied is that incels and Far Right extremism that that really overlaps, which I definitely think it does, and it's something to consider, especially how one can influence the other and how, for example, incels can radicalise into further, Far Right ideologies. But I would also say it's really important to make sure that we consider vice versa, what that effect is, because I would say that violent misogyny, whether online or offline, that obviously needs to be studied also in its own right because it's a threat against women and that should be taken seriously, not just because it can influence someone to also become, for example, antisemitic or Islamophobic.

But I would say that there's now, again, there's a lot of development now, and I think Andrew Tate has really changed this and raised these issues to the service because I wouldn't say that Andrew Tate really fits into one of those categories that I just mentioned in terms of the manosphere, but obviously, he's very misogynistic. And I think what we really need to consider there is what is actu-

ally online misogyny, and how should we categorise it and how should we treat it as a threat? And I would say that, especially Andrew Tate, has really raised issues of what are platforms, and especially their algorithms, promoting? Who are they promoting it to? And what is the internet affording in terms of features and algorithms in terms of how that misogyny is spreading, basically. And I think a lot more can be done about that. And the Digital Services Act in the EU, that will certainly focus on algorithmic transparency, the online safety bill in the UK, hopefully, will also focus on algorithmic transparency, but I think, in the context of online misogyny, that is incredibly important to consider.

And in terms of that definition point, it goes wider than also the manosphere and people like Andrew Tate. If you think about the harassment both online and offline, that female journalists or female politicians are facing, I would say that this is really—I think, Julia Ebner's put it as the 'new glass ceiling' of women because if they go into politics the online misogyny that they face is so steep that it usually translates into an offline risk as well. And so, I think that online misogyny, to be honest, is still not being taken seriously as it should. And sometimes it also is because it's been put in this 'terrorism or violent extremism' paradigm, to see it as part of that, and I think we need to be very careful, because the threat doesn't spread the same way, is what I would say. And so, we should respond to it in different ways as well.

SG: Yes, I certainly would echo your comments about Julia Ebner, who has done some very important research into this and is not only a friend of our podcast, but a former student of mine. So, there's definitely a lot of praise I have for her. I'd like to explore with you the use of memes in the context of terrorism and violent extremism. Why are memes being used by terrorists and violent extremist actors? What is the goal and the agenda? Is this part of the current generation who are susceptible and impressionable to the impact of those memes?

AC: Yeah, so at Tech Against Terrorism, we always say extremists and terrorists, they use the internet in basically the same way as normal people. So, we like memes for a certain reason, and they do as well. And I would say that, mostly, I think we're familiar with [the fact that] good memes have to be funny, and they have to signal something and I think when we then put that into the context of violent extremists and terrorists, it's a very good way to signal to your in crowds because the sense of community you can build up through a meme grows, and it's also a very good way because if you don't understand the context, or the for example, antisemitic slur that a particular meme is trying to convey, the outgroup doesn't understand it. And so, it's a very good way to distinguish basically between your in group and out group.

It obviously has different purposes. Some say that it can be used, for example, for recruitment because we sometimes see very clear memes, for example, we saw a recent one where the Islamic State and al-Qaeda tried to basically make fun of one another and that is a very pointed meme for a clearly terrorist audience. Usually what we see is that these memes are bridging the more hardcore versus the people that might be entering into a particular extremist space. And a meme might be able to take them through that pathway.

I think another thing to point out that I think there's a lot of focus usually on—and it makes sense—in terms of the Far Right use of memes and I would definitely say they use memes a lot more than Islamist actors or Islamist terrorist actors, but they are—and Moustafa Ayad has actually done quite a lot of work on that as well—they are definitely also exploring with memes. And I think this goes into a wider trend where we always say, the Far Right and Islamist terrorists and violent extremists don't operate in completely separate spaces online. They very much learn from one another. And so, if Islamist actors notice that, actually, memes are a very good way to communicate to your in-group then Islamist actors will probably learn from that. And for example, the Far Right might look at Islamist actors and say, 'Well, they are having a lot of success with file sharing platforms, let us experiment with that as well.' And so, I think it's always important to make sure that we study the two and how they learn from one another.

And in terms of memes, the final thing I'll say on that as well, is I find it very interesting in terms of how our memes and extremist memes might not be as separate as we would want them or believe them to be. And Olivier Cauberghs has done a lot of research on this, in terms of how an innocent

meme can be utilised by violent extremists and terrorists and then pop back up into our normal society. So, actually one of my friends, the other day, sent me Pepe the Frog and I was like, 'Oh, dear, I don't think you understand what this implies to a completely different audience.' And so, how that transfers from one to the next is interesting, and again, points to the fact, also in terms of how difficult it is to moderate memes, right? Because if you're not a subject matter expert on violent extremism, you might not have a clue as a content moderator that you're actually looking at a very deeply antisemitic slur. And in order to teach content moderators how to recognise that is a real challenge.

And also, memes are continuously changing. So, for example, automated detection methods like hashing, which is basically a digital fingerprint that you can take of a piece of content, if it changes, if it is edited, the hash won't work anymore. So, there's no automated way to go about this either. And maybe we shouldn't even try automation when it comes to the freedom of expression elements as well, because when is a meme terrorist and when is it violent extremist. That debate in terms of human rights and digital rights is even more complicated. So, there's many different reasons also, I would say, tactically, why terrorists and extremists would use memes because it is difficult to moderate and detect.

SG: Let's continue to complicate things that we're discussing. So, we're living in a world where deepfakes are becoming a mainstream topic. You mentioned the evolution of AI earlier in our discussion and how this is now also, just like memes, it's impacting into pop culture as well. Can deepfakes be manipulated for terrorist purposes?

AC: Yeah, I think it's a very good question. And it's an interesting one because I definitely feel like there is a lot of focus on deepfakes and especially also the question of whether terrorists and violent extremists would use them. Interestingly, I would say the sort of the thought leaders on this one are Daniel Byman and Chris Meserole, from Brookings Institute, and they wrote a paper on deepfakes and what it showed is that they haven't really seen any terrorist or violent extremist use of deepfakes, which is interesting. That's not to say no, that there is not massive potential. And I think when we spoke to them on the podcast, they were also like, well with generative AI, which is basically happening all that week, or at least, it became the topic of conversation, the paper was produced before that, and so I think generative AI has really changed the game on that one.

So, in terms of what we've seen, at Tech Against Terrorism, we haven't seen deepfakes where, for example, because that was kind of what everyone's talking about, what if a former leader for example, the of the Islamic State or al-Qaeda would pop up and do a speech and basically using a deepfake to do so. So, we haven't seen that but obviously, with generative AI, it has gotten a lot more complex. And what you could imagine, for instance, is—and this ties into disinformation as well—what if terrorist and violent extremist groups start using deepfakes and generative AI to, for example, create a false flag attack and spread disinformation on that account?

That is something that we're monitoring, but we haven't seen. We've seen an experimentation of generative AI, but we haven't seen this persist as of yet. But that's not to say, that this is not a massive worry and with how quickly the technology is developing and growing, we can see violent extremists and terrorists starting to use it. And I think with deepfakes again, whilst not having seen it, I'm by no means saying that it won't be used in future. And also, the one thing I would say is that I absolutely don't want to come across like I don't find deepfakes a threat in terms of obviously, state actors have had a lot of success with this already and are already using it for disinformation purposes. So, it's a question of when terrorists and violent extremists are going to start utilising it as well to a to a greater extent.

SG: Building on that as a final question, I guess, talk to me about the challenges of hybrid threats online and perhaps, for the benefit of our listeners, maybe just also explain what hybrid threats actually mean as well.

AC: Yeah, so hybrid threats are the hybridization of online harm. So, previously, where you might have had terrorists use the internet, so terrorists' content, as purely that and now we've got the hybridization where, basically, online harms that aren't necessarily terrorist or violent extremist are starting to overlap with that. So, you now have online terrorism, then you've got violent extremism,

hate speech, discrimination, misogyny, conspiracy theories, and the hybridization of those basically they all overlap now.

And so, it's really changed the game in terms of, first of all, what the content looks like. And so, this poses questions, for example, for content moderators in terms of how to moderate it. Are they going to moderate something as terrorist content, violent extremism, hate speech, because on the content moderation side, platforms have rules for this, and they have definitions of content. And so, it becomes very hard to see for example, we've seen a video that has about one minute of the Christchurch live stream and then it has a massive conspiracy theory about an anti-Vaxxer, basically, and then it has a load of antisemitic tropes that are usually behind conspiracy theories. So, you could say that that could also be discrimination or hate speech. And so, it becomes a lot more difficult to detect this material and to also say what online harm it actually is. And so, that's kind of what we mean with the hybridization of online harms.

It also feeds into what I would say is a trend of post-organisational terrorism and violent extremism. And I would say even beyond lone actor attacks, because obviously those have been rising massively, especially on the far-right side, but material online that can't be attributed to a terrorist organisation or a violent extremist organisation. It's usually content that centres around a particular idea or a certain event like COVID-19. And so, that's changed as well. And then I would say the final part of that is that it's not always ideologically confined. So, content online, especially in more Far Right terrorist channels or violent extremist channels, for example, Atomwaffen Division is a designated Far Right terrorist group, it's not all material that is neatly produced by Atomwaffen Division and labelled as such. It's basically a lot of material that picks and chooses from different ideologies, I would say, and different ideas, this content that it shows up as. And as I mentioned, COVID-19 has had a massive effect on that as well.

And I think again, and I pointed that out earlier, but because of that hybridisation people and networks of individuals are interacting with all of these different online harms in different spaces. And obviously our worry then is, as Tech Against Terrorism, is what happens when people that, for instance, believe in a conspiracy theory actually radicalise towards even more extreme ideologies, and in the worst-case scenario, justify violence based off that. And Bettina Rottweiler and Paul Gill have done a really good study where they basically look at what are the psychological factors of an individual that might predispose someone to actually radicalise from a relatively more innocent conspiracy theory to more violent ideologies. And they, for example, show that low self-control, but high levels of self-efficacy can actually make someone interact more from conspiracy theories to more extreme ideologies.

And so, this is really important to consider, because it really also changes how we think about countering that threat. And not just in terms of what it presents as online. But also how to tackle these things, because for Islamic State, there's almost such a brand identity that it's very easy to identify what is official material produced by the Islamic States, we've got designation lists where governments say we shouldn't have this material and then we've got online regulation that says, well, we shouldn't have this material online as terrorist content, so we remove it. And for this hybridization of threat and the overlap and online harms, we don't have that pathway yet, or that sticker in terms of a solution.

And I think that is something that we really have to come to terms with and I know that like the Digital Services Act, or the DSA, and the online safety bill, they're trying to make a start at this. But I don't think we're there yet in terms of the granularity of definitions and I haven't even brought up the term borderline content, but this often coincides with it as well. So, it's sometimes material that doesn't even go against the terms of service of a platform, but it errs on the line. And so, it can be very hard to tackle that type of material. But I would say I'm mostly worried about that type of material and about the hybridization of threat because it might seem more innocent, I do think that's the type of material that has the opportunity to polarise society and the opportunity to recruit people and undermine our democracy really. I worry about that a lot, basically.

SG: Definitely something for all of us to be deeply concerned about, and as you mentioned, the chal-

lenges to democracy and civil society as well. So, things that we'll need to watch out for. Well, let me thank you, again, Anne Craanen of Tech Against Terrorism, for joining us and helping to demystify a lot of the challenges that we are having to deal with online. Thank you so much.

AC: Thank you so much for having me. It was a great conversation.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

Episode 47 – Caroline Rose and the Captagon Challenge, September 2023

Key Reflections

- **Captagon was originally a licit pharmaceutical drug mostly used for attention deficit disorders until the 1980s. In the 1990s and 2000s, it began to trickle into the black market.**
- **Today, the drug has made its way to the Levant, where actors aligned with the Assad regime in Syria have benefitted from involvement in the Captagon trade.**
- **It was thought that normalising relations with Syria could help stem the flow of Captagon, but this has not necessarily proven to be the case.**
- **Captagon labs and networks have been uncovered in parts of Europe as well now, such as in Germany and Austria.**
- **Between 2018 and 2021, captagon smugglers used commercial maritime shipping methods to traffic the drug. After that, routes became more localised, with the product being moved in trucks and civilian vehicles across borders. Smugglers sometimes even engage in risky behaviour including attacks against military actors like the Jordanian Armed Forces.**
- **Captagon has also contributed to food insecurity in parts of the Levant, which does not get enough attention. Therefore, counter-narcotics needs to factor that aspect into future initiatives.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

CR: Caroline Rose

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel, and in this episode, I talk with Caroline Rose, the Director of the Strategic Blind Spots Portfolio at the New Lines Institute. I discuss with Caroline her research on the Captagon narcotics trade as well as the intersection of defence, security, and geopolitics from Europe to North Africa and the Middle East to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Caroline Rose, thank you for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

CR: Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

SG: It's our pleasure. Let's start with a broad brush. Talk to me about how serious, currently, the challenges are with the intersection of illicit economies, armed conflict, and insecurity.

CR: Absolutely. So, I think that this is a very unique challenge that is emerging in the 21st century. With the doubling down and the acceleration of globalisation, along with blurred lines in active and latent conflict zones, illicit economies are beginning to embed themselves very deeply into governance networks, into local security landscapes. And they're doing an excellent job by undermining governance, exacerbating corruption, and using illicit economies as alternative revenue sources that allow them to accrue power, but then also, over time, degrade human security. A lot of these actors are armed actors, and once they accrue political influence, they also broaden their access to arms and pursue violence against local communities or forces of government. And because of that, this is really an emerging challenge. You have, of course, organised crime, but you also have armed groups that are becoming very intimately embedded and intertwined with illicit economies.

SG: So, I want to delve deeper into this. And in particular, one aspect that you've been researching in great detail, you even testified to the UK Parliament about it, and that is that there has been a great concern over the dangerous impact of the drug Captagon. Now not everyone knows about this

narcotic. Can you firstly explain what it is and then also talk about its proliferation?

CR: Absolutely. So Captagon was actually first introduced to the licit pharmaceutical market in the 1960s by a German pharmaceutical company named Degussa AG. And it was essentially produced for a variety of different needs, the first and foremost being ADHD, attention deficit disorders. It would be occasionally or reportedly used for weight loss as well, but primarily used for attention deficit disorders. And in the 1960s, when it was introduced on the pharmaceutical market, it had a very brief tenure there until the mid-1980s when it was scheduled by the World Health Organization and then incrementally taken off the licit market. In the 1990s to the early 2000s, that's when we started to see Captagon trickle into the black market, where it was proliferated by organised criminal groups in the Balkans, and it slowly migrated and made its way into Turkey and then eventually into the Levant in Syria and Lebanon, where a variety of non-state actors began to produce Captagon in very small amounts.

The reason why we think that Captagon became popular in the early 2000s to mid-2010s in the Middle East was because it used to be a licit pharmaceutical substance that would require prescription, and it was used for productivity. And because of that the taboo of drug use was lessened. The taboo of using Captagon was deemed less societally shameful, and because of that, Captagon became a very popular substance. It also became a useful substance for those facing food insecurity, those working multiple shifts that needed something to get them through the day.

SG: Let's look at one in particular, which is its negative impact on the Syrian civil war. Who is benefiting the most from this illicit trade?

CR: Without a doubt, actors that are closely aligned with the Syrian regime. In the mid-2010s, you saw a dramatic shift from small-scale production to large-scale, industrial-size production around 2018 to 2019, where we began to see Captagon seized in millions of pills. Incredible industrial-scale capacity for both production and smuggling, where only a state actor that had access to Mediterranean ports like the Port of Latakia as well as commercial vessels and the industrial-scale packaging that it required to be shipped in such large amounts. And because of that, even today, we still see the Syrian regime benefiting from the Captagon trade because they control the checkpoints for taxing Captagon tablets and shipments. They control the border hubs and cross-border trafficking nodes.

This has also allowed them to have leverage in negotiations for normalisation discussions. And then of course, the elephant in the room is that Captagon has become a very lucrative illicit trade that has allowed the regime to reap what we estimate to be billions of dollars per year, roughly two to three billion dollars annually. And that's just regime actors. Of course, there are non-state actors, there continue to be communities involved in the opposition and lone wolves and criminal networks that are actively involved in Captagon production that are not affiliated with the Syrian regime. However, the Syrian regime network is the most extensive and by far produces the great majority of Captagon stemming from Syria.

SG: I find it mind-boggling, the figures you were talking about, just billions that the regime has made within the chaos of the civil war and the misery that so many millions have felt inside the country. So the Assad regime is somewhat being rehabilitated within the Arab world. How do we address the fact that the Captagon trade is still growing in the midst of the multiple Arab nations that are taking steps towards normalising the relationship with Syria?

CR: Well, certainly. I think that it's notable when you look at the statistics, and you look at arrests and seizure data from countries, Captagon is not growing to the extent that it did between 2020 and 2021. It's still steadily growing in the region, but not at such a rate that this constitutes a crisis for anti-narcotics and law enforcement agencies. That being said, we are seeing an uptick in reports, particularly amongst transit countries like Jordan and more frequent reports of Captagon seizures, which shows that law enforcement agencies are getting smarter about detecting Captagon shipments. They're also communicating a lot better amongst themselves and amongst other law enforcement agencies and intelligence agencies. That being said, now there's a discussion about bringing Syria into the fold and involving them in that conversation and even allowing them to contribute to ongoing investigations into networks inside of Syria, identifying who was involved in the Captagon trade from both a production standpoint and a trafficking standpoint.

By allowing and bringing Damascus into that conversation, giving them agency about who they can approve or deny…I think, is extremely premature, just given that the regime does have extensive

networks and connections to large-scale Captagon production and trafficking networks. That being said, it does seem like the region is starting to slow down with particular normalisation efforts, especially after admitting them into the Arab League. It didn't necessarily yield the results they wish to see on counter-narcotics. There was this big belief that the flow of Captagon would dramatically be reduced after Syria was admitted, believing that…as a move and confidence-building measure that would somehow translate to a reduction in flow. And we have not seen that. In fact, this past summer, we've seen a dramatic rise in Captagon laboratory seizures, Captagon shipments, seizures, and arrests across the region. So, because of that, I think that many of Syria's neighbours are recognising that direct collaboration with the Syrian regime may not necessarily be the most strategic or successful move and decision that they can make when it comes to stemming the flow of Captagon.

SG: Talking about stemming the flow, could the Captagon trade potentially expand well beyond the Middle East? I'm thinking of places like Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, which have had challenges of narcotics such as opium, heroin, methamphetamines, but also through the Balkans, which I recall you did mention a little earlier.

CR: Absolutely. I think that in the Middle East, it's reached its limit to where it's an extremely popular substance. There's now a very large-scale law enforcement campaign across states, an intra-regional counter-narcotics campaign that is concentrated on Captagon. And because of that, we're starting to see trafficking networks get creative and identify new potential consumption markets outside of the region. The reason why Captagon can be competitive within new markets is because Captagon has so many uses. Captagon can be used for productivity, but also it can be used for food insecurity, it can be used to work a second or third shift, it can be used recreationally. And because of that, it is kind of this multi-use drug. It's an amphetamine-type stimulant. It's addictive for sure, and it has many health concerns associated with it. But that being said, it's still not perceived as this hard drug like, for example, heroin and cocaine would be. And because of that, I think it can be extremely competitive in other markets outside of the Middle East. We've already started to see trends that indicate that Captagon is moving into Iraq very steadily as a both transit and destination market.

We've already started to see labs seized in Iraq, which we've never seen before this past summer. In terms of Iran, where there is a high methamphetamine use and heroin use as well, Captagon certainly could be a competitive substance. But I think the biggest trend that we're starting to see is Captagon move in across the Mediterranean, through the Balkans, and into Europe. We have already seen it this past July; a Captagon laboratory was seized in Regensburg in Bavaria, Germany. We've also seen various Captagon smuggling networks busted across Europe, primarily in Austria of all places, as well as networks that have helped with trafficking operations in Italy as well. So, it looks like they're trying to plant roots across Europe, as well as Africa, and that's the last potential transit and destination market. We've seen Captagon be trafficked to transit ports and transit routes within Africa, particularly in Morocco, Nigeria, Sudan, and various other countries. And we also have heard reports of militants being attracted to Captagon just because it supposedly boosts their performance on the battlefield.

SG: So, it is spreading quite substantially, and as you gave the examples of Germany and Austria, it is already now in continental Europe, so that is deeply concerning. Building on that, what are the routes, the methods for the narcotics to move across countries? Is it with couriers? Is it through human trafficking? How is it being shipped around?

CR: So, from 2018 to 2021, I would say that the most popular way was through commercial maritime shipping. You would see overland smuggling, and certainly overland smuggling didn't disappear during that time period, but maritime smuggling through proven existing commercial shipping routes and shipping lanes, that was a very popular way to transport industrial-size Captagon shipments. But after, in 2021, there was a severe uptick in the attention and concern and study and examination of Captagon trafficking, because it really did explode in the region.

The sizes of shipments were just astronomical, I mean they were in the millions of pills. After that happened, you saw smugglers shift their tactics. They then sought to exploit reopened smuggling routes, for example, the Jaber-Nasib border crossing between Syria and Jordan, and also rely on overland smuggling. So you had smaller shipments, they were not in the millions of pills, but they were in the thousands, and it relied upon a broader network of local communities, local tribes that were recruited to essentially smuggle Captagon in backpacks or even in some cases in convoys, in trucks, in civilian cars and civilian vehicles across the border. And that's why we've seen a severe uptick in Captagon smuggling along the Syrian-Jordanian border. Some smuggling operations have

been militarised as well.

We've seen some smugglers kind of accept very risky behaviour by firing on Jordanian Armed Forces and participating in armed clashes with Jordanian Armed Forces. We've also seen an uptick in smuggling efforts along the Saudi-Jordanian border as well, particularly a lot of attempts at the Al-Haditha port. And then also we've started to see smuggling from Iraq into Kuwait, from Iraq into Saudi Arabia. They are really identifying new overland routes to transport Captagon in smaller sizes, but in more frequent bursts.

SG: Well I'm very glad that you helped lay out the methods of how it moves around because it's very important, especially for a practitioner to understand themselves and a lot of them that we interact with, as part of the work for NATO's train the trainer programme, including the Jordanian Armed Forces. So, the example that you brought up with what they're having to encounter is really, really important there. You mentioned earlier that Captagon is not viewed as a hard drug. Is that ever going to change? What would it take for that to be elevated, and are there countries, or at a multilateral level, [are there] desires to make it viewed as a hard drug?

CR: I think that when it comes to Captagon, one of the trickiest elements—and for me as a researcher and analyst, one of the most concerning elements —about Captagon is that we really don't know what's in it anymore. So, I mentioned in the 1960s, this was a licit pharmaceutical product, and there was a formula, it followed the fenethylline formula, and because of that, there was a definition of what Captagon was. But now…its chemical evolution has changed so much…. There are very few laboratory analyses that show the chemical composition, but the few that do show that Captagon does not whatsoever resemble the fenethylline formula of the 1960s to 1980s. Instead, it actually is nothing like it. Sometimes it has little to no amphetamine at all, or sometimes up to 47% of amphetamine metabolised inside the pill, along with a variety of cutting agents that range between quinine, caffeine, and a number of other substances that can be either harmful or not harmful to the user. And really, it shows that these smuggling networks and these producers, they're kind of making Captagon whatever they want it to be. There's no formula; there's no set guideline or procedure that these producers are following when it comes to the manufacturing process of Captagon.

Because of that, coming back to your question of "will this be considered with more stigma or perceived with more stigma as it expands to new markets?" I think it's entirely possible, but what would require that is more frequent and sustained testing. So, law enforcement in the Middle East that do seize Captagon pills being able to send it to laboratories for consistent testing, identify that chemical composition of that batch of Captagon, and make it publicly available and compare it with other seized shipments that are also chemically analysed. That would make a big difference for researchers but then also, of course, the public perception of what Captagon really is. As of now, it's an amphetamine-type stimulant, an ATS, which I would also say overall is not perceived with much stigma as, for example, other harder substances, heroin, cocaine, etc.

SG: So that's very interesting. I wanted to segue a little because the other big development that is happening in the region in the Middle East has been the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Was this down to great power competition, thanks to say countries like China's involvement, or as others have suggested, are there more immediate practical concerns such as for example the trafficking of Captagon?

CR: I think that the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rapprochement process had a lot to do with the rapprochement process between Syria and its Arab neighbours. I really do believe that that normalisation process sparked another and that when it came to Iranian expectations and demands, that was a hidden concession that was not on paper, but it was an expectation that regional players would test this out. And that's why we also saw the urgency and the immediacy. The Iranian-Saudi Arabian rapprochement process, that was in March, and in April and May, we saw a huge rush to roll out the red or white carpet for President Bashar al-Assad. We saw the string of regional visits, and really, I think that that had a lot to do with the timing.

That being said, of course, the earthquake as well really did change the tide for normalisation with the Syrian regime. A lot of countries were already toying with the idea of normalisation. Some have tried and failed, for example, I think that Jordan could be counted as one of them. They tried to open the Jaber-Nasib border crossing about a year before that, and after they did that there was a huge uptick in violent smuggling operations, and they pumped the brake on normalisation. A number of other countries like Saudi Arabia that had been much more cautious for normalisation also rushed to

that process following the earthquake and following the March Chinese-brokered deal. And because of that, I think that that normalisation can be seen as intimately intertwined with normalisation with Syria and ongoing rapprochement talks.

SG: A lot of geopolitical moves right there. Sticking with the potential of building ties, the chances of Israel and Saudi Arabia having closer official engagement at a diplomatic level seems to have moved a step closer—we'll have to watch this space—but how does that impact on the region? How does it also impact on a lot of the aspects that we've been talking about such as counter-narcotics cooperation? Where do you see the key strategic dynamics between Israel and Saudi Arabia emerging?

CR: Certainly. So, I think that this creates a new balancing act for Riyadh that we had not seen before. We've always heard Riyadh trying to diversify their foreign policy agenda and diversify their diplomatic relations. This does that. However, being able to juggle two parallel rapprochement processes with two of probably the most bitter regional rivals, Israel and Iran—that's going to be a very delicate process for Riyadh to balance. And because of that, I think that we will see counter-narcotics, that agenda and that issue, elevated to the top of both normalisation processes. I think that's also why we saw counter-narcotics so prominently featured with normalisation with Syria as well. And the reason for that is because it is less politically sensitive to many countries. It's a newer subject. Not many people are even aware of what Captagon is. And even for law enforcement systems, there are processes and procedures in place.

Captagon counter-narcotics in general seems like an easy win and something that they can elevate to the top of the negotiation agenda because it's easy to build momentum on. With Syria, it's a bit more politically difficult and challenging, and because of that, I think there's been a turn away from that recently. But when it comes to Saudi Arabia and Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran, I think it's very likely that we'll see this issue featured prominently in discussions. And when it comes to Israel especially, this is now a shared concern between Riyadh and their Israeli counterparts as well. Israel hasn't been a hub of Captagon consumption, but they have seized Captagon along their border.

The IDF has now announced some regular seizures of what seems to be Captagon and other amphetamine-type stimulants. And as a lot of these Iran-aligned networks that are involved in Captagon smuggling, also production, inside of southern Syria, as they accumulate and as they proliferate their presence along their border with Israel. This could be something that Israel would seek dialogue and communication with Riyadh with regarding interdiction capacity, best practices, and just communication about and intelligence about the networks that are operating.

SG: A lot of important dynamics right there. A theme that's been constant in our discussion has been this aspect of food insecurity, and very often, that is always there when it comes to narcotics. We've seen it in, for example, Afghanistan, where the growing of poppies has been seen as the alternative to growing normal crops because it's easier, it's less expensive, it's weatherproof. Slightly different, I guess, when it comes to the aspect of Captagon, but are there strategies, are there goals, potential options to alleviate the food insecurity in the Middle East, which Captagon has benefited so much from?

CR: Absolutely, and I think it's very important that when we talk about the timing of Captagon on the rise, when it really did explode in the Levant, it was exploiting food insecurity. It was exploiting economic insecurity in a country that had been ravaged by a civil war for years. And the actors that were actively involved in Captagon production, especially those on an industrial scale—this wasn't necessarily about community-level development and using Captagon as an alternative revenue locally, but rather on a national scale, given the level of high-level regime-aligned officials, businessmen, and other magnates that have been involved in Captagon production and trafficking. Because of that, I think that when we look to solutions for food insecurity inside of Syria, this has been an ongoing discussion for a very long time throughout the civil war. That starts and ends with a political settlement, which unfortunately, at this point in the civil war, and even in the rapprochement process, does not look likely given the litany of non-starters for the Syrian regime, also their role in the diversion process with humanitarian aid and widespread corruption.

So, when we look to Captagon and its role in ongoing food insecurity, it's very likely that the alternative revenue that's being generated by this trade, it's really not trickling into local communities. It is not bolstering local economic and employment opportunities or anything like that. While local

community members, we believe, have been employed at some Captagon processing facilities and Captagon manufacturing facilities, it does not look like this is being used, for example, like crops have as means for local survival. It seems very concentrated in the hands of a few inside of Syrian regime-held territories.

SG: Well, you've helped provide so much detail and perspective on all the different dynamics to do with Captagon. And a final question, and I have to ask this one, especially as I teach at the LSE, like myself and our two producers of the NATO podcast, Marcus and Victoria, you too are an alum of LSE's International History department. How much did your master's degree there help you in your career path and what you're researching now?

CR: I think that studying at the LSE and studying in their International History department gave me an incredibly strong foundation and a base of knowledge that allowed me to understand how states interact with each other, history of conflict, but then also history of diplomatic breakthroughs as well. And then also it exposed me to coursework, and it exposed me to classmates and faculty members that I'm still in touch with today that have been an incredible resource and also played an incredible role in my own professional development. And really, I'm extremely happy that I had that degree and had that time at LSE.

SG: I know everyone in the department is very proud of you and what you're doing. And we wish you to continue your efforts because it's so important the research that you're doing. You're another very timely reminder of why historians do make the best practitioners. So Caroline, let me thank you again for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive,and hope to have you back in the future.

CR: Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me.

Episode 48 – Ravi Satkalmi and the D.C. Capitol Police, October 2023

Key Reflections

- **The Capitol Police is the only law enforcement agency under the U.S. legislative branch and is responsible for protecting members of Congress both domestically and overseas.**
- **The Capitol Police also bears the responsibility of protecting the U.S. Capitol building itself and anyone on its grounds. The agency must ensure that protesters themselves are not a security threat but also that such demonstrators do not become a target either.**
- **The January 6, 2021, storming of the Capitol has led to changes across the agency and consideration about whether such threats are anomalous or part of a new normal.**
- **Today, extremists may be motivated to enact violence as a result of seemingly unconnected ideologies, making it harder for law enforcement to identify. New and emerging technologies only further compound these challenges.**
- **The Capitol Police factors in threats emanating from hostile state actors who seek to harm members of Congress. Adversarial nations have grown increasingly bold in their behaviour.**
- **Groups traditionally underrepresented in certain arenas need to have examples of representation in those domains. Organisations like the Gay Officers Action League exist to create change on the ground.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

RS: Ravi Satkalmi

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel, and in this episode, I speak with Ravi Satkalmi, the Director of Intelligence for the United States Capitol Police (USCP). I discuss with Ravi about his unique role with the USCP in leading a team charged with identifying and interdicting threats to the U.S. Capitol and members of Congress. Ravi Satkalmi, welcome to NATO DEEP Dive.

RS: Thank you. Thank you for having me. Looking forward to the discussion.

SG: It's going to be our pleasure. So, the United States Capitol Police is a unique law enforcement agency. Can you explain what makes it so different to others in the U.S.?

RS: Sure. So it is, firstly, the only law enforcement agency that falls under the purview of the legislative branch of government. So, all the federal law enforcement agencies we typically think of—the FBI, ATF, HSI—all are under the executive branch. The Capitol Police is under the legislative branch and is tasked with protecting Congress, and that includes the members of Congress, the senators and the representatives, their staff while they're here on campus, the visitors that come to our campus. But I think the other thing that most people don't realise is our authority and our responsibility extends far beyond the campus of the US Capitol itself. And so, our responsibility to protect the members of Congress extends nationally. So, we're responsible for their security in their district offices, in their home states when they are travelling, when they're on recess. So, all of that falls to us to manage and to get ahead of. It's unique in that regard. It's a relatively small agency for the footprint that it needs to defend, understanding the national purview that we have. And that will extend at times overseas as well. So, when our members are going on their overseas trips to different nations, we are also responsible for making sure that we are coordinating security for them as well. And so, it's a large responsibility that we have, and it's one that we're continuing to improve upon, particularly in the current threat environment.

SG: That's really interesting, and if I understood correctly, it's not just the US Capitol that you're covering, you're actually looking at protecting the people of Congress across the United States, which obviously extends to Hawaii and Alaska as well. So, what exactly does that entail when it comes to having to safeguard them when they're not in the Capitol?

RS: For us, it depends. Some of our high-ranking leadership in Congress do get details that are not dissimilar from the details that we typically think about when we think about protecting the President or the Vice President, and obviously that is work that the Secret Service does. It's analogous for us when we're talking about, say, the Speaker of the House, it's a similar level of focus that we provide for our congressional leadership, for their security, but we are looking at 535 members of Congress that we are responsible for, and we do not have the resources to provide everybody with such around-the-clock protection. So oftentimes what happens is we rely a lot on our partners to help us extend our security footprint. Oftentimes, that will be state and local agencies, county agencies, police departments that we will pick up the phone and reach out to when we know that a member is going to be in their jurisdiction and try to coordinate any kind of security that may be needed for an event that the member will be at. And so those relationships are really key for us. They are kind of force multipliers for us, I think very much in the literal sense. And a lot of that threat picture and that approach is driven by the intelligence, right? So, what is the threat that any given member of the body may be facing, or what is the threat that elected officials in general in the United States are facing? Who are the threat actors? Where are they most active? What have they been saying lately? All of that kind of comes into the picture when we think about resourcing for protection for all of these elected officials.

SG: In some ways, you've kind of answered what my next question was going to be but let me see if I can also extract more from what you're saying, because it is actually a very, very unique role that your agency plays. So, you're the Director of Intelligence at the United States Capitol Police—what would you say is an average day in what you have to look at, and why did you want to take on this role?

RS: So, I think anybody that does this type of job, particularly from a protective standpoint or an intelligence standpoint, will tell you that the average day is probably not average. And it will really depend on what's happening that day, right? So, our concern ranges anywhere from protests that are happening here on Capitol grounds and making sure that we know who is approved to be here on Capitol grounds for their daily protests. And if they are here, to make sure that not only are they not a security concern, but also making sure that they themselves wouldn't be the target of any potential malicious action. So that falls to us. That's a daily task. We have protests here every day. I like to say that they go on without incident, and these are protests covering all ranges of political views. And the fact that you don't hear a lot about them is good news for us. They're going on every day as they're meant to do.

Our day-to-day also includes taking in threats that are being made to our members of Congress, and we're getting that from all types of directions. We have members of offices that are calling in saying there's a particular individual that they know about that they think warrants some scrutiny. Or we are finding it online—there's commentary online suggesting perhaps that somebody wants to target to kill a member of Congress, and that kind of language ebbs and flows with the 24-hour news cycle and who's got the spotlight that day. And so, a lot of our work is determining which of these are credible threats and which ones you can kind of tell from context may be somebody just blowing off steam. But there's a lot of that that happens, it's not a perfect science, and anybody that's in threat mitigation space will tell you that, and it's no different for us.

It's also making sure, as I was talking about, that we know where our protectees are going to be at any given time and that we've got the resources in place to make sure that they are protected and understand the threat that they are facing. And those are some of our key lines of effort as we think about protecting Congress. And a lot of that is done through, as I mentioned, relationships and relationship-building. A lot of that is done internally, of course. We've got our dignitary protection elements, we have our threat assessment elements, all of which are crazy busy, which is not going to be surprising. So, they're doing all that work on a daily basis, while also trying to stay ahead of the threat and anticipate what's coming down the road. And from my shop, which is the intelligence shop here, it's to find a way to support each one of those kinds of operational prerogatives that we have, and also continuing to build out subject matter expertise on the range of threats that government officials and elected officials and law enforcement face in this country. So, it's a pretty wide range of

responsibility that we're trying to tackle every day.

SG: It definitely shows just how wide the challenges are, and I want to come back to that in a moment. Part of what I was also curious about is what made you want to take on this responsibility. It sounds very challenging, very hectic, and no doubt will give you a lot of grey hairs in the future.

RS: I've got some now, in fact. The listeners can't see, but they're there. But the opportunity is one that I don't know that I could have turned down. I joined just last year, so I've only been here for over a year. Before this, as you know, I was over at NYPD for over a decade, working counter-terrorism there. But particularly after January 6, and particularly after the attention that was paid to protecting Congress after that day and the challenges that the organisation was facing to kind of get ahead and stay ahead of that threat… I applied when I saw the posting, not necessarily thinking it would come my way, but when they did call, I couldn't say no. They decided that my background is something that could help them. That is something that I felt that was a privilege to be offered, and I couldn't turn down. So much so that actually, I don't know if I told you this, but before I moved here to take this job, I was actually in contract to buy another home in New York and basically had to walk away from that contract to take this job. But I think it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and one with potential for real impact, and I couldn't say no to that.

SG: Most definitely. I think an obvious question that's going to come up is of course the January 6, 2021, protests that have attracted a lot of attention around the world, not just in the U.S. So, as you mentioned, you had a different role at the time when you were with the NYPD. I guess with the benefit of hindsight, is there something that could have perhaps been looked at to have pre-empted what was going to transpire? Or is it one of those situations where it spirals so quickly that it is ultimately very hard to anticipate something of that scale?

RS: I spent a lot of time thinking about this question, and not just me, obviously, my colleagues here that were here that day and continue to work this job and continue to drive the mission of this agency have spent a lot of time thinking about what could have been done differently or what needs to change going forward. And that is continuing to drive decision-making here at Capitol Police. It continues to drive their support around growing the intelligence apparatus here at Capitol Police. And when we talk about January 6, I think there were lots of elements that fed into what happened that day. There were conversations online indicating a level of heated discourse that was kind of directed and coming out of this idea of a stolen election in 2020. There was a lot of conversation about that. We had that kind of organising happening online…obviously still in the midst of COVID, a lot of people that were unemployed or severely affected by the overall effects of the pandemic in this country. And we in the threat space had thought a lot about what would the impact be of large populations sitting at home online, and whether or not that would lead to some kind of increased consumption of content that might motivate them to act violently. And to some degree, I think we saw that with January 6, we saw that another couple of other cases that are not related to January 6, but I think we did see some of that, so there was that factor, as well. It was a politically charged environment. And I think all of these factors were coming together in a very unique way, leading into January 6. And I think what we saw there is something that nobody really expected to see here in the United States.

It's interesting because we had seen something similar happen in Germany, maybe about a year before that. We saw something very similar happen in Brazil earlier this year in terms of an attack on their parliament and their government. And it raises the question as to whether or not this is becoming more of the norm or whether or not it's an anomaly. And we certainly hope it's more anomalous than normal, but that's one of our jobs, to continue to look to see what factors are out there that not necessarily would replicate January 6 because I think the agency itself, Capitol Police itself, has made a lot of changes after January 6 to make sure that doesn't happen again. But what is the next thing going to look like that we need to be open to expecting? I think that's the real challenge.

SG: So, to build on that, you mentioned the next thing—do you see an evolution of the threats that you had to deal with from the time you were with the NYPD to now? Has the has the scenario altered? Has the way you assess things changed as well?

RS: So, I joined NYPD in 2011. And even at that time, coming out of the mid- to late 2000s, there was still a very kind of al-Qaeda-mode-centred focus on what the terrorist threat was. It was still very much focused on Islamic extremism. It was focused on operators being sent to the United States or being embedded here in the United States to carry out operations. And I think all of that is still at play. I think since the time I joined NYPD 12 years ago to today, we've seen a lot of trends related to that

threat stream. We've seen the killing of Zawahiri, we've seen the rise and fall of ISIS, we've seen the move towards this whole characterization of inspired and directed attacks. And through that, I think what we have seen is a coming together of tactics and a coming together of modes of motivation, that I think have spread across the extremist spectrum. And what I mean by that is, you think about the propaganda that al-Qaeda really pioneered in terms of trying to get instructions into the hands of their followers here in the United States such that they didn't have to travel to Afghanistan or to Pakistan to get trained—they could just do it at home, and that was a very successful tactic.

ISIS took it up another level with the level of graphicness and gore that I think attracted a large amount of viewers, and I think also showed people that were not even into the Islamic extremism piece of this how effective that can be in terms of getting attention for your cause, getting recruitment for your cause. And so, we've seen that be adopted by other threat actors, particularly when we talk about white supremacist, neo-Nazi groups and what we call accelerationists—those that essentially want to bring a collapse to the current system in order to replace it with something more to their liking, which in this case is oftentimes a white ethno-state. But you see them adopt these same tactics—the propaganda is out there, the messaging is out there, the "you can do it yourself" is out there, the "pick up what you have available to you," that message is out there.

And we've seen that progression over the course of the past decade or so. And I think what we're seeing now is now that those tactics have kind of been tried and true, and people understand what is at their disposal if they want to sow chaos, I think the next transition we're seeing is just away from discrete lines of hate ideology. And so, it becomes harder to put folks into a particular bucket because people are choosing what they want to act on in terms of their grievances, and it's not always coherent. It's not always what we would think, our ideological bedfellows, but threat actors out there put it together themselves and say, "Well, this is why I'm angry, and I'm going to go ahead and act on it." And I think we see this a lot with conspiracy theories, which I think is harder for us to wrap our heads around at times. Some of the bigger ones we understand, but there are always more out there. And some of these conspiracy theories do end up motivating violence on the part of those that adhere to them. But those become difficult for us to pick up in the way that we were able to pick up folks that were kind of more disciplined in the communities that they engaged in, or the ideology that they were espousing. So that's a challenge for us.

And the other thing I'm thinking about, a year from now, I probably wasn't thinking it was going to be as quickly, but we've got AI and ChatGPT and these new technologies that are coming up and people kind of racing to integrate them into all facets of life. But it becomes easy to see a world where the motivator behind a hate ideology is no longer a person but some chat bot essentially that people will go to get the guidance that they need in order to push this forward. So, all of a sudden, we're not talking about somebody that we can arrest, we're talking about a programme that has enough smarts to it, to be able to radicalise and to mobilise. And I think that that's going to be a brand-new challenge for us.

SG: Yes, I'm actually reminded now of when we were in Las Vegas for that counter-terrorism conference, where our good friend Rebecca Weiner from NYPD gave that presentation, which I found absolutely frightening, about AI and how it can be utilised and actually sow a lot of panic and discord in society. So yes, that is an emerging challenge that has suddenly really rapidly accelerated, perhaps faster than any of us were anticipating. Do you also find that hostile state actors come into your purview in the work that you do?

RS: Yes. And when we think about threat protection, we often talk about the lone wolf actors, but actually it's the full kind of gamut of threat that we are concerned about and so that includes things like counter-intelligence by nation states, it includes cyber threats. It's a pretty broad scope of responsibility that we have in protecting Congress. And we know some of our most concerning nation state adversaries, I think, have grown a little bit bolder over the past few years. We talk about Iran, and we talk about the plot to assassinate John Bolton. We talk about a Russian plot to assassinate a CIA operative in Miami. We've got the Chinese setting up police stations in New York and other places, in the United States and elsewhere. And I think there's a brazenness that exists among our nation state actors that didn't exist some time ago. And I think they're really pushing the boundaries. And for us, when we talk about the folks that we protect, these are people that are vocal on a lot of these issues, particularly on things like China, or the war in Ukraine, or sanctions against Iran. These are all issues that are key policy issues that Congress weighs in on, and because of that, our protectees are vocal about these issues. And it's concerning to us that some of these boundaries are

being pushed. That absolutely informs how we think about the threat that is facing our protectees.

SG: Okay, so you've got all these different challenges, threats that are emerging. So, I've always wanted to ask this type of question, I guess, because we have politicians in our various countries, and they come from various different ideological perspectives, the way they interact with people will also vary. So how do members of Congress interact with US Capitol Police? I mean, by and large, do they comply with all the security issues that they're guided that emerge? Do they get upset if their day isn't going to go according to plan because you have to give them some bad news that something is emerging and therefore you need them to perhaps change the order of their day? How does that work?

RS: Right, so it's a great question. I mean, you're basically asking to what degree are our potential victims partners in their own protection. And I think that is a key aspect to the protection industry itself, you need the cooperation from the folks that you are trying to protect. And with 535 members, you've got a range of views about Capitol Police and how a threat will affect a given member and how much they themselves want to participate. And for a lot of members, it's a calculation of being able to interact with their constituents versus having to stand back from that. And for elected politicians, this is their job, meeting with constituents is their job. This is an open campus for that reason. And it's a security challenge for us. This is a public building; the Capitol is a public building. And we need to make sure that we are continuously educating the folks that we protect about what they can do to keep themselves safe. And generally, we do get cooperation from our members. And some of our programmes, as I mentioned, will focus beyond just the Capitol grounds to make sure that our members are safe at home in their district offices.

We partner with the respective Sergeant at Arms offices in both the House side and the Senate side to make sure that we are in lockstep in communicating our security message to our protectees and to the members of Congress and imparting upon them what the threat may be, and why it makes sense to do x or to do y to increase their safety—because maybe we're seeing a heightened level of attention online, for example, or we know that there are some tactics out there that are being used by threat actors, and there's a fairly straightforward way to mitigate against them. And so, we offer all of that to the members for their use, so that they can avail themselves of those services. And again, the level of engagement will vary by member, but all in all I think people have generally bought into the security mission here at Congress because I think they understand themselves how important it is to keep this institution safe.

SG: Well, that is encouraging. I won't ask whether you give them gold stickers for the best-behaved ones.

RS: We don't give out stickers.

SG: Okay, good to know. Let's look a bit more at yourself and the role that you've been playing. So, you're an ethnic minority of Indian heritage in a very senior position in a very important police organisation. Do you feel any burden or responsibility that your role could help encourage other Asians, other ethnic minority groups to join law enforcement agencies? And where are we at when it comes to Asians in national security in the United States?

RS: I give this question some thought from time to time. I don't come to the job wearing my identity, the identity is who I am. And I certainly don't characterise it as a burden, but again, a privilege to be able to be in this position and be somebody representing the Desi community essentially. And to your point, it's not something that is traditionally viewed as a career path for, I think, a lot of South Asian families. But I will tell you, having been in both a national security and law enforcement space now for over a decade, close to 15 years now, I've come across a lot of folks of South Asian descent that are doing this work on a day-to-day basis, at the ground level up to some senior ranks. And I think that is encouraging for us as a community, particularly here in the United States, where the Desi population is relatively new, which is in contrast to say, a place like the UK, where it's been there and kind of ingrained? for a much longer period of time.

Here, we're fairly new—my parents immigrated here in the early '70s, so I'm first-generation-born American. But I do see folks that have that background, are part of that diaspora, part of the Desi diaspora here in the United States, taking this as a solid career choice and finding ways to serve their country in that way. But these are often roles that are not visible unless something goes wrong. And so, we do see a lot more representation for folks of South Asian descent coming out of the

West Coast. We see CEOs of Microsoft and Google and talent in Hollywood being kind of the face of the diaspora here in the United States. But I like to think that here in Washington, D.C., we're also holding our own.

SG: Most definitely. That's very encouraging to hear. You're also a member of the Gay Officers Action League, perhaps one of the most senior people in law enforcement from the LGBTQ+ community. How have you experienced attitudes change towards the community, and what more needs to be done?

RS: I think the biggest change in attitude with respect to being a member of the LGBTQ community in law enforcement has been my own. And I say that because for this industry in particular, which traditionally is not thought of as being LGBTQ-friendly, the national security space, the law enforcement space, it takes a lot of effort to make the decision to be out and to let people know who you are. And this conversation about bringing your whole self to work is, I think, an important consideration. I spent a large part of my career not doing that, trying to think about how to have conversations about my personal life in a way that wouldn't give away the fact that I was dating guys or what have you. And that is, I think, a burden for a lot of people that are in similar shoes. But organisations like GOAL exist because it's clear that the change needs to happen. There need to be change agents making that and pushing for that. And GOAL started in the early 1980s and I think since then has grown to a substantial organisation working on real change in law enforcement, not only where it started, NYPD, but for law enforcement kind of across the board. And there are similar efforts going on here in D.C. as well.

And the fact that I can be on this podcast with you talking about being gay—that I think is itself an indication of change and acceptance in the field. Now was it all 100 per cent? Of course not, but I do think one of the most important things somebody can do, particularly when you're a member of a minority, whether it's being Indian-American, or being gay, is to stand up and be counted, to be proud of who you are, to take that with you. And that is one thing that I would encourage folks to do, understanding that people, particularly when we're talking about having to come out, people are at different stages of that journey. They can make that decision when they feel that time is right. But I can sit here and honestly say that there will be challenges to it, but the other side I think is absolutely worth it.

SG: Well, you set a very important example for two different communities, that you can play an active role in law enforcement and be successful at that. So, it's very important what you're saying, very encouraging and uplifting as well. I think we've covered a lot of areas in our discussion. So, I'm very grateful to you, Ravi, for being on this podcast. I hope you'll consider being on it again, and in the meantime, please keep everyone in Congress safe.

RS: Yeah, absolutely. That's my job. Thank you so much for the time. It was a great conversation, and I'm looking forward to seeing you again soon.

SG: Yes, most definitely. It's been our pleasure.

Episode 49 – David Loyn and the Retro Taliban, October 2023

<u>Key Reflections</u>

- **The current Taliban regime is more extreme than it was in the 1990s and has imposed harsher rules across the country. By controlling the major ethnic-Tajik territories, the Taliban has consolidated its rule there by pushing the migration of Pashtuns.**
- **Girls being denied access to education is the new norm in Afghanistan, enabled by the Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue, which oversees the bans on women's rights.**
- **The closure of beauty parlours in the Summer 2023 demonstrated the Taliban's continuous assault on women. 60,000 women became unemployed as the Taliban closed down one of the last social spaces for women.**
- **There is a debate over the recognition of the Taliban, with some in the West claiming that engagement is necessary for aid to the region. Afghan activists argue this will legitimise a regime that discriminates against women and ethnic minorities.**
- **There is a disagreement over al-Qaeda's status in Afghanistan. The UN and others have stated that al-Qaeda and foreign fighters are being given freedom to operate by the Taliban, whereas the Biden administration believes that the terror threat has receded.**
- **Some current factions of the Taliban hold different international perspectives compared to their predecessors who were influenced by Mullah Omar's Afghanistan-specific movement.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

DL: David Loyn

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel, and in this episode, I speak with David Loyn, author, journalist and analyst on global affairs. David is also a Senior Visiting Research Fellow at Kings' College London and I discuss with him how Afghanistan has evolved two years after the Taliban's return to power and the inherent challenges that remain including the concerning signs that terrorism is regrowing there.

David Loyn, Welcome back to NATO DEEP Dive.

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

SG: It's our pleasure. It's now been over two years since the Taliban regime took control of Afghanistan once more. Have the Taliban surprised you in any way in the sense of how they have governed the country? Or is this very much the Taliban of the 1990s?

DL: There's a key change between then and now, which is that then, they took over, you'll remember, a country that had been bitterly divided and destroyed by an awful civil war. This time they took over a functioning country. I mean, albeit there were problems with the Republic, as we know, corruption ate at the core of it, but it was a functioning, somewhat democratic country and the institutions of the country were intact, and the Taliban have taken over those institutions.

One of the really interesting things about Afghanistan over the last 40/50 years now, of insurgency and disruption, violent changes of government, is the continuity of Afghan institutions, and the Taliban

took over a functioning democracy. All the evidence is that, for example, the Ministry of Finance is working quite well, revenues are far lower than they were because the economy is so much smaller, but the Taliban have been quite efficient about the way that they're dealing with those revenues. So, somebody I know well, who's just come back from a trip to Afghanistan, said that he was really surprised that the roads are paved much better than they were. The Taliban have been successful at delivering—of course, they're not blowing them up anymore, so there isn't a disruption to transport that there was. But as there was in the late 1990s, they've taken down roadblocks, there's a sense of the economy moving again, albeit at a much lower scale. So, I think the system is broadly working.

I wasn't surprised by how doctrinaire they'd been. And there was, I think, this rather naive hope on the part of some Western governments, most notably the Biden administration, that there was somehow some Taliban 2.0 who would abide by the things that they promised to do in the Doha agreement, to have a more inclusive government, to potentially talk to some other players, to open girls schools, allow women to work etcetera, which were commitments that they made at Doha. And I must say, there was no sense that the Taliban that I saw had changed at all. I wasn't surprised that there wasn't any Taliban 2.0. They were, if anything, more extreme than they were in the late 1990s in the way that they've imposed very harsh judgments across the country. And the other big difference between then and now is that this time, the Taliban do control the whole country, including the major Tajik areas of the northeast, which were out of their hands in the late 1990s. So, they've been able to extend their writ. And there's a lot of concern in those areas that the Taliban have been displacing Pashtuns from the south and putting them into those areas in the north in order to extend the sort of social control, which is the way that I think they'll try and manage the country.

SG: So, they seem to be doing ground operations—changing the ground realities effectively.

DL: Yes, I mean, it's oddly very similar to, in historical terms, what Abdur Rahman was doing towards the end of the 19th century, he did it much more sort of overtly, a very specific transplanting of Pashtuns from the South to the North. And I think this is the same sort of thing that the Taliban are doing. We heard months ago that they have moved significant numbers of people from the south into Hazara areas, Bamyan, and some of those central provinces, but now we're hearing that they're moving them to the north and the northeast as well.

SG: When decisions like this are made, who are the key Taliban individuals that are behind the decision making that actually implement these policies?

DL: All of these discussions have to be introduced with an enormous caveat that, honestly, we don't know. We don't really understand what's going on inside the Taliban itself. There are glimpses that happen when certain situations emerge. But the broad analysis, with that caveat, the broad analysis is that—people who watch these things very closely have concluded—is that Hibatullah Akhundzada, the supreme leader of the Taliban, the Amir al-Mu'minin so called, the Commander of the Fait**HF**ul, he took on the title that the founder of the Taliban Mullah Omar had taken. He is in pretty tight control of things from Kandahar and that means that these institutions of government, which are in Kabul operate under diktat from him. And so, some of the people who I think the West thought might be more in control, Mullah Baradar, Stanikzai, who was the deputy foreign minister in the last administration, he's filling the same role in this administration, people in the West thought might take a more senior role, have been more sidelined.

There have been, we understand, some pretty significant arguments between those two factions. The Doha faction, the people who negotiated the deal, and Hibatullah and the older ideologues, who are based in Kandahar, and who still appear to really rule by diktat. And I think in recent months, you've seen Kandahar, if anything strengthening its grip. We saw, again you just get these glimpses of what's happening, but Zabihullah Mujahid, the Taliban spokesman who was operating in Kabul and was pretty open to journalists, open to Western journalists, the few who've been given visas, he's been told now to spend most of his time in Kandahar. So, there's a sense that the Hibatullah administration is increasing its grip on what's happening in the country.

There was a rather curious glimpse into arguments within the Taliban about four or five months ago, when a few leaders including Sirajuddin Haqqani, who's the leader of the Haqqani Network, the interior minister in Kabul, made some videos which appear to criticise the government's line on girls' schools, and they were pretty swiftly condemned. Some months ago, and this hasn't happened yet, so perhaps it was oversold at the time, some months ago, there was a sense that there was an increased possibility of armed fighting between Sirajuddin Haqqani, whose power base is very much Kabul and the east, and Hibatullah Akhundzada and the Kandaharis in the south. One of the glimpses we have of that was the report that suicide bombers who had been until then operating in sort of formation against ISIS groups in the east of the country, were moved to Kandahar to defend the central leadership. So, some sense of internal dissent, but although we had those reports a few months ago, nothing came of that.

SG: There are several aspects of what we've been talking about, the role of women's rights or lack of, has come up. Now the Taliban's Ministry of Vice and Virtue, effectively the 'Ministry of Misogyny,' has overseen the complete eradication of women from public life, also in terms of education as well. Is this now permanent? Is there any way that this can be changed? Is the Taliban as you said maybe potentially more extreme than what it was before, that this is a cornerstone of what their identity is about: misogyny?

DL: Well, it's a very easy one, they use exactly the same language that they did in the 1990s, although with less justification, which is that there will be girls' education under Islamic principles when the time is right, when things have settled down. Well, now they control the whole country, you'd have thought that things would have settled down enough. But it hasn't happened. So, I think it is becoming clearer and clearer that this is the new norm. This is what the Taliban wants to do in Afghanistan, they want a very tightly constrained space for women. And one of the interesting things that has happened here is that the regulations didn't all come at once. I mean, there were incremental regulations from the very beginning. And I think I mentioned this perception last time I spoke to you in the previous NATO podcast that when the Taliban came in, there was a sense in which this was an alien country to them. There were many young people in Kabul who were observant Muslims, but not in the Taliban's sort of mindset, and they found it difficult to control the country in the way that they'd done in the 1990s. But that squeamishness or lack of social control, if you like, has gone.

One of the most symbolic elements of that is that the Ministry of Vice and Virtue is in, actually, what was the Ministry for Women's Rights. The only significant institutional change the Taliban made was to replace one with the other. And the regulations on women were, as I say, incremental from the autumn really, of 2021. So, over the two years, by December, you had women not being allowed to travel without a Mahram, a male guardian. In the spring of last year, women's access to public parks was severely curtailed. Travel on planes was curtailed without a Mahram. Clothing regulations were tightened up even more during the summer of last year, so that women had to cover up and what is broadly in the West called the burqa, the all-covering clothing when they left home. So, it became tighter and tighter and tighter, public parks closed, women's access to gyms closed, and then in the summer of this year, the final straw really, the closure of women's access to beauty parlours, which threw 60,000 women out of work and was a very specifically misogynist move by the administration. This was the Taliban closing down one of the last private spaces that women had to meet and to be able to talk to each other.

I think the change that has had the most impact on the way that the international community engages with the Taliban was again, incremental movements against women operating in the NGO space and the development sector. So, during the end of last year, women working for NGOs were banned and then in the spring of this year, the Taliban said this includes women working for UN organisations. So, I'm just going through a number of different restrictions. The UN has counted 173 separate restrictions made against women, but I think it's going to become increasingly difficult for the United Nations to justify keeping its offices open in Afghanistan, if they can't employ women in the way that they want to, because it's under their charter, the mandate they have to employ people equally. And this has had a very significant impact on the way that international organisations have been able to

operate.

So, it does feel as if this is permanent, and the international community has not found any way around it. Of course, it's discussed when people talk to the Taliban, but I think there's broadly a sense from the Western officials that I speak to, who speak to the Taliban, that if you force them to try and do things, they're not going to do them. So, I think there's an awareness that perhaps this is one that is not going to be argued about in every single meeting by Western officials.

The other thing I'd say about the women's restrictions is that this is very restrictive to Afghan women in the same way as it would be to international women. So, to say what I mean by that, some people say, well, 'these are just traditional Afghan values, the West is being obsessed about Afghan women,' and certainly the Taliban's view is that the West is obsessed about Afghan women. I remember ministers in the late 1990s saying to me, 'Why are you so concerned with our women,' as if there was some sort of Western obsession with Afghan women, but this time I think it's different. Afghan women have experienced a different kind of life over the last 20 years and closing the door on that life, in 2021, and the incremental restrictions on it, have been much harder to bear because of that. A whole generation of women expected to be educated, expected to go to university and because they can't I think it's much more difficult for them.

SG: Absolutely. I'd add to that, that, in fact, Afghan women had pretty much similar rights to men before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. So, it's not something that was only introduced necessarily in the last two decades, it has historical precedence, as well. You had this point, several times, about the role of the international community and you wrote a very interesting and important article in The Spectator and we'll put the web link of that into the transcript. I'll leave it to you if you want to come out with the title! but it's become very clear that there's a kind of typology of a Western politician, bureaucrat, that is advocating recognising the Taliban. So, if we were going to create that typology, what are the characteristics and motivations behind that, do you think?

DL: Yeah, this was Tobias Ellwood, who was then the chair of the UK's Defence Select Committee, who went on a trip to Afghanistan, arranged by an international aid organisation and, of course, because that was arranged, he was given very good facilities everywhere he went, and the Taliban were willing to let him see lots of things. He went to Helmand and of course, as someone who'd been there as a British member of parliament, and had lots of friends who are soldiers, he's an ex-soldier himself, he had some feeling for being in that area, and I think he—and look he went a bit over the top in the way that he said, 'This is very normal.' And I think a lot of people who go to Afghanistan, when they see the buses running and the security being very easy, have a sense there is a sort of normality.

And I think he rather let that go to his head and he did a video, which—well the headline that The Spectator put on my piece was 'The Taliban's Useful Idiot,' using the old description of people who were friendly to Russia, during the days the Soviet Union, because they would go to Moscow and say, 'Everything's fine.' And, in a sense, he was doing something vaguely similar to that. Because, obviously, there was no sense in his piece of the sorts of things we've been talking about: restrictions on women, the extremely harsh justice. I would say that at the time he was there, there were several British citizens who were being held by the Taliban. As I speak, we understand that they've actually been released. But the Taliban have had a track record since they came to power of holding a number of Western hostages; they also hold some Americans, not on any real charges and getting them released is rather complicated by the fact that the head of the Taliban intelligence service, the GDI, Wasiq was in Guantanamo Bay for I think 15 years, so he has no desire to be soft on any Westerners who come his way. And it's a clear policy of the Taliban to hold a few Westerners, but none of that was in the description of what Mr. Ellwood said when he visited.

I think behind the slightly over enthusiastic sense of the way he described his visit is this much more serious sense that if not formal recognition, that Britain would be better placed to engage with the Taliban more positively, to accept their willingness to open a mission in Kabul if not an embassy, a number of countries—China, Pakistan, Russia most notably—have kept their embassies open,

and, while not formally recognising the Taliban, they have significant links with them. And I think the argument by Ellwood and others is that this way, you can have some leverage over the Taliban, and he said that perhaps they could negotiate over women's rights, which of course led to a huge argument, backlash from Afghan women activists who said, "Our rights are not negotiable. This is not something that can be negotiated about for the West. This is an absolute." And so, I think there's a pragmatic side to it. The first person in the UK to call for recognition of the Taliban was Lord David Richards, who was the former Chief of the Defence Staff who commanded NATO forces in Afghanistan back in 2006-07. And very soon after they took the country, he said, "Look, let's be pragmatic. We've lost the war. This is the government that's now in power. We need to deal with them. And it would be much better for Afghan people if we dealt with them and engaged them properly."

The argument against recognition very strongly made by Afghan activists is that this legitimises the Taliban. They're not an inclusive government in any way, not only inclusive of women, but they're a Pashtun government, balanced as I say up to a point between the Pashtuns of the South and the Pashtuns of the East but not inclusive in any sense of Afghanistan's myriad other tribes, let alone women. And that recognising them would somehow reward them for the violent takeover of a country. So, I think those are the two extremes. I think people like Ellwood are in the middle, saying, "Well, there is a sort of middle ground of more constructive engagement under which perhaps we could, as he says, negotiate around the edges of women's rights and do more constructive development as well as humanitarian aid."

And the questions at the heart of this are all about how we support the Afghan people. 20 million people are facing another winter. The drought has been terrible in Afghanistan. The ability to operate in aid terms is severely hampered by the problem of employing women. But there are a number of countries, Germany most notably, in Europe who are increasingly saying, we need to be more constructive in the way that we put in development money, so it's not just humanitarian aid. And yes, of course, that will involve having some more discussions with the Taliban. But the opponents of that in the development community, and perhaps most notably, the most recent report by the American congressional Special Inspector General on Afghanistan Reconstruction, SIGAR, their report quoted a USIP investigation into the way that the Taliban are co-opting international development funding for their own purposes. So, the money is going towards Taliban coffers because they're controlling most of the UN agencies, and where they're not actually formally going through Taliban accounts itself, they've asked all NGOs who operate in Afghanistan to have an MOU with the Taliban, which effectively puts them under the Taliban wing. So, there is a really live argument in the development community about how you engage with the Taliban, with a lot of Western politicians increasingly saying that the answer is to at least engage with them more constructively, set up missions in Kabul, if not recognise them.

SG: I remember Lord Richards' comments when the Taliban were on the cusp of taking over. He also, I think, if I recall correctly, said "The Taliban, if we give them time, could transform Afghanistan into a tourist haven akin to Vietnam." That doesn't seem likely.

DL: This was the Taliban 2.0, Sajjan. At that time, in the summer of 2021, that's exactly how a lot of people were talking. And of course, it wasn't true. I mean, I wrote a piece that weekend saying they're not going to change.

SG: Well, I think that's partly because people like yourself, David, and me, we're a little more grounded in what happens with the Taliban as opposed to some that maybe hoping very wis**HF**ully that the Taliban can be reasoned with. But for an entity that was so dishonest out of power, it's difficult to then assume how they can be fait**HF**ul to any promises that they made, for example, as you said, the Doha accords. One of those things that comes up in our discussion is a key aspect of the Doha accords was this counter-terrorism component, where the Taliban promised that they would not harbour terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, that they would be committed to preventing that country from being a cesspool for extremism. And we're seeing a very interesting, different perspective on that terrorism-related situation currently unfold in Afghanistan. The UN Sanctions

Monitoring Team has spoken about the fact that al-Qaeda, even though it may be weakened, is being protected in Afghanistan by the Taliban, that they're being allowed to operate across various provinces, whereas the US National Security Council under the Biden administration has a different take on that, in that they believe that al-Qaeda is not regrowing and that the fact is that the Taliban are actually cooperating when it comes to counter-terrorism, including, for example, dealing with ISKP and other entities. There seems to be a disconnect here.

DL: Yeah, I'm sorry to say that I think the Biden administration, because of the shameful way that it abandoned the country in the summer of 2021 and scuttled and ran. Even though it was very clear, by the time by administration came in January of 2021, that the Taliban had not and would not adhere to the terms of the Doha deal, most notably that they would sever their links with al-Qaeda in return for the withdrawal of American troops, and America still withdrew its troops. And I think during this period, it is of political significance, political importance to the Biden administration that this deal is seen to have worked. So, I'm not sure that intelligence is being read with the scepticism that perhaps it should be read. I mean, we've heard in public from the president that he believes that these counter-terrorist measures are working. But it's not just the UN report you cite. It's references by other people who see al-Qaeda training camps not very far away from Kabul along the Jalalabad road. There are foreign fighters openly operating. And the detail of the UN report was quite specific about not just al-Qaeda, but the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the IMU, it described in terms how the East Turkestan movement, the anti-Chinese Uyghur group, are being used by the Taliban as fighters operating against ISIS in order to be given training camps and the capacity to operate in Afghanistan. The Taliban Ministry of Defence uses al-Qaeda training manuals, so tightly enmeshed are they into the Afghan system under the Taliban. So, I think all of that evidence feels pretty strong.

And the US system, I think, has a political directive, if you like, I'm sorry to say it, that these counter-terrorism measures are working. I would like to see more public evidence in the same way that the UN have reported their findings, which come from reports from a number of different countries that reach the UN for this counter-terrorism deal that's supposedly working. Yes, it's true that al-Qaeda have not yet managed to reconfigure themselves in a way that they're going to operate internationally. And it's also true, I think, that the Taliban probably still don't have the same international perspective that some of these other jihadi groups do. They don't have the same sense of a sort of global caliphate that Islamic State or al-Qaeda do. But in a sense, that's changing. That's one significant difference between the fighters who are currently operating in the field in the Taliban, the younger commanders and the older commanders. The older commanders are from the Mullah Omar generation when this was just a nationalist Islamic movement. It was a movement just for Afghanistan, and the younger fighters do see this as more part of a sort of global jihadi movement. They've been more connected with other international groups. So, I think that's one division, if you like, in perspective within the Taliban. But certainly, there isn't the same kind of sense within the Taliban that they want to stop attacks from Afghanistan as they did try to do in the late 1990s, unsuccessfully, as we know, because al-Qaeda succeeded.

SG: That's very interesting. As a penultimate question, I wanted to ask about China. So, they've now appointed a permanent ambassador to Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. China's already faced a lot of challenges in Afghanistan under the Taliban where their workers have been attacked, there have been all kinds of activities that have undermined their ability to expand the Belt and Road Initiative. Can China make any progress in Afghanistan? It seems to be persisting with it. Part of it seemed to have also been based on promises that their neighbour Pakistan had given in terms of guaranteeing that the Taliban would deliver. None of that seems to be happening, though.

DL: No. And China has one overriding interest in the region, which is to stop cross-border terrorism. Your listeners will remember that Afghanistan has a border with China—it's very narrow, but it is a border. And those Uyghur militants that I mentioned are certainly training inside Afghanistan, and that is the overriding perspective in terms of the relationship that China has. It has huge industrial and commercial potential interests in Afghanistan. A lot of discussions about extracting lithium, other rare earth metals. We know about the world's largest un-excavated copper mine, Mes Aynak in

Logar Province near Kabul, which China built all the infrastructure for their workers, the sheds, the places where they would live some years ago now, but they've still not been able to do the final deal with the Taliban believing that there is enough security in that area to try to actually extract the copper. So, I think it all goes back to terrorism, and China is scratching its head, as every other country is, about the Taliban to try to understand what to do. Having said that, anecdotal reports again from people I know, there are a lot of Chinese citizens now operating in Kabul, they've been taking their families, there are Chinese women openly in the shops, speaking Pashto, being able to sort of operate domestically in the country, which is quite different in a way from the way that the United States and its allies operated over the last 20 years when they were all behind closed doors and not sort of living in the country. It's much more similar to the way that the Russians did when they were there in the 1980s, but in a sense, that's sort of just the cosmetic front. If China cannot do the deals that they need to do in order to have the security guarantees they want from Afghanistan, which as you say are very much connected with Pakistan's complete inability to manage any of the promises that they thought they had from the Taliban.

SG: As a final question, David, so we've seen that in the month of October 2023, Hamas launched a deadly incursion into Israel. You mentioned that the Taliban isn't necessarily wanting to promote itself internationally, but they seem very keen to talk about global issues with all their various ministries, issuing statements, and in the case of Israel-Palestine, the Taliban have come out very strongly against Israel and have supported Hamas' operation. Does the Taliban getting involved in the Israeli Palestinian issue have wider implications? I ask this in part because you've reported in the past on the motivations of Hamas and Hezbollah, so you've got a lot of knowledge in that part of the world as well, so I'd just be curious to get your take on all of this.

DL: Yeah, I had a fascinating trip to the southern suburbs of Beirut when I worked for the BBC some years ago, interviewing Hezbollah and Hamas leaders, and got a real sense of an insight into their worldview, which is different than the Taliban's, because it's a different part of the world. But certainly, the Taliban see Hamas as brothers in a sense of a sort of anti-Western jihadi worldview, even if they don't actually have the capacity to operate against them. There was some intriguing material that appeared on social media yesterday that appeared to show American weapons that had been taken off the battlefield by the Taliban in Afghanistan popping up in Gaza being used by Hamas. We know that lots of those American weapons have been sold, so it doesn't necessarily mean a direct connection between the Taliban and Hamas, but it was quite an interesting insight into that sort of connection. It wouldn't be surprising that the Taliban see themselves on that side of the fence, anti-Israel, Israel with its friends in the region, particularly India, who are no friends of the Taliban. But you're right Sajjan that it does show more of a sense of a global perspective by the Taliban, which, once again, would point to perhaps the UN report on counter-terrorism being more accurate than the US National Security Council reports on suggesting that they've been more useful in counter-terrorism.

SG: Very interesting, indeed. And before I conclude, I'll just remind everyone that listens to the podcast to buy David's book, The Long War, because it's a very important read when it comes to understanding the dynamics of Afghanistan and the challenges that occurred across two decades. But let me thank you again, David.

DL: I'm grateful for the plug and very happy always to talk to you and your informed audience.

SG: Well, we learn so much from you, and hope to have you back, unfortunately, no doubt it will be to convey some more troubling news on Afghanistan, but it's important that we also have to hear it, especially with someone that has so much ground perspectives. David Loyn, thank you again for joining us on NATO DEEP Dive.

DL: Thank you very much. Goodbye for now.

Episode 50 – Andrei Soldatov and Surviving Putin's Russia, November 2023

Key Reflections

- **The Russian security services have a paranoia that Russian emigres will return and embarrass the Vladimir Putin regime. This is a fear grounded in the role of the emigres in the 1917 Russian Revolution.**
- **Putin came to power in 2000 with a reputation of brutality from the Second Chechen War. It was always clear that he would enforce media censorship and intimidation of journalists.**
- **In the Russian army, the level of accepted casualties is far higher than in other nations. Losing soldiers and officers does not negatively impact the morale of the Kremlin.**
- **Putin rules by fear, and much of his public support is based on this. Around 20 percent of people are openly against Russia's war in Ukraine, another 20 percent support it, and the rest are silenced by fear.**
- **The Russian political regime is insecure about the fragility of the state. This stems from the historical memory of the collapse of the USSR and the complicated relationship between the Communist Party and the KGB.**
- **Putin has managed to secure control over the Russian Orthodox Church and uses it as a tool of soft power to exercise influence abroad.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

AS: Andrei Soldatov

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel, and in this episode, I speak with Andrei Soldatov, a Russian investigative journalist and co-author of The Compatriots.

I discuss with Andrei his career, what is currently unfolding inside Russia, Vladimir Putin's wider agenda, and the state of the war in Ukraine.

Andrei Soldatov, a warm welcome to NATO DEEP Dive.

AS: Thank you for having me.

SG: It's our pleasure. Let's start with some of the research that you've done. You wrote this book, The Compatriots: The Brutal and Chaotic History of Russia's Exiles, Emigres and Agents Abroad. What was the motivation for writing that?

AS: It's always been a very interesting topic for me, Russian emigration, given the history of Russia in the 20th century. But I have some personal motivation behind it. Before The Compatriots, my co-author Irina Borogan and I, we did two books, the New Nobility, about the Russian security service, the FSB, which was, of course, about how the Kremlin used the Russian security services to control its population in Russia. The second book was The Red Web, which was about online operations. So, it was also about how to control people online, and the book was not only about offensive operations, but also about the system of online censorship and surveillance. So, it came to me and really, quite naturally, that we need to write a book about the Russian security services abroad. What do we do to control people—who are the Russian people—who are beyond Russian borders. And then, during our research, it became clear to us that the whole point about Russian

political immigration was much more serious and much more important for the Russian security services, which is quite ironic.

We used to think that Russian emigration didn't play a really crucial role in, say, the collapse of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. People who emigrated and fled the Soviet Union played some role, but it was not crucial. It was not how it was perceived in the Kremlin. It is actually quite interesting that dealing with the threat posed by political emigres, was a defining moment for the modus operandi of Russian intelligence and security services. And there has always been paranoia about this threat, mostly, as far as I get it, from my conversations with people inside, based on the history of the Russian Revolution of 1917. So, that very primitive and basic idea, shared by many people in the security services, that this revolution was organised by emigres, by Vladimir Lenin and his friends, and they got back to the country when they were given a chance, and they destroyed the mighty Russian Empire.

So, the thinking inside of the Russian and Soviet security services has always been like that. That look, 'What if another group of Russian emigres come back to the country, they might destroy the present political regime, easily.' And of course, it's very ahistorical, I would say, even anti-historical because the First World War destroyed not one (Russian) Empire, but several empires, right. And emigres didn't play a crucial role in toppling this regime, it was the war, which destroyed these empires. But it is how things are seen in Moscow, especially by people in the security services. So, they invested a lot in dealing with this threat, developing methods, and mechanisms and ideas, which then were used outside of the country, but also inside the country. And unfortunately, it's still the case.

So, we still see that the Kremlin and the security services are obsessed with the threat posed by political immigration. And finally, I had this very personal thing because I was born in the mid-1970s, and by 1991, I was 15/16 years old, and it was such an optimistic time for everybody in Russia. We all believed that all these things from the time of the Cold War, like immigration, forced emigration, that people cannot get back, were all in the past already. And the 1990s was actually the only period of time in Russian history where we didn't have any political emigres. And that's why we had many hopes about how things might develop for Russians living abroad. And the new concept was born of Global Russians, that we don't need any more any political or any kind of emigration, people might travel to Russia, out of Russia, they can always come back, we're just looking for opportunities, it doesn't need to be such an emotional and dramatic issue for the Russians, and Putin destroyed the whole thing. He just destroyed the idea of Global Russians and what we see now is a direct come back to what we had 50/70 years ago. So, that's why we decided to write this book.

SG: Well, those are obviously very important reasons for why you wrote the book. And you said a couple of things that I found very interesting. You spoke about the optimism that there was in the 1990s. And you then added how Putin destroyed that optimism. If we go back to when Vladimir Putin first became president of Russia. What were your initial thoughts about that? Did you envisage the way it would turn out as we see now with Vladimir Putin.

AS: It was a very sad day for many people in Moscow, including me, to be honest. I remember very vividly this moment, when Boris Yeltsin, on the first 31st of December, came on television and said, 'I'm tired and I retire, and Vladimir Putin is the guy who will be my successor.' It was a horrible moment, because I have friends, my friends, colleagues, journalists who covered the wars in Chechnya. And we all knew, already by 2000, that Vladimir Putin was extremely brutal. The way he conducted his war in Chechnya, the Second Chechen War, was horrible, it was extremely brutal, and the climate in the country completely changed, because of the war and the way it was promoted on Russian television and in Russian propaganda media.

And even for personal reasons, I felt that it would be a disaster, because it was immediately clear that Vladimir Putin decided, well, he wanted to sell this war to the Russian population. And to sell this war to the Russians, he needed to explain why the First Chechen War was lost by the Russian army. And his way to explain this defeat was to blame journalists. So, basically, his message was that We

would have won, but journalists, Russian and foreign journalists, undermined the Russian military effort in Chechnya and that is why we lost, but this time, it will be different.' So, for me as a journalist who was writing about terrorist attacks and the activities of the Russian security services, it was a clear sign that it would be really difficult to keep doing what I was doing, because the Kremlin and Putin wanted to introduce censorship, and he was applying more and more pressure on Russian media. That was absolutely clear from day one.

SG: Well, let's tie some of this together. You talked about Putin's disastrous campaigns in Chechnya. You talked about his sort of declaration of war on journalism and how journalists were reporting events. You, as a journalist, were covering the Moscow theatre hostage crisis back in 2002, in which Chechen militants took many hundreds of people hostage. It ended very controversially, because a lot of the people that died during the attempted rescue operation, they died because of toxic substances that were pumped into the theatre system. Was that an indication early on about how the state under Vladimir Putin would deal with security challenges?

AS: Very much so. Yes, it was immediately proclaimed on Russian television that Putin could not repeat the mistakes made by his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, in dealing with these kinds of situations. And back in the 1990s, we had several huge hostage taking crises, including the one when the whole hospital with women was taken hostage and it was a horrible event. But back then, Boris Yeltsin decided that the lives of these people, that's what mattered. And he decided to talk to terrorists, to release his people, and to save them. The message of Vladimir Putin was completely different. He said, basically, that the most important thing is not the lives of its people, but political stability of the country. So, if you have the political stability of the country destroyed or undermined, it would be a much bigger disaster, and to avoid this kind of scenario, we need to do everything we can. And that was the logic behind the operation launched by the Russian security services when they decided to storm the theatre instead of negotiating with the people inside. And that is why this disastrous operation when more than 130 people died, nevertheless, was proclaimed a victory.

And it was also a moment when Vladimir Putin made it very clear that he would not tolerate any critical reporting by journalists. He attacked many media and journalists in person, including me. That was the very first time I got into trouble with the FSB, and they opened a criminal investigation against me, and I was interrogated many times in Lefortovo Prison. So, it was a very unpleasant experience, because you never know whether you will be let out of the prison or not. And that was his message, the follow up, to all of us, that the things which really matter to him, which have something to do with national security or political stability, there is no room for any kind of criticism or debate. And it should be all tightly controlled by the Kremlin and the Russian security services.

SG: So, that, in many ways, is illustrating the beginning of the challenges that you face head on with Putin's regime? How did it evolve to the point where you became considered an enemy of the state? What was the process? When did you realise that you could no longer stay in Russia? And kind of connected to that question, have you been worried about your own safety and security since you left Russia?

AS: Oh, it took a long period of time. Even in 2002, I still thought that there were people inside of the Russian security services, that were really good people and good professionals. And actually, I had some contacts inside who were really good people, for instance, people who were in charge of dealing with explosive devices. And it was a very risky business for these people—some of them died, because they tried to save people's lives. And I knew these people. And I remember, during my very first interrogation at Lefortovo, I argued with the officer saying, 'You need to not investigate me, but we all need to do everything we can to prevent these kinds of attacks—the taking of the theatre—from happening.' And I had this foolish idea that we were on the same page to some extent, because the people who were put in charge of fighting terrorism, and it is such a big thing and such a big evil. But gradually, I understood that no, the situation had completely changed.

Two years later, in 2004, there was another huge attack, a hostage taking operation—a hostage taking crisis in Beslan, when the school was taken hostage, and even more people died: kids. And

the way the Russian security services dealt with this crisis was horrible. Lots of kids died, there was complete chaos and confusion. But the most important thing was that the Russian security services didn't want to admit that they made mistakes. And when many Russian journalists and foreign journalists raised these questions and reported mistakes were made, the reaction was extremely aggressive. And that was the moment I started thinking that maybe it would not be really possible anymore to write about the activities of the Russian security services.

Nevertheless, we kept doing this for a number of years. But by 2008/2009, the problem was that it became clear that there is huge pressure on Russian media. Well, the thing you saw was that many editors became extremely cautious and hesitant at having investigative journalists, in their newspapers, and then in their media, they understood that they might get into a lot of trouble. And these journalists posed a risk for the very existence of his media. So, in 2008, at the end of 2008, I was fired from a newspaper, along with my colleague, and that was the very last job I could actually have in Russia as a journalist. And still we thought that it was still possible to do journalism. And what actually happened was that a friend of mine, an American journalist, came to me and said, 'Look, why not write a book about the Russian security services?' And I said, 'I was just fired from Russian media, why would a Russian publisher publish my book?' And she said, 'No, no, no, you need to approach American publishers, try maybe it's worth it.'

And thanks to some fortunate events, and coincidences, and some friends. Well, finally, I found a way to get our proposal to our publisher, and he agreed, and that's how our first book was published. And after that, it was a very strange moment—I would say period—of my existence as a journalist in Russia. I was writing books in English, for an American publisher, to get them published in the United States. While asking Russian publishers to buy the licence for the book and to get them translated into Russian, to get back to my Russian audience. The feeling was very bizarre, I felt like I was in some sort of virtual emigration. So, you still consider yourself a Russian journalist, but you write in a foreign language, and this is the only way you can get your story published in your country. It's a very unconventional way of doing this. But it worked for us until 2020. And in 2020, we were told, very clearly, that we had only two weeks to pack, and we needed to leave the country. And that's what we did.

SG: Are you worried that living abroad you could be targeted? I'm thinking about the cases of Alexander Litvinenko and Sergio and Yulia Skripal; we know how far the hands of the Russian state can go. Is it something you think about?

AS: Yes, unfortunately, it is something I need to take into consideration. Also, because once the full-scale invasion of Ukraine started, I was almost immediately put on the wanted list of the Russian authorities, which resulted in several things. My assets in Russia were seized, it was not a lot of money, but still, it was quite unfortunate. The other thing was that I was told that I cannot travel to certain countries. And it was really unfortunate because these countries, we are talking about Central Asia, Georgia, Armenia, Serbia, these are the countries where you can now see lots of Russian recent emigrants. And they settled in these counters, mostly because you don't need to have a visa to get into these countries. But it is also a reason why it's so risky to come to this country if you are on the Russian wanted list, because many of these countries are still on friendly terms with the Russian security services, so you can be easily extradited or kidnapped. So, it is a real risk, unfortunately, for me and for my colleagues, because now we have a long list of Russian journalists on the wanted list of the Russian authorities.

SG: That's very concerning, and very troubling indeed. You mentioned the aspect about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. How is the war going for Russia? Where do you see it heading? And how long can Russia continue to fight this when it is continuously losing soldiers?

AS: The biggest problem now we have—we used to have—a wrong perception of the Russian army. On the one hand, it is true that the Russian army is not very professional, not very competent, they lost a lot of soldiers and officers, trained officers, which is not easy to replace. On the other hand, I would say a unique quality of the Russian army is that they can sustain more casualties than the

armies of, say, Western Europe or the United States. The level of acceptance of casualties is much higher. If you lose, say, in the British army or the French army, so many soldiers it would be a disaster for the army and people would be asking questions that would affect the morale of the army and all of that. Whereas in the Russian Army the situation is completely different. And it's been like that for many years, if not decades. The level of accepted casualties was extremely high during the Second World War, and the idea was everything was justified because we just needed to win the war no matter what. The costs never actually mattered.

In Chechnya, it was always a disaster. It was a disaster during the First Chechen War, it was a disaster during the Second Chechen War, but the army just didn't pay any attention to that. And it goes not only to soldiers, but also to generals. I vividly remember when the war in Georgia started, in the summer of 2008. As a general who was in charge of the 58 army of Russia, as a main fighting force, he was immediately, almost immediately, wounded because he was on the very first tank of the column of Russian tanks, heading to the war. And I remember, back then I was having conversations with Russian officers asking them, 'Do you think that it's normal, that you have a general sitting on the very first tank with no protection, it doesn't make any sense to me and I'm not a military officer, but still, it's seems to be stupid.' But they said, 'No, it's fine. It was just a sign that he was extremely brave.' So, they accepted this level of incompetence, as a sign of his courage, which is an astonishing thing in the 21st century. But nevertheless, this is something we need to take into consideration. So, unfortunately even now while they are losing so many men, nevertheless, it doesn't affect the army as deeply as we all hoped. And unfortunately, I think it means that this war might last much longer than any of us expected.

SG: Well, I think that tallies with what a lot of others that have been looking at the war in great detail have to say. Does some Putin have public support in Russia for this war, or is there just an increasing amount of apathy towards it?

AS: First of all, Vladimir Putin is really good at spreading fear. He knows how to do that. He is really a world expert in doing this. The way he is doing this is targeting every strata of Russian society. It's not only about journalists, it's not only about activists, it's not only about opposition politicians. It's also about the army. It is about the security services, and it is about the ministries. I think it makes things really difficult because even as we see now more and more attacks of drones on Moscow, nevertheless, Russian bureaucracy is so scared of Putin that they remain loyal to him. And we see that; the most interesting example for me was when drones attacked Moscow city. One of the buildings they attacked was the so-called tower of ministries, because this tower houses three Russian ministries, including the Ministry of Digital Development, which is, in part, in charge of the Russian import substitution programme, which is a great, big thing for the Kremlin, because this is the way they are trying to substitute for the Western equipment, which became unavailable because of sanctions. So, it is a crucial, key ministry for the Russian military effort, in short. And I know people who work in this ministry, and they told me that yes, of course, it was very scary when we got these attacks of drones, literally at the windows of the offices, but we also remember that just two weeks before that, the Deputy Minister of this very ministry was arrested and sent to jail. And if you waive the risk of being hit by Ukrainian drones or being arrested by the FSB…lots of Russian officials think that the risk of being arrested was much higher. So, fear plays a crucial role in this public support for Putin. So, it's all just about trust. The real picture is that you have 20% of the population against the war, but they're really afraid of doing anything about it. There are 20% who are really pro-war for many, many reasons. So, the rest are either frightened, scared, or just passive. And they just support Putin, because they support matter what they are doing.

SG: Speaking about fear, the mercenary leader and ex-convict Yevgeny Prigozhin of the Wagner Group is now dead under mysterious circumstances. It seemed very unsurprising when he seemed to threaten the Kremlin, and then there seemed to be some resolution, then he dies. Did he actually believe that he would be forgiven for his actions? How do you explain everything that has happened in this very weird world of the Wagner Group and the Kremlin?

AS: What we need to remember about Prigozhin, and he was a very interesting character, is that

he was not part of Russian bureaucracy. He was not a military commander. He had this criminal mindset. And also, he had a very personal relationship with Putin dating back to their years spent together in the 1990s in St. Petersburg, and again, that involved a lot of criminal activities. And when you are talking to people who have some understanding of the criminal world, especially in Russia, these people always believe that some sort of deal is always possible. You just need to understand what is the deal. So, he had his deal with Putin for many years. When the war started, Prigozhin found a way to update his deal. And he became more prominent and more public, more ambitious. He then was put under some pressure from the Ministry of Defence, which he found very unfair because it was unfair in regard to the deal he had with Putin. So, what actually he tried to achieve with his mutiny was not to topple Putin…he wanted to renegotiate his deal. And I think his biggest mistake was that finally, he went into a room with Putin after his mutiny failed, and Putin made him believe that Prigozhin got a new deal. Maybe it was not such a good deal, but still it was a deal. And part of this deal was that Prigozhin would be safe. And I think that was his mistake.

SG: Big mistake in fact. So, one thing you'd mentioned to me before, when we had met previously, was that very often when Vladimir Putin give statements, he's seen on camera. You were telling me that actually very often that is not even in Moscow, but elsewhere, that he's recreated the same visuals from Moscow in other parts of Russia. Did I understand that correctly, and why is he doing that?

AS: Yes, exactly. He built replicas of his office in Sochi and then two other places. So, his idea is always keep the pretence that he's in Moscow, in the Kremlin, working hard. And I think it has a lot to do with the idea of keeping things under control. And he believes that he needs to project this, and always have this message to the Russian people that he's there, he's in control, and he cannot be challenged. So, for him, it's extremely important. And I think sometimes we do not understand that, but it is important to keep in mind that a lot of people in the Russian security services including Putin, they share his interest and belief that the Russian state actually is extremely fragile. So they're always talking about how they're strong and how they're challenging the United States and the West and all of that, but at the same time, deep inside, if you ask them, they will tell you that actually it's very fragile, and it might be destroyed with something, which might start with something really, really small.

And this kind of paranoia and the idea of fragility of the Russian political regime, again, you can trace it back to 1917…until 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union, because the KGB never explained itself, why the Soviet Union collapsed and why the Russian Empire collapsed, because it's very uncomfortable to think about 1991. Just think about it for a minute. You had a big country, the Soviet Union, which was a formidable power, a global power, right? And this country, this regime had the KGB, which was probably the biggest, if not the most numerous security service in the world. And it was also the most intelligent organisation, at least, that's how people at the KGB considered the KGB. And all of a sudden, in three days in August 1991, it just all collapsed. The uncomfortable truth about this collapse is that the KGB did nothing to save the political regime of the Communist Party, for one particular reason: because the Communist Party controlled the KGB, and the KGB wanted to get rid of this control. They just didn't see that without this control, the whole country would collapse. But they cannot tell this truth to themselves. So instead, they invent all kinds of conspiracy theories. And part of this conspiratorial thinking is that they believe that the Russian state, Russian regime has been always extremely fragile. And that is why Putin is so aggressive in his reaction to every threat, even if it's very minor, if we are talking about some students or some girls protesting in Moscow's streets, nevertheless, the idea is we do not know what might start the next revolution. So, it's better to suppress any kind of unsanctioned activities because it might start a new revolution.

SG: Speaking about suppression, so the Kremlin has built a system known as SORM which Russian intelligence compels all the country's internet providers to install this, I guess you could call them, black boxes. Could you expand on what this all entails? Because I know you've written about it.

AS: Yes, it's a very totalitarian approach to surveillance. Basically, it means that every internet service provider in the country is required by law to install these devices, which provides backdoor access to the local departments of the FSB. It is a very sophisticated system these days. And the

problem is that now we have the occupied territories of Ukraine, and now we have the Russian Internet service providers in these territories. And that means that right now, as we speak, Russian engineers are installing these various systems, but now in the occupied territories of Ukraine, while actually putting Ukrainian civilians under control of the Russian online surveillance system. It is, again, it is quite sophisticated, it's developed locally. And, unfortunately, we already see, and we have seen for years how this system was used to target activists and just people who speak their mind on social media about what was going on.

SG: We've been talking a lot about the methods, the tools, the hard power that the Russian state uses. IF we look at a form of soft power, as well, the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, and how it helps Putin serve as a form of intelligence, as a form of recruitment. Could you explain how that works?

AS: It is a very sad story, to be honest, for me as a Russian because back in the 1990s and even in the 1980s, we believed in several things. We believed, for instance, that beyond Soviet borders, that it was with Russian emigration—for some reason, we believe that all of them are aristocrats who fled the Revolution and the Civil War—and there was this church, which was not compromised by cooperation with the KGB. And that is why we had two churches, actually, there was a White Church, as we call it, the church as the Russian Orthodox Church, beyond Russian borders, and the Red Church inside of the Soviet Union. And we called it the right choice for these reasons because it was infiltrated and penetrated by the KGB. Putin, when he came to power in 2000, immediately understood the role of the Russian Orthodox Church abroad. He immediately started working on a plan of how to put this church under control of the Kremlin. And to be honest, I was shocked and surprised how easy it was for him. I thought it was a very strange thing. Like, think about it. This church, the White Church, was built by descendants of the first wave of Russian emigration, so the people who fled communists and Cheka and the KGB. And of course, they would say no to the approaches made by Vladimir Putin, who is a former KGB officer. That was my thinking.

But unfortunately, the reality was absolutely different. The church abroad decided to join forces with the church in Moscow, so these two churches, the Red and the White Churches, are now the same thing. And the main reason for that is, it's not corruption as we might think, or coercion. No, not that. It is that they share the same, I would say, worldview, which you can take to the 19th century The problem with people, with the descendants of the first wave of emigration, people who are close to the church abroad is that many of them share a very nostalgic understanding of the Imperial Russian past. And Putin, he is the same guy with the same idea. He is seen by them as a new Tsar who is rebuilding the mighty Russian Empire. And they just decided not to pay any attention to the fact that he is a former KGB man because he is, for them, an imperialist, someone who is rebuilding the Russian Empire.

So unfortunately, when the war started, first in 2014, and now in 2020, many people who are close to the church decided to support the war. So, we can say, yes, it's all orchestrated from Moscow, but unfortunately, it's only part of the explanation. And I spoke with many priests, and they were really shocked that they couldn't speak about the war because the people who are in the church would leave the church. So, they're afraid of speaking about the war. But it doesn't mean that the Russian security services and intelligence agency didn't and do not explore the church—quite the opposite. We just discovered a document that actually the Russian church was establishing some rules of cooperation with the Russian intelligence and security services, and that this cooperation includes not only providing, say, ideological ammunition, but also helping in operations.

SG: That's very interesting and very concerning, and as you said, very sad as well. A final question, Andrei. So, as you know, one of my books is coming out on Ayman al-Zawahiri, and we'd spoken about this in the past, because in the 1990s, al-Zawahiri was actually arrested and detained in Dagestan and was then actually released. It seemed that members of al-Qaeda actually bribed local Russian authorities to release him, and the Russian authorities didn't know who he actually was. Were there a lot of people connected to al-Qaeda that were travelling through Russia in the 1990s? Was this all about Chechnya? Or was this a bigger dynamic?

AS: It was a very important and interesting story. And I remember that I did an investigation about this, because I always asked myself a question, why, after the war in Afghanistan ended and when the regime of Najibullah collapsed, why all these Islamists, international jihadists, when they had a choice where to go either to Bosnia or to Chechnya, they decided to go to Bosnia and not to Russia, to fight in Chechnya. I would think it would be quite natural for them to come to Chechnya to fight the same enemy they had fought in the 1980s in Afghanistan, but it never happened. And I think the main reason was that in Bosnia, the local war leaders were not extremely powerful. So, they were happy to have international jihadists come and take over. But it was never the case in Chechnya. In Chechnya, the local resistance, the local militancy was much stronger than any visitors or any global jihadists. Yes, in Chechnya, there were several famous fighters coming from abroad, but they were never in control of the movement.

But of course, the Russian security services didn't pay attention to this distinction. They always pretended that in Chechnya, they had another front against al-Qaeda. But this kind of assumption was made by the Russian security services for purely political reasons. It was right after 9/11, they wanted to secure support from the United States. And at some point, maybe you remember that it was a very hilarious story: the press office of the FSB had a press conference, and they claimed that they had just discovered a CD-ROM with training exercises for a Boeing 747. So, the idea was to try to convince the Americans that actually terrorists were trained in Chechnya, and that is why we need to join forces and to fight in Chechnya together. Of course, it was all false, and they just made up the story, but nevertheless, that was the idea of the Russian security services. Then, later on—and again, it's all about politics, it's not about reality— the FSB made another point that they discovered a document in Chechnya, a letter, a kind of certificate, with two sides: al-Qaeda and the CIA training school. They started pretending that actually all these jihadists who came to Chechnya were trained by both al-Qaeda and the CIA. So, we all understand the reasons for that—purely political reasons. But it was a moment when lots of people just understood what we're dealing with, that these people just couldn't be trusted.

SG: Well on that, very wise and important words, I think we can conclude this very riveting discussion, Andrei. Let me thank you again for spending time on the NATO DEEP Dive podcast. But most importantly, please take care of yourself. Please stay safe.

AS: Thank you, Sajjan. Thank you.

Episode 51 – Sajjan Gohel Part 1: Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist, December 2023

__Key Reflections__

- **Ayman al-Zawahiri engaged in terrorism for five decades and represents an Egyptian ideological strain that pursued insurrection in the Middle East, North Africa, and the West.**
- **Al-Zawahiri was calculating and scheming. He positioned himself as the face of the al-Jihad terrorist group that assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and isolated his rivals by endearing himself to bin Laden in Pakistan.**
- **Al-Zawahiri worked in tandem with Osama bin Laden to develop al-Qaeda's strategy and tactics. The Egyptian oversaw many of al-Qaeda's most consequential mass casualty attacks and plots. He also recruited double and triple agents.**
- **The September 11 terrorist attacks were only possible because al-Zawahiri coordinated the precursor plot involving the assassination of the Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Masood, two days before 9/11. This eliminated a key ally of the United States and ensured the loyalty of the Taliban who feared Masood.**
- **During the War on Terror years, al-Zawahiri ensured his own personal safety by insulating himself with the Taliban in Pakistan as well as being protected by Pakistani terrorist groups like the Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed.**
- **Throughout the generations, al-Zawahiri pioneered and evolved the use of technology as a tool to provide the oxygen of publicity for terrorism.**

MA: Marcus Andreopoulos

VJ: Victoria Jones

SG: Sajjan Gohel

MA: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast with me, Marcus Andreopoulos.

VJ: And me, Victoria Jones. In this episode we'll be speaking to Dr. Sajjan Gohel, author of the forthcoming book Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist, The Life and Legacy of Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

MA: Sajjan is also the International Security Director at the Asia-Pacific Foundation, the chair of the NATO DEEP Global Threats Advisory Group (GTAG), and guest teacher at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He is also, of course, the host of this podcast, which is why today he's being interviewed by us, the producers.

VJ: Sajjan, welcome to the show.

SG: Thank you, Victoria. Thank you, Marcus. Appreciate the invitation. Please be gentle!

VJ: How does it feel to be on the other side as the interviewee?

SG: Surreal, but I'm looking forward to it.

VJ: Likewise, as are we. So, let's just dive in. Can I just ask you to tell us a bit about what inspired you to start looking into Ayman al-Zawahiri as a figure of history or character in the first place?

SG: Sure, so I guess there was a thematic approach that got me interested. Let's start with some context. I saw the September 11 attacks happen on television, it was something that had a huge impact on everybody at the time, to see that sheer force of terrorism, the brutality of it, the chaos, the panic, the fear that it created. But behind the violence, there was a message, there was a doctrine, which I was very interested in understanding because counter-terrorism has to be much more than capturing, killing, and prosecuting you've got to understand the ideology in order to try and find methods to counter.

And as I started looking at it in more detail, I discovered that there was an Egyptian ideological strain from various different figures in history, starting with Hassan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood, he'd created the first clandestine movement to plot attacks, conduct assassinations. This was followed by another Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, who was a teacher, turned ideologue, gained the respect of global jihadists because he'd visited the United States, especially New York City, and Greeley, Colorado, which was not necessarily a place everyone would know about, but it gained a lot of attention because Qutb painted a very negative picture of the United States to justify his preconceived notions of Western moral corruption and decadence. His other contribution was that he wrote the book Milestones which spoke about removing what he deemed apostate rulers in the Islamic world by violent force and challenge the moral malaise that countries like Egypt found itself in.

So, his book contributed to eventually being imprisoned and then sentenced to death by the state, under the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser. Interestingly Qutb's lawyer was an uncle of Ayman al-Zawahiri, so this left a massive imprint on al-Zawahiri too and he felt he had a personal responsibility to continue Qutb's legacy and that contributed to him joining the terrorist group al-Jihad, the same entity that then was responsible for assassinating Nasser's successor as Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat. Again, ideology played a role because there was a book called The Neglected Duty by Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, and that book was the inspiration for the assassination of Sadat. Al-Zawahiri was part of al-Jihad, and so he was arrested for the assassination and then he became the face of the Egyptian jihadist movement. So, I'm giving you a kind of a long ideological trail here and al-Zawahiri was the latest incarnation of that strain, that's why, ultimately, I started looking at it.

VJ: Very interesting and speaking of all the Egyptian ideologues that you've been mentioning, I know your PhD focused on this topic as well. So, how much of the book is related to what you were looking at with your PhD? Does it build upon that work?

SG: Well, I'm not going to bore everybody with the huge, intricate details of my PhD, but the book in many ways, I guess, has been an on/off process since 2009 and it's evolved substantially. I would say that it's primarily a different contribution and that's because so much has happened between 2009 to 2022 involving Ayman al-Zawahiri. I do encapsulate that Egyptian strain, but it's very much centred around the prism of al-Zawahiri, his life, 55 years and terrorism, covering a several generations, and also areas that were not looked at previously, including his time as the head of al-Qaeda when he took over from Osama bin Laden in 2011.

VJ: That's very interesting. One other question I was just curious about is, what was the most surprising thing you've discovered during your research for the book, and then also relatedly, could you tell us a bit about your methodology and how you went about finding relevant material?

SG: So, what I found surprising was just how significant and important Ayman al-Zawahiri's family is when it comes to Egyptian society, both on his paternal and maternal side and that also would then play a role in his own calculus, his own worldview. So, for example, on Ayman al-Zawahiri's paternal side, one of his relatives, one of his grand uncles, Muhammad al-Zawahiri was the grand Imam at the Al Azhar seminary, one of the most prestigious Islamic institutions in the world and he had attained that position during British colonial occupation of Egypt, and eventually he was pushed out of that role because of his tensions with Britain. And that in particular then had a knock-on effect in terms of why Ayman al-Zawahiri was so opposed to Western presence in the Islamic world.

The other thing that was important was also on his maternal side. So, one of his great uncle's Abdul Rahman Azzam, was the first Secretary General of the Arab League and he was there when the British Mandate of Palestine came to an end, and the state of Israel emerged, and the wars with

various Arab countries. So, again, that had a massive impact on Ayman al-Zawahiri's thinking. And perhaps the third thing that struck me was that al-Zawahiri actually saw himself as a historian. If you look at a lot of his writings, his doctrine, it is shaped by archival research. How he got hold of those archival documents is something that is very curious, but he was somebody who looked at the past to understand the present.

And in terms of my methodology, a lot of it was piecing together various different strands across decades of Ayman al-Zawahiri's life, interviewing people that knew him, interviewing people that were investigating him, a lot of counter-terrorism officers that had spent their lives trying to locate him, trying to understand who he was, what he was about, and then trying to piece it all together. It was not an easy process. It took a long time, many years, but it was very satisfying to then be able to put the different pieces of the puzzle together to form that wider picture.

MA: These different pieces of the puzzle that you mentioned, they really uncover a lot about someone that is perhaps less well known than the likes of Osama bin Laden. But for those who do know about al-Zawahiri, what would you say is the most misunderstood thing about him?

SG: Well, often there's this perception that al-Zawahiri gave very long, turgid statements, that was certainly a reputation that he perhaps had in the latter years of his time as the head of al-Qaeda, but I think that often gets misunderstood because he was also very nuanced. And if you look at everything associated with al-Qaeda, it tends to be, as you mentioned, tied with Osama bin Laden, but in fact, there was al-Zawahiri's hand, always behind the scenes. He was very cunning. He was long term thinking. This is an individual that was responsible for plotting some of the most significant terrorist attacks that we had seen prior to 9/11, such as the U.S. embassy bombings. This was a person who also started recruiting double agents and even triple agents all the way from the 1980s, sending them to the United States, so that they could be his eyes and ears.

He was thinking long term, that if you are going to defeat the regimes in Egypt, especially in the 1980s, which at that time was led by Hosni Mubarak, then you needed to understand the countries that supported Egypt, such as the United States. So, this was somebody who was planning, strategically, tactically, and I think that has often been ignored and neglected. The fact that you had somebody that was looking at having agents and spies for a terrorist organisation in the 1980s is unheard of.

MA: Well, you certainly do get across this point that this was a very methodological, strategic thinker. So, do you think he'd prefer this role, in the background directing operations? Or did he wish for fame in the same way that perhaps bin Laden achieved in those late 1990s, early 2000 years?

SG: That very much depends on the period that we're looking at. He certainly courted attention and notoriety. So, for example, when he was imprisoned for the assassination of Anwar Sadat, even though he was on the periphery of that particular incident. He became the face of the movement. You see him being very charismatic behind the prison cell. So, the perception that he was very turgid, and boring is actually not reflective of who he was and how he grew, as being a leader of a global jihadist movement. You see him behind the prison cell, captivating the media, the public that are present, the fact that all the other individuals in the prison cell are following every word, then chant as he finishes his statements.

This was somebody who wanted the attention, he liked the oxygen of publicity. And as I mentioned, he became the face of the movement. This was also somebody who could speak in English. Not many people knew that, but Ayman al-Zawahiri was fluent, very articulate in English, unlike Osama bin Laden. He was fiery, he was very intense in what he was saying. Over time, personal security became his priority. He would still appear in a lot of the al-Qaeda videos and propaganda, seeking to inspire and influence terrorists around the world. But perhaps at that point, he preferred to take a role which was more safe and secure rather than court the limelight as much as he had perhaps done previously.

MA: That's interesting. So, what do you make of the claim that al-Zawahiri was not instrumental to the 9/11 attacks in 2001?

SG: It's an important question because the September 11 attacks have defined al-Qaeda, and certainly there are scholars and journalists that have made the point that Ayman al-Zawahiri was not intrinsic to the 9/11 attacks. And I don't necessarily disagree with that, because primarily Ayman al-Zawahiri had been tasked to actually do the precursor to 9/11, which if it did not happen, the September 11 attacks could not have occurred either.

So, what doesn't get a lot of attention and it is as important as the September 11 attacks was the assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, which was on 9th September 2001. And the reason why that was done was because Ahmad Shah Massoud, as the leader of the Northern Alliance, was a major thorn in the side of the Taliban. He was the one preventing the Taliban from completely controlling Afghanistan. And as we know, al-Qaeda was allied to the Taliban, the Taliban had given al-Qaeda safe sanctuary. So, in order to carry out the September 11 attacks, al-Qaeda's calculus was that the United States would react, that they would want to launch some kind of invasion in Afghanistan, but that they would be weakened, they would be hemmed in, and they would also suffer casualties if they didn't have an ally on the ground.

So, the theory was that if Ahmad Shah Massoud was successfully eliminated, the Northern Alliance would fall apart, it would dissolve, and the U.S. would not have a viable ally on the ground. Ayman al-Zawahiri had to plan a very sophisticated operation to lure Ahmad Shah Massoud into a false sense of security. So, for over a year, there was a plot to convince Ahmad Shah Massoud that journalists from Belgium wanted to interview him as part of a documentary, and that dialogue had begun well over a year before the September 11 attacks. Ahmad Shah Massoud was fooled into agreeing to that interview, and then on September 9, 2001, two individuals pretending to be journalists carried out an attack in which a bomb inside a video camera exploded, killing one of the terrorists as well as Ahmad Shah Massoud. That was the signal, the green light, to the September 11 plotters that they can carry out their operation.

Without Ayman al-Zawahiri's role in the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, 9/11 would not or could not have happened and it would not have been successful. So, I don't disagree with people that say that he didn't plot the September 11 attacks, but he was certainly consulted about it, he was involved in the planning of it, and he was the key to the precursor to 9/11.

VJ: Sajjan, I was wondering if you could tell us how you ended up choosing the title for the book, Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist.

SG: This was a long-drawn-out process. I think both of you were involved in helping in that as well. The original idea that I had was calling it the '$25 Million Terrorist' and that was because that's the bounty placed by the United States on Ayman al-Zawahiri. The fact was that was the highest amount ever put on any individual wanted by the United States. My editor at Oxford University Press made the point, that two decades after that bounty was put on, $25 million was not a lot of money anymore, and that inflation has perhaps devalued that. I wouldn't personally say no to $25 million! But I do agree that it doesn't necessarily carry the same resonance that it used to.

My other idea was to call it 'The Enduring Terrorist' because, prior to 2022, Ayman al-Zawahiri was still at large, he had been on the run for decades, and he had somehow managed to avoid being detected. As we know, he was eventually then found in Afghanistan, after the Taliban re-conquered the country, so that changed the perception of what is enduring!

Eventually then I settled on the title which I'm happiest about, in fact, which is Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist and the reason for that is that if you see the FBI Most Wanted poster, there are aliases that describe Ayman al-Zawahiri, which include 'teacher' and 'doctor', and then, of course, it says right at the top that he's one of the world's most wanted terrorists. So, Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist, which is also reflective as to his own credentials as a doctor and a teacher, as well as being one of the world's most notorious terrorists.

VJ: And could you also tell us about the significance of the book cover itself? For listeners, the cover of the book depicts Ayman al-Zawahiri raising one finger and then there's also an image in the background.

SG: There are many easter eggs on the front cover alluding to al-Zawahiri's life in terrorism. Four in particular: Firstly, the image of al-Zawahiri reflects the moment when he announced in 2011 that he had taken over from Osama bin Laden as al-Qaeda leader following bin Laden's death in a U.S. counter-terrorism operation in Pakistan.

The second dimension is al-Zawahiri holding aloft his right index finger, where he is alluding to the tawhid, the belief in the oneness of God, and the statement of faith. Overtime, that has become a sign of an ideological cause within transnational terrorist circles. There is an incorrect perception that ISIS coined the usage of the index finger for its terrorist agenda. Actually, al-Zawahiri started it when he was imprisoned following the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat back in 1981. That is how far back it goes, and al-Zawahiri was seen doing that in front of the gaze of the world's media. Interestingly, I have a photo in my book reflecting that.

The third aspect you may notice is the callus on al-Zawahiri's forehead. It's a prayer mark aimed to show his own personal piety from repeated prostration in prayer. Sometimes, the mark is quaintly referred to as a raisin. Curiously, Anwar Sadat had the same prayer mark, which he would use to convey his own religiosity.

The last part on the cover is the silhouette of the 1998 US Embassy bombing in Kenya, which al-Zawahiri and his Egyptian Islamic Jihad group coordinated with bin Laden's al-Qaeda. It's meant to demonstrate al-Zawahiri's own impact, influence and imprint on bin Laden. So, the four visual aspects of the cover are demonstrating leadership, ideology, theology, and terrorism. All of which were continuously conveyed by al-Zawahiri throughout his decades in terrorism.

VJ: I noticed also that you have a lot of interesting and detailed maps in your book. Why did you decide those were important to include?

SG: Forgive the pun, but I wanted to map out al-Zawahiri's 55 years in terrorism! I have seen many books on terrorism, and they're very good books around, but I have been disappointed with the maps, because they just seem to be an afterthought, very basic—they don't really provide any information, and you wonder why they're even there. So, I wanted to have maps that could serve as a window into Ayman al-Zawahiri's life, where he travelled, what he planned, who he was ultimately targeting in terms of his terrorism. I wanted to show how he was moving across four continents: North America, Europe, Africa, Asia. And I think these maps—they tell the story on their own. It conveys hopefully the enormity, and the magnitude of what Ayman al-Zawahiri was inflicting upon the world across generations.

It was interesting, because in many ways, the maps were a project on their own. They tell their own story. I'm very grateful to my cartographer Ed Merritt for the work he put in, because originally, we were thinking about just having one map, and then we ended up creating four, and each one is very detailed, and hopefully it provides a clear illustration as to what terrorists can plan, especially if they're able to plot and plan across five decades.

MA: Well, I for one am certainly glad that you decided to include so many maps with so much detail. I feel like in a lot of these sorts of books, you can really get lost in the maps before you even start the story just because of, like you said, how much of a story they tell in themselves. To go back to an earlier point that you made during this podcast, I want to return to the importance of the Egyptian strain of jihadism, and why you deem it to be so important in your book.

SG: The Egyptian strain is significant because it's ultimately the doctrine that consumed al-Qaeda, that shaped much of al-Qaeda's thinking from individuals like al-Banna, Qutb, Faraj, and of course, Ayman al-Zawahiri. And if you think about the fact that Ayman al-Zawahiri had led his own terrorist group, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad—which was working in tandem with al-Qaeda throughout the 1990s, and then formally merged with al-Qaeda in the summer of 2001, before the 9/11 attacks—you get to see that it had a massive bearing and influence upon Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden himself relied and depended on Ayman al-Zawahiri. He needed him as somebody who would check his impulses, guide him, give him the support he needed, but also act as that barometer as to what the sentiments were that existed within the Islamic world, within especially the jihadist move-

ments that were plotting and planning attacks, not just against the West, but also against regimes in the Islamic world, that al-Qaeda were also responsible for killing Muslims as part of their plots and collateral damage. So, the Egyptian narrative has been enduring long-term, and that has also been so significant when it has factored into the calculus of Osama bin Laden and the global jihadist movement.

MA: In your book, you also talk about al-Zawahiri's experimenting with technology and new media. Could you expand on this point?

SG: The aspect about technology is very important, because Ayman al-Zawahiri was actually a pioneer. He was very innovative in controlling the media narrative to make sure that it reflected and represented what he wanted to convey. And this goes back all the time to the 1970s, where Ayman al-Zawahiri was fascinated in how television media would produce news reports, documentaries. One of his relatives worked as a stringer for several US media networks in Egypt. And al-Zawahiri would talk to him about the editorial standards of news media, how you would film, direction, cutaways, how you would splice in different images. All of this shaped much of his thinking. And as I was mentioning earlier, you saw al-Zawahiri behind the prison cell, galvanising the world's media in the aftermath of Sadat's assassination.

Media became an important tool for him, almost as important as actually carrying out acts of terrorism or spreading hate, and he was pioneering then in its technological dimension. Ayman al-Zawahiri was the very first terrorist to start using fax machines as conveying statements to the world's media, claiming responsibility for attacks. Now, of course, today, fax machines may be deemed to be very outdated, but at the time, they were extremely new and innovative. Also, Ayman al-Zawahiri had spoken in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks about how the jihadist movement had to end the 'media siege' from the West, that the media was controlled, in his mind, by the West, and that the jihadists had to take ownership of it.

So again, when you see the growth and the advent of the internet, that was something that Ayman al-Zawahiri was very keen to latch onto, creating their own production company for al-Qaeda, as-Sahab, that would have editorial standards, that would create visuals, that would be effective in conveying a message, bite-sized sometimes, or on occasions more detailed, claiming responsibility for attacks. And you saw al-Qaeda's independence on technology continue to grow, and Ayman al-Zawahiri was very much at the helm of coining and developing that.

MA: And this experimentation extended to other spheres, for example, looking at different types of weaponry. You mention in your book some experimentation with CBRNE, or chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and explosive weapons. Could you also expand that?

SG: One of Ayman al-Zawahiri's most dangerous obsessions in the 1990s was to make al-Qaeda a very effective terrorist group using biological, chemical, radiological, and even nuclear weapons. He spent a huge amount of time looking at all of these various potential deadly weapons. He was seen as experimenting with chemical weapons; for example, there are videos that were uncovered from the al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, where they were experimenting on dogs. And we also know that he had created laboratories, in which he oversaw the production of experiments that were designed to then be used for the purposes of terrorism.

Even when it came to nuclear weapons, just demonstrating how overly ambitious he was, Ayman al-Zawahiri would speak to Pakistani nuclear scientists that were involved in Pakistan's own clandestine nuclear programme, to see if they could be used to aid al-Qaeda's quest. That never took off, in large part because 9/11 and the US operation to remove the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan hindered the development of that, but al-Qaeda still looked at chemical, radiological, and biological plots, which they were seeing whether they could be viable.

There was a plot in New York, which Ayman al-Zawahiri ultimately decided not to go ahead with for strategic reasons—and I explain in my book in more detail why—and then there was also a plot in the UK using a radiological device, which than**KF**ully was disrupted by British authorities. So again, you're looking at somebody that was looking at a very dangerous form of terrorism involving weap-

ons that could have had a massive consequential impact on our lives.

VJ: In terms of identifying the location of al-Qaeda's leaders in Pakistan, they all ended up being found in the country's urban centres. But al-Zawahiri chose to hide in the Pakistani tribal areas. Why was that the case?

SG: The logistics are fascinating because a lot of the al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, were found in major urban centres. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, one of the master planners of 9/11 was found in Rawalpindi next to a military garrison. And perhaps that was also very revealing in that even Osama bin Laden was right next-door to Pakistan's military academy. So a lot of the al-Qaeda figures wanted to be in urban centres, and perhaps they thought that that was a safe place—they had some security guarantees by Pakistani jihadist groups that had those murky ties with the Pakistani military—but because they were in those urban centres, it was easier for the US to eventually find them and track them, especially if they had their own networks in which they could uncover where these people were based.

Ayman al-Zawahiri adopted a different approach. He chose to be based also in Pakistan, but in the tribal areas. And he was insulated, protected, by not just Pakistani jihadist groups, but also by the Taliban, and in particular entities like the Haqqani Network. So even though he was probably in a much more spartan environment, tougher, difficult conditions, he nevertheless focused on his personal safety and security, and also had the backing of the Taliban. And that is why during the whole duration of the war on terrorism, he was never captured or killed. There were many efforts to get him, and I talk about in my book where there were close moments where the US thought they might be able to target him, but at the last moment, Ayman al-Zawahiri kept escaping, kept eluding being captured.

VJ: That's all very interesting. Also, I wanted to ask you, what kind of strategic mistakes would you say al-Zawahiri made as the leader of al-Qaeda?

SG: There were several. And it's also important to point out that no terrorist is the perfect assassin or murderer. They will make mistakes too, and Ayman al-Zawahiri made mistakes. And it's important to look at that because that also tells the story of an individual.

One of those perhaps was that he was never successful in countering the perception that he had killed the Jordanian-Palestinian ideologue Abdullah Azzam. They were rivals; they formed a tense relationship in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation of the country, and whilst they were based in Pakistan, they had a falling out. That falling out was largely down to the direction of where the Arab fighters would go after the Soviets were defeated. Abdullah Azzam wants to focus on Israel-Palestine; Ayman al-Zawahiri wanted to look at the Arab regimes such as that of Hosni Mubarak. Abdullah Azzam mysteriously died, and in my book, I unpack potentially who was responsible for killing him. The strong perception within the jihadist community was that Ayman al-Zawahiri was responsible, and in many ways, even though he was successful in getting rid of a rival, and then using that opportunity to further develop his ties with bin Laden, it also hindered Ayman al-Zawahiri too, because there were many jihadists in some parts of the Arab world that resented Ayman al-Zawahiri for that.

The other perhaps strategic mistake was the fact that he chose to support Osama bin Laden over the 9/11 attacks. Ayman al-Zawahiri did not prioritise 9/11 as essential. He had no love for the United States, he hated America as much as bin Laden. He was fine with plotting attacks against US interests, such as the US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania or targeting the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen. But he was hesitant about going off to the US mainland, because he was concerned that that would lead to massive blowback, as it eventually did. And it also resulted in him having a massive falling out within his own Egyptian cadre of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, who were opposed to the 9/11 attacks. So, he ended up having a fracture within his own terrorist group.

Perhaps the third strategic mistake was in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war. Ayman al-Zawahiri was unable to address the differences of strategic opinions by various jihadists such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who would end up becoming the leader of ISIS, and Abu Mohammed al-Golani. These two individuals had a very poor relationship, and Ayman al-Zawahiri failed to find a

solution in that. And these I think are examples of where perhaps on reflection he may have wanted to do things differently. But he was never ever acknowledging his mistakes. He was adamant that everything he did was ultimately correct. But these things certainly created setbacks for him, and also, I guess, left a challenge in terms of what direction he could go down in the future.

VJ: In your opinion, what has been the most consequential decision that al-Zawahiri made during his decades-long career in terrorism?

SG: Very often when we look at terrorism, we look at the attack, we look at the number of fatalities, people injured, we look at the visuals of it. And each attack, of course, has a consequence. But I would say in many ways, his contribution has been more the disruption, because not every plot he had wanted to carry out was successful. But the plot itself caused a massive impact on the way we see and feel about security. It required counter-terrorism agencies to have to recalibrate. It required governments to pass new laws when it came to prosecuting terrorists, also enhancing security methods and procedures at critical national infrastructure sites, including at airports. It caused a massive amount of disruption to our daily lives. It became an upheaval; it became more irksome.

One example, which I talk about in the book, was the 2006 airline liquid bomb plot, in which al-Qaeda planned to blow up several transatlantic flights from the UK to the US and Canada. Than**KF**ully, the British authorities along with their American colleagues were able to stop that from happening. But that has had long-term ramifications. It created the ban on liquids that we could take on board a plane as hand luggage—we can only do it through those plastic bags with 100 ml bottles. That is one of the legacies of Ayman al-Zawahiri. And in 2023, most airports still have those bans. So, you can see that disruption, in many ways, was one of his consequences.

I would also say that he has left the imprint of the Egyptian ideological strain for others to continue, he has passed that mantle on for others to pick up and carry through for the future for when groups like al-Qaeda and other jihadist entities are able to be at an operational ability to start plotting and planning deadly attacks again.

MA: I think this is a very apt place to conclude the first part of this two-part special with yourself, Sajjan. So, thank you very much for your time, and we'll return to look at the legacies and modern-day implications of al-Zawahiri's life.

SG: Sounds good

Episode 52 – Sajjan Gohel Part 2: Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist, January 2024

Key Reflections

- **Al-Zawahiri had some strategic differences with Osama bin Laden, one of which involved bin Laden's reluctance to sanction al-Qaeda affiliates. However, after bin Laden's death in Pakistan, al-Zawahiri began the process of expanding the al-Qaeda franchise.**
- **After the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, al-Zawahiri felt it was safe to go back too. However, the U.S. used some of its local intelligence assets to keep track of the Egyptian and conducted a sophisticated drone operation to ultimately eliminate the al-Qaeda leader.**
- **Before his death, al-Zawahiri adopted a long-term 'Safe Bases' strategy of strategic patience. For al-Qaeda and its affiliates to endure, the Egyptian wanted them to avoid mistakes made by ISIS. This entailed replenishing their ranks, becoming financially independent, and developing regional community support.**
- **Like Pakistan, Iran served as a logistics hub for al-Qaeda to operate and travel across regions, often thanks to the complicity of state elements.**
- **Following the Hamas attack on Israel on 7th October 2023, al-Qaeda received a revitalisation online.**
- **Prisons play a substantial role in radicalising individuals and bringing terrorists together. Al-Zawahiri was crucially shaped by that experience as were countless others.**

VJ: Victoria Jones

MA: Marcus Andreopoulos

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

VJ: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, with me, Victoria Jones.

MA: And me, Marcus Andreopoulos. This is the second episode of our two part discussion with Dr. Sajjan Gohel, author of the book Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist, The Life and Legacy of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

VJ: Sajjan is also the International Security Director at the Asia-Pacific Foundation, guest teacher at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Chair of NATO DEEP's Global Threats Advisory Group (GTAG), and as our listeners will surely know, he is usually the host of this podcast, but since he's the guest in our special, Marcus and I, the producers, will be playing host.

MA: So, Sajjan, welcome back. It's a pleasure to have you back for a second part.

SG: Thanks for having me back.

MA: One point that has lingered from our last recording, is this idea that al-Zawahiri seemed to take advantage of the opportunities that were presented to him during his life in international terrorism, I guess you could say. Would you describe al-Zawahiri as an opportunist? Is that a fair description?

SG: Yes, he was a massive opportunist. Every scenario that he faced, sometimes working in his favour, sometimes with adversity, he would find a way to progress, to continue, to linger. And opportunity was always an aspect that Ayman al-Zawahiri sought out, even if he had to create it himself. So, for example, he may have not been directly responsible for the assassination of Anwar Sadat, he

was on the periphery, as we were discussing in the previous podcast, but he then became the face of the Egyptian jihadist movement in prison. He was identified as the individual that led the al- Jihad Group and then what would eventually become his own group, Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ).

Another opportunity was when he met Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and where he latched onto bin Laden, isolating people like the Jordanian-Palestinian ideologue Abdullah Azzam, [he] removed him from Bin Laden sphere of influence and made sure that bin Laden continued the jihadist campaign under al-Zawahiri's guidance to do with fighting the so-called apostate regimes in the Arab world, such as against Hosni Mubarak. Al-Zawahiri was a networker; he was calculated, very self-serving, but that's also perhaps what a terrorist leader needed to be in order to carry out their ruthless operations. So, al-Zawahiri was a massive opportunist.

MA: That's a very interesting way of putting it. So, to what extent would you say that al Qaeda was led more by Ayman al-Zawahiri than it was Osama bin Laden? And where did the two terrorist leaders differ on policies and strategies?

SG: Well, it was a partnership. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden, had to work together and pool their resources, pool their infrastructure. Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, in many ways, had a lot of similarities. They both came from very wealthy established elite families: bin Laden in Saudi Arabia, Ayman al-Zawahiri in Egypt. So, they had a commonality in terms of their background. In terms of who was leader, who ultimately was pulling the decisions, again, a lot of it came down to consensus, it seemed that they were able to calibrate their own strategic thinking and broadcast it as one narrative. For example, if you look at some of the very early operations by al-Qaeda, such as an attack on U.S. troops in Yemen in 1992, or on U.S. peacekeepers in Somalia in 1993, that was principally a bin Laden—al-Zawahiri joint plan. You also look at the operations afterwards, which have often been heralded as an al-Qaeda attack, but actually, were both al-Qaeda' and al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad's attack. So, the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania; the attack on the USS Cole as well. These were joint ideas.

Where perhaps there were differences was over the priority over who to target. The 'internal enemy', as it's been defined, Ayman al-Zawahiri wanted to focus on Mubarak in Egypt, other Arab regimes. He was willing to go after the U.S. but within the Global South because he believed that if you weaken the U.S. interest in the Global South, it then has that knock on effect within the regimes in the Arab world. Bin Laden became more and more ambitious, he could see that the U.S. was not reacting to al-Qaeda plots throughout the 1990s. He wanted to take the battle to the United States, ultimately, culminating in the 9/11 attack. So, that's perhaps where there was a difference, but even then, out of loyalty—because loyalty is a very important dynamic when it came to bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri—Ayman al-Zawahiri stood by bin Laden, even though he faced opposition within his own Egyptian cadre. And equally, it was bin Laden that showed Ayman al-Zawahiri loyalty when the disputes happened in the 1980s between al-Zawahiri and Abdullah Azzam.

Perhaps another difference that's really important here is the role of the affiliates that would emerge, post-9/11. Bin Laden was hesitant to expand the al-Qaeda franchise, to have more affiliated groups, whereas Ayman al-Zawahiri was all in favour of expanding the al-Qaeda brand, bringing other groups into the fold, increasing the network and operational capacity and base, as well as financial resources, by having other groups based in Yemen, in North Africa, in Somalia, for example, with al-Shabaab and perhaps it's only after, when bin Laden was killed in 2011, that Ayman al-Zawahiri was able to push through more successfully, more independently, that affiliate relationship that he had long been courting.

MA: So, this was a slight difference in approach, I guess, in regard to the affiliates. So, in that respect, in which period of leadership would you say al-Qaeda was more successful, in regard to its own aims and ambitions at the time and the individual aims and ambitions of the leaders? So, I'm talking about this period of joint leadership where potentially Osama bin Laden was the more well known of the two and then post-2011, when al-Zawahiri took over by himself.

SG: Much of it depends on what we deem or define as success. If we look at attacks, you could

make the point that pre-9/11 al-Qaeda was perhaps most successful during that joint partnership between bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Post-9/11 many plots al-Qaeda were able to still have, but they didn't go beyond the drawing board, because many of them were disrupted. The counter-terrorism agencies were able to learn from past mistakes and disrupt and foil some of al-Qaeda's ideas. But perhaps you could also say that the goal of what success meant, changed, because post-9/11 al-Qaeda lost its operational base in Afghanistan which is something al-Zawahiri had long feared could take place.

So, survival became the main goal, as a result. And al-Qaeda lost a lot of its leadership, as we were discussing in the previous podcast, they were getting captured, killed, arrested, many of them were being found in Pakistan. So, they had that challenge of how to continue when their leadership was getting haemorrhaged so significantly, including with bin Laden being found in Pakistan. Ultimately, Ayman al-Zawahiri was able to endure the War on Terrorism, he survived, he was able to bring himself back to Afghanistan when the Taliban retook the country in 2021. So, you could argue that was a form of success because al-Qaeda had not been properly defeated, not been entirely dismantled, and the opportunity for them to grow and expand remains. So, it's often a question of what we define and determine what success means.

VJ: In your book, you talk about the Iran factor for al-Qaeda, can you elaborate more on that?

SG: So, it's a really important question, Victoria, because Iran became a logistics hub, a place to operate for al-Qaeda, post-9/11. In many ways, the Iranian regime, principally led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, played this passive aggressive approach with al-Qaeda. And again, this comes down to the differences of opinion that emerged within al-Qaeda, in the build up to the 9/11 attacks. Many of the Egyptian Jihadists that opposed 9/11, because they felt that they would lose their operational base in Afghanistan, ended up in Iran, whereas the al-Qaeda leadership that supported 9/11 went to Pakistan instead.

Complicating matters, some of bin Laden's family members were also in Iran, post-9/11 and the Iranian regime, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, they played this approach of allowing al-Qaeda's leaders and family members to operate in Iran, sometimes openly, sometimes under house arrest, under the condition that al-Qaeda would not target Iran. And this perhaps shows the duplicity of al-Qaeda's own ideology, because openly, publicly, they criticise Iran. They are very sectarian, critical of Shia Muslims. Privately, they would say things differently. A lot of the documents found from Osama bin Laden's Abbottabad compound actually showed Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden criticising their own fighters, in internal documents, and warning them not to target Iran because they needed Iran as a base to plot and plan.

Also, Iran allowed al-Qaeda to send fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan through Iran and then into Iraq, where they contributed to the insurgency from 2003 onwards. So, Iran has had a huge number of al-Qaeda figures that have been based that including to this day, as well, there's this suspicion that one of the most senior members of al-Qaeda that remains Saif al-Adel is believed to be in Iran, and it's interesting that the Iranian factor never really got a lot of attention, but it's certainly something that I tried to unpack in my book and explain this dynamic in much more detail.

VJ: Could you tell us about the moment you found out that al-Zawahiri had been killed, where were you and what was going through your head?

SG: So, I was in the Himalayas, and I woke up to look at my phone as I always do. Sometimes you get a few messages, a few emails, but my phone was lit up and literally as I was still looking at messages more were coming in. Everyone that knows me knows that I was researching Ayman al-Zawahiri, that I had a book that was in the process of being published. And this was completely unanticipated. I was processing it because on the one hand, you're looking at a very significant moment in counter-terrorism; one of the world's most wanted terrorists, who had a $25 million bounty on his head, was eliminated in a drone operation. But where was he found? He was found in an urban part of the Afghan capital Kabul, in Sherpur district, the embassy district, where the British, Canadian, German, American embassies have all been based. He was kept in very close proximity to Taliban government buildings. So, it was firstly processing the fact that somebody I spent my

entire adult life looking at had suddenly been killed and then also where he'd been killed, and then once again demonstrating the very close relationship that Ayman al-Zawahiri has with the Taliban.

VJ: Al-Zawahiri was hidden in Pakistan throughout the war on terror, and yet he chose to go back to Afghanistan once the Taliban had taken over once again. Why do you think he made that choice?

SG: There's two theories that I have, ultimately, we can't interview Ayman al-Zawahiri, so one has to make an informed guess, and having looked at him all my life, I think there are some reasons that he rationalised. The first was that he felt safe and secure. His personal security was his obsession during the War on Terror. Hence why he based himself in the tribal areas of Pakistan. But then once the U.S. and the Western coalition left Afghanistan, he began to feel more confident that he could come out. He'd lived in very difficult trying conditions in the tribal areas and perhaps that had an impact on his own health. And we do know that on many occasions, he was suffering from various ailments, and it was difficult within the tribal areas to get the medication that he needed. In his adult years, he needed to be in a place where he could get more support. So, he's willing to take that risk. But that risk was also guaranteed under the protection of the Haqqani Network. The very entity that took him out of Afghanistan, took his family out of Afghanistan, protected him after 9/11, insulated him. So that aspect was there.

The other one was, perhaps he was also feeling a degree of nostalgia that he had achieved his objectives: al-Qaeda had survived, al-Qaeda had not been defeated, they were able to go back into Afghanistan, even though they were in a lesser shape than they had been previously. They now had the opportunity to replenish, to regrow, to reconstitute and in many ways, the one thing Ayman al-Zawahiri would often reflect in his writings was that he was very fatalistic. Perhaps he knew that eventually his time was going to be up, that he might even die because of some of the medical conditions and challenges that he had.

So, he was willing to perhaps overcome that obsession of personal safety and security. Perhaps he'd become complacent. Perhaps he thought that the U.S. would not be able to carry out a successful counter-terrorism operation, but I would also make the point that he wanted to always claim that he was a martyr for the cause, and in many ways, by being killed in a drone operation, that martyrdom status was guaranteed and ensured, rather than him withering away as an old man.

MA: So, to remain in modern day Afghanistan and Pakistan, how are current events in the region contributing to the terrorist landscape? And how has this changed since August 2021, when the Taliban returned to power?

SG: Well, as the expression goes, 'history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes,' and currently we are witnessing dangerous dynamics emerge within the confines of Afghanistan. The very entities that gave al-Qaeda home, sanctuary, in the 1990s are back in power. The Haqqani Network, which is a proscribed terrorist group, which many of the people on our podcast have spoken about before, are the most powerful entity inside the country. They are the ones that brought al-Qaeda back in. If we look at some of the reports that have been coming out, especially by the UN monitoring team, to do with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, al-Qaeda is showing signs of regrowth. Its leaders are being given sanctuary; they have safe houses. There are even camps that are being reconstituted, not necessarily the same type of camps that we saw in videos in the 1990s, but where they've closed down schools, for co-education, or for girls to learn, those have now been handed over and provided to al-Qaeda.

And where there is a real concern that I have is that we are seeing the dangerous dynamic of misogyny, state sanctioned by the Taliban, showing its reemergence. The Taliban practised misogyny in the 1990s and Taliban 2.0 is very much the same. Women have been stopped from working, stopped from being educated, their way of life that they had been guaranteed, post-9/11, has completely ended, civil society has collapsed. And this is where we have a problem because when you see the rights of women being degraded, you will see the rise of radicalization and you will see terrorism subsequently take place. Women's empowerment is one of the most powerful tools to counter radicalisation because it acts as a bulwark against the male supremacy ideology that seeks to institutionalise violence against women. And if you take away the rights of women, what you will

find is that there is an ideological narrative that promotes male supremacy, which appeals to people that want to join al-Qaeda like in the 1990s, ISIS in Iraq and Syria post-Arab Spring, and once again, we're seeing that dynamic. So, those two warring dimensions, where the Taliban are allowing al-Qaeda to regrow, and the spread and sanctioned support of misogyny are working in tandem, and that doesn't bode well for the future.

MA: A major theme in your book is that of al-Zawahiri's 'Safe Bases' strategy. In many ways, you argue that this is how you best explain the current state of al-Qaeda. So, could you talk to us and the listeners about this 'Safe Base' strategy?

SG: So, the 'Safe Bases' strategy is something that Ayman al-Zawahiri began to develop when he took over from Osama bin Laden in 2011. And often when people were critical of al-Qaeda, within the jihadist movement, for being inactive against the West or when Western analysts would say that al-Qaeda is a paler form than it was before, they perhaps misunderstood what Ayman al-Zawahiri's goal was, because he believed in long term strategic patience. He knew that al-Qaeda was not in any capacity to plot major attacks or if they could do one, it would lead to massive repercussions. In many ways he preferred to let ISIS grow and develop and let them take all the attention from Western counter-terrorism agencies and that's in many ways what happened. ISIS definitely superseded al-Qaeda for a period of time, they burnt very brightly, but then they also burnt out as a result too because they became overly ambitious and their infrastructure was then subsequently dismantled and I would argue that ISIS is no longer on any scale of capacity to what it was before. And it doesn't necessarily have the same level of endurance that al-Qaeda has.

And what the 'Safe Bases' strategy ultimately was this five-pillar plank that al-Zawahiri had developed across his period as the leader of al-Qaeda. And that involved firstly, recruiting individuals to replenish al-Qaeda, to mobilise, so they could reconstitute, and they could be in a position to grow. The other thing was develop one's own funding streams, that was part two, so that they're financially independent and that they don't have to then be dependent on anyone else to provide that financial support.

The third was local outreach. Win support from within the confines of where al-Qaeda and affiliates are based. So, if it's al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, or the affiliates, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, which is also in Afghanistan and Pakistan, AQIM in North Africa, AQAP in Yemen, marry into local families, win them over, let them act as a buffer, insulate them further. And that's what al-Qaeda has done, when it comes to entities in Pakistan and Afghanistan, colluding with the Taliban. So that local support and outreach would be the third part.

The fourth part is create structured cadres. Start creating an organisational framework, which can result in an effective operational command and where orders can go from top down, and you have a grassroots support base that can add to that structured cadre. And the fifth plank is that if you're going to do attacks, focus within the Global South. There is no need necessarily to start plotting attacks in the West imminently, but if you could target Western interests in the Global South, think about doing that. Equally, go after the regimes within the Islamic world as well. So, it's all about a staged process of rebuilding and regrowth. And even though Ayman al-Zawahiri may no longer be around, his 'Safe Bases' strategy is being adhered to by all of al-Qaeda's affiliates. They are literally following his doctrine as scripture and as very much the cornerstone of their own development and regrowth.

MA: So long before al-Zawahiri was able to come up with a strategy, he obviously spent a lot of time in Egyptian prisons, as you mentioned in our first part of this podcast. Similarly, Yahya Sinwar, who was accused of plotting the October 7 attack in Israel, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi too also spent time in prison. How much would you argue that prisons play a role in radicalising these individuals?

SG: You brought up some good examples right there—al-Zawahiri, Yahya Sinwar, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi—all of them were in prison, and in many ways that defined them, that made them the people that they would unfortunately go on to become, very dangerous terrorists with the ability to mobilise, galvanise and plot and plan attacks. Unfortunately, prisons serve as incubators for extremism. You bring all these different entities together, where they will share ideas, and it becomes effectively

almost like a form of a fighting pit where the strongest survive. And they create their own cult of personality, their own networks, their own ability to have a system of individuals that will be able to support them, show almost undying loyalty to them. And that is something that we haven't ever addressed because throughout history, prisons will always be a place for ideas to form, for radicalisation to grow. And they serve as cesspool for the narratives that then end up being utilised with dangerous effect if and when these people are released. And that was very much the case.

Al-Zawahiri, released from prison, goes to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, forms a relationship with Osama bin Laden, the growth of al-Qaeda occurs. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi spent time in Iraqi prison, forming relations with members of Saddam Hussein's inner circle as well as the dregs of al-Qaeda in Iraq, culminating in ISIS when he gets released. Yahya Sinwar, imprisoned by the Israelis, learned Hebrew, learned the language of Israel, understood the Israeli culture and mindset, and used that with the deadliest effect with the October 7, 2023, attacks. So, you see how each experience creates an imprint on the mind and a very dangerous legacy that then continues.

VJ: Speaking of what's going on in Israel and Gaza right now, how would you say al- Qaeda is reacting to or using the current crisis in the Middle East?

SG: Well, al-Qaeda is certainly exploiting the situation. They are taking advantage of it. They are making sure that they can produce propaganda and content on a scale that we haven't seen since Ayman al-Zawahiri was killed. They obviously have a lot of confidence, and perhaps where they are now operating in Afghanistan as well as still in Pakistan too, they are taking control of the jihadist narrative, or they are seeking and trying to, and trying to hijack other issues that perhaps they'd not necessarily been responsible for, such as the October 7 2023 Hamas operation, but nevertheless want to try and show that they're part of it, that it's their agenda, that they can cache on it. They can utilise it for recruitment, for inspiring. They've already called for lone actor attacks in the West. And sadly, tragically, we've seen plots emerge, which have resulted in some casualties, and in other cases, the authorities have been able to disrupt. Al-Qaeda is definitely seeking an opportunity to exploit tensions, and those tensions are continuing to spiral into 2024. We are witnessing further problems emerge, challenges, security challenges, and that will only aid and benefit al-Qaeda as they continue to distort and manipulate the situation for their own ends.

VJ: Following the Hamas operation on October 7, there was a brief period where the so-called 'Letter to America' that is said to be written by bin Laden went viral on the internet. What do you make of that? How do you explain that?

SG: It was a disturbing phenomenon that occurred because the 'Letter to America', which was being framed as written by bin Laden, suddenly was getting a lot of airtime and oxygen on social media, especially on places like TikTok, where you see a young generation, the Gen Z generation, talking about al-Qaeda with a very new lens, where they seem to be of the view that al-Qaeda may have had a point about their grievances towards the West, citing the Letter to America, which was written in 2002, a year after the 9/11 attacks, specifically factoring in the aspect of the Israel-Palestine issue. And I think the concern has been that al-Qaeda is almost being seen as retro through social media by people who wouldn't actually usually form al-Qaeda's constituent base.

One of the challenges is that a lot of these people don't have lived-in history of what al-Qaeda has done. They didn't witness 9/11 as I and many others had seen on television, which I mentioned at the beginning of the previous episode. They don't remember the plots prior to 9/11, like the US embassy bombings or the USS Cole, they don't remember the attacks after 9/11, such as the London 7/7 bombings that al-Qaeda and Ayman al-Zawahiri had led—all of these plots, by the way, I sort of try and detail in my book as a reminder for people that do not live through the al-Qaeda years as to what this group was about.

They may have known about ISIS, so they don't necessarily praise or parrot what ISIS have said. But they look at al-Qaeda differently, and maybe their worldview was tainted by the debacle in the 2003 Iraq War, which was supposed to be about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and al-Qaeda being there. So, they grew up very sceptical. I think one of the challenges is that there has to be a discussion of making people aware of what took place with al-Qaeda, what al-Qaeda did.

Taking snippets of the 2002 'Letter to America' doesn't reflect the full position of what al-Qaeda believed because the entire letter actually is a statement of hate, a statement of violence. And perhaps where this now goes full circle is that bin Laden probably didn't even write the letter. There's actual evidence that the letter was written by Ayman al-Zawahiri himself. So, promoting bin Laden as being the author of something that is not fully contextualised is a problem. Understanding who the main culprits are is also important. And I guess it didn't help when the letter was taken offline by some news media, only fuelling conspiracies and assertions of government censorship. So unfortunately, we're living in a new era where we have to be aware of the history and the context, and not everyone is.

VJ: Where do you see the future of al-Qaeda heading? And for example, why hasn't Saif al-Adel been announced formally as the new leader following al-Zawahiri's death? And do you think that al-Zawahiri's assassination brings about the demise of al-Qaeda as we know it in terms of the organisation's hierarchical leadership structure?

SG: There are things we know, there are things we can anticipate, and there are also dynamics that we just will never be able to predict in advance. So, Ayman al-Zawahiri being killed by the US in a drone operation certainly impacted on al-Qaeda. And as you mentioned, there hasn't been a formal announcement even now as to who is the overall leader of al-Qaeda, but I would argue that this continues part of Ayman al-Zawahiri's 'Safe Bases' strategy—that he wanted the al-Qaeda movement to become decentralised so that it wasn't dependent on one particular individual, it operated entirely independently, but was bonded by a common ideology. And Saif al-Adel, still believed to be in Iran, may be seen as the de facto leader of al-Qaeda, but he is very much continuing the 'Safe Bases' strategy of al-Qaeda. And the aim is to grow steadily, quietly, following al-Zawahiri's point about strategic patience, long-term thinking.

However, the aspect about what we can't anticipate is that there are always going to be upstarts within the jihadist movement. People that don't follow the script, people that decide that they want to skate uphill with their ambitions about plotting global attacks. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was an example of that, the former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who had a very bad relationship with Ayman al-Zawahiri, and I talk about that a lot in my book. He decided that he didn't want to follow the al-Qaeda script in Iraq and fomented sectarian violence, creating further problems for al-Qaeda, which they felt their brand was being undermined by, and that was perhaps another difference that Ayman al-Zawahiri had with Osama bin Laden. Al-Zawahiri knew that al-Zarqawi was going to be a problem, but nevertheless, bin Laden still wanted to utilise him, and that bac**KF**ired, which al-Qaeda suffered from, and al-Zawahiri had warned about. Also, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi didn't read the script either. He decided that he was going to move away from al-Qaeda and that they were going to carry out their own operations.

So we can predict some things, we can't predict all the things, and I think that's what's worrying is that when you find that there are ungoverned spaces in parts of the Global South, where you see radical extremist entities growing and emerge, and then you see regional conflicts, this conflation of incidents and events, mixture of different entities, that is where you will get a lot of unanticipated problems. We could not have predicted the rise of ISIS, the Syrian civil war, the sectarianism in Iraq ended up connecting, which gave ISIS opportunity to grow and expand, and I dare say that there are other dynamics that are still unfolding in 2024 that could create future problems for us.

MA: So moving away from the actual content of the book, and to focus more on your writing process and research process, how much did your roles at LSE and NATO contribute to the work and research that went into your book?

SG: They contributed massively to my growth, to my development, to the relationships and friendships that come from that. They have been the most important aspects of my life. LSE has been a constant from 2001 onwards, on and off through various stages of my academic life, of my career, of the ability to carry out research. The fact that I teach there, in the History department, which has been one of the most rewarding experiences, where everything that we talk about in the two podcasts that we've done, and not just that, but the podcasts for NATO DEEP where we talk to practi-

tioners, where we look at geopolitical issues, counter-terrorism, international security—a lot of that is based through the prism of history. It's grounded in history. And that has played a massive role in my thinking and my belief as to how important history is.

And then our work with NATO, and the work that we've done with NATO for its Defence Education Enhancement Programme, such as the Counter-Terrorism Reference Curriculum, and working and collaborating with different people with different skill sets, but again also with the goal of understanding ideology, looking at history—that has had a massive impact, and bringing in practitioners from various different countries, each with their own unique experiences, their own cultural dynamics—that makes you more better informed about the world, so that when you actually do your research, when you conduct your own areas of investigation, you feel that you are better at understanding local context, regional context, and the global context as well. So, I am forever grateful for the institutions that have helped me develop and have contributed to a lot of the research that I've done.

MA: Well, it's clear that these institutions and the people that you've worked alongside there have been a great help in your research and your career. So, what advice would you give to people that are perhaps embarking on their own process of writing a book about a similar topic, about terrorism?

SG: Research, research, research. These are the things that I have had to learn about. And tied to all of that is patience. You're not going to get the answers immediately. You may not even get them for weeks or months. But you have to be able to have that resilience to persevere, to continue to knock on doors, to investigate. Dig deep. Draw out the strands that connect different actors. Avoid just the surface analysis, and I think that's what makes us historians, I would argue, probably the best researchers around, because we can also look at the ideology, as well as the tactics and strategies. Most importantly is to understand the history and the context of terrorist movements. The aim is that history is your friend. It's your ally. It will guide you. It will help take you down the paths that you need to, in order to understand the current context, and maybe then perhaps be better prepared as to how to look at the future challenges that are going to emerge.

And I would say, just building on what you've asked, and what was previously asked, is that learn from everybody and be open to that, as well as looking at the fact that every interaction can open up new doors, new ideas, new concepts. One thing I experienced from researching al-Zawahiri and my book is that whenever I thought that maybe I've now got the full picture, I would have a meeting, an opportunity, random discussion with a practitioner, and suddenly, I'd be presented with aspects that I had not considered, or individuals that I couldn't draw a thread to, and suddenly now I was able to connect the dots.

I'll give you an example, where I was looking at Ayman al-Zawahiri in the late '70s and his interest in the media, how the media works, how production and editorial standards are utilised by news media. That was one story. But then when I spoke to a person for the book, John Miller, who was a former journalist and a very senior practitioner with the NYPD and also with the FBI. He had interviewed Osama bin Laden prior to 9/11 and he met Ayman al-Zawahiri, and he was telling me an anecdote about his interaction with Ayman al-Zawahiri to do with Ayman al-Zawahiri's own focus on the media and how much he knew about the media. Suddenly, I was able to connect a story that I had been told about Ayman al-Zawahiri from the late 1970s all the way to connecting to his justification for the importance of the media in the late '90s. So, you're able to draw those connections, and that required patience, it required digging, and it required also opportunity as well.

VJ: Well, this has been a really fruitful discussion and fascinating conversation with Sajjan. And it's been a real pleasure to get to be on the other side, interviewing the host. I've definitely learned a lot, even though I already am familiar with the book, I learned a lot of new things just from this two-part special myself. So, thank you for enlightening us further.

MA: Yes, I just want to echo everything that Victoria has said. Thank you for carving out some time to give us this two-part special, Sajjan, on Ayman al-Zawahiri. Doctor, Teacher, Terrorist: The Life and Legacy of Al-Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahiri published by Oxford University Press is available online and in stores, so please do get a copy of it. It has been a very, very enjoyable read. And thank you once again, Sajjan, for joining us.

SG: Well, thank you, Marcus, and thank you, Victoria, for hosting me. I've certainly enjoyed also being on the other side. And I appreciate the amount of time that you guys spent also looking at and reading the book as well. And I hope it's of use to practitioners as well as to people that are just interested in terrorism as well, because hopefully it will contribute to understanding the history of transnational terrorism and fill an important gap. And I'd also just say that I look forward to seeing what you both are going to be contributing to the research of international security in the future.

MA: Thank you, Sajjan.

VJ: Thank you.

Episode 53 – Meghann Teubner & Kelli Foy and Mainstreaming Extremism, January 2024

Key Reflections

- **Extremist narratives that used to be confined to the periphery of the internet have shifted to the mainstream. As such hate rhetoric is made more accessible on major social media sites, it compounds and proliferates.**
- **Flashy, digestible, and easy to look at extremist and terrorist content is getting more circulation on social media websites compared to lengthier propaganda documents. This is also a method to circumvent censorship or deplatforming by tech companies.**
- **Terrorists know that misogyny transcends the extremist spectrum and exploit this crossover to unite a variety of hateful beliefs under one rallying point.**
- **Catalytic events play a critical role in mobilising individuals to violence, including accelerating the decision to plan an attack or offering a channel and target for pent up rage. Better understanding the impact of such events on a person's mindset can help counter-terrorism prepare more effectively.**
- **Law enforcement agencies like the NYPD are keeping up with the latest research in subjects like radicalisation pathways in order to hone their practices and strategies.**
- **With the rise of misogynistic extremist ideologies, it is more important than ever to have women in leadership positions in the counter-terrorism and national security space.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

MT: Meghann Teubner

KF: Kelli Foy

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel, and in this episode, I speak with Meghann Teubner and Kelli Foy from the New York City Police Department (NYPD).

Meghann is the Director of Counterterrorism Intelligence Analysis at the NYPD and Kelli is its Team Lead for Global Risk Intelligence. We discuss the evolving threats to national security and the dangerous role disinformation plays in that.

Meghann Teubner and Kelli Foy, warm welcome to NATO DEEP Dive.

MT: Thank you so much for having us.

KF: Thank you.

SG: It's great to have you both with us, especially with so many important things that are happening in the world right now. So, some things that I would like to talk to you both about in your work with the New York Police Department (NYPD) are the challenges of extremist narratives and catalytic events. But before we delve into that, Meghann, talk to me about your role with the NYPD and what that entails.

MT: Sure, happy to. So, I'm currently the director of intelligence analysis for the NYPD Intelligence and Counterterrorism Bureau. I oversee our Intelligence Operations and Analysis Section in the Intelligence Division and, with an operational counterpart, we are basically tasked with ensuring that we are integrating operational efforts, investigative efforts, information that is coming in from multiple

different sources of reporting, and that we consolidate that into intelligence analysis and share that as far and wide as we can. Obviously, it has to be tailored for the right audience. And if it's an ongoing investigation, we're coordinating that with our FBI and other federal partners.

But our mission is counter-terrorism. So, we are looking at ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, IRGC Quds Force, and all of their different proxies, as well as all of the different provinces and affiliates of the terrorist groups. Obviously, now, especially focused on Hamas and Hamas' capabilities after what they demonstrated on 7 October. And we're looking at that, we're looking at the propaganda that they're putting out, we're looking at their communications channels, and we're always looking for that New York angle. Who is this message resonating with? Is anybody responding to it? Are they looking to provide material support in whatever form that may look like: travel, finance, or, obviously, the thing we're most concerned with is some form of kinetic violent attack.

We're doing that on the terrorism side. We're also doing that on the domestic violent extremist side, across the ideological spectrum. We have a team that is focused on what we would call racially ethnically motivated violent extremism, and on the other end of the political spectrum, so to speak, we have a team that's focused on anti-government, anti-authority extremism and everything in between. So, our unit is primarily on the NYPD's counterterrorism and combating domestic violent extremism mission. We also have a little bit of effort into insider threat, counter intelligence and cyber threat intelligence. And the cyber threat side of things is more on the strategic intel information sharing side, we're not in the ones and zeros, as I like to say, we're not protecting NYPD networks, but making sure that our partners and our information technology bureau have what they need to do their job to protect our systems. So, it's a wide ranging task and mission. And obviously, it's never a dull moment, especially these days. But it is an incredible partnership between analysts and uniformed officers on a daily basis working to keep the city safe.

SG: Certainly, as you say, never a dull moment, and a very large remit in one of the most important cities in the world, dealing with all those plethora of challenges. Kelli, if I come to you, so how does your work dovetail with what Meghann oversees?

KF: Yeah, absolutely, and thank you again for having us. So, I am the team lead of our Global Risk Intelligence Team within the Intel and Counterterrorism Bureau. So that, in a nutshell, is essentially our strategic intelligence shop, we're developing written intelligence assessments, we're also delivering oral briefings on really a range of topics related to the current threat environment, with the main goal being enhancing the situational awareness and preparedness of all of our various partners. Now, who does that entail? Of course, first and foremost, the executive leadership of the NYPD, of the Intelligence and Counterterrorism Bureau, our over 35,000 uniformed NYPD members of service, but it also includes our various public sector partners, at different agencies both in New York and beyond, and our private sector partners as well.

So, my team coordinates very closely, for example, with our International and Domestic Liaison Unit, basically to facilitate that intelligence and information sharing, with not only law enforcement around the country, but internationally as well through our liaison programme. So, as you likely know, we have NYPD liaisons stationed both in the U.S. and abroad, not serving as intelligence officers, but once again to facilitate that intel and information sharing, and my team serves as the primary conduit for those individuals really trying to get them the information they need. So, my team is writing on a daily basis about anything from the latest extremist propaganda releases, whether from Salafi jihadist extremists, like ISIS or al-Qaeda, from racially ethnically motivated violent extremists, mainly to look at what they are trying to get across in terms of recommended tactics, and targeting that then we can translate for our own officers to make them more prepared. We also frequently write about any major significant developments going on in the world that could mobilise someone to violence; we write about significant attacks and plots. And once again, the main focus of that being main takeaways for our officers. So, really kind of the strategic portion of our shop that's aggregating all of this information and getting that back out to our partners.

SG: Well, I know from my own personal insights, and having discussed in the past, with many of you, and on various issues, just how well researched, knowledgeable you are on the world and what is

happening globally. And I think it is phenomenal the work that you all do, not just for keeping New York safe, but having actually a much wider impact beyond just the U.S. and contributing to global peace and stability. So, please keep doing the work you all are doing.

MT & **KF**: Thank you.

SG: Well, it's a fact. You guys do such important work. And let's, let's delve further into that then. So, the two of you have been writing and researching the concerns about extremist narratives and, and catalytic events, if we sort of take it piece by piece. So, I think you both have said that what used to be primarily behind closed doors, as in certain types of information, and content, and radical narratives, have become increasingly mainstream. So, how has that process taken place? Maybe Meghann, if we start with you.

MT: So, I think it's several different factors. And I think part of it is that we have seen extremist narratives show up in everyday life and in mainstream media in the past, but what we're seeing now is this cycle of the extremist narrative that used to be kind of kept behind closed doors and encrypted channels, because you knew that you were going to be an outlier, you were not the norm, so you were finding your kind of echo chamber, your circle of friends that would agree with you and have these extremist views, but you were keeping it close hold. But what we're seeing now is that these, what used to be kind of smaller, encrypted conversations are happening at larger scale on some social media platforms that then make their way over out of maybe say, a more secure, encrypted platform like Telegram and then that same narrative then moving over to a more mainstream social media platform that reaches a much wider audience and without really changing the the narrative at all.

So, it's hate rhetoric, it's anti semitism, it's misogyny, it's any number of narratives that are baked into a lot of the violent extremist ideology that we are concerned with. And then it gets on mainstream social media and it is accessible to so many more people and I think we're in a society now that once its seen there, it scene as almost an acceptable narrative to either take on yourself and then comment further on or create some form of discord, fights with the person who has the opposite opinion. Then it makes it into the press, and then that then goes back into encrypted channels because they see the impact of it; they use it for recruitment; they have more conversations; and then the cycle continues and another variation on a theme of that same narrative will pop back up into more mainstream social media, and in some cases, on the news that everybody is tuning into on any one of these 24/7 news channels.

So, [what is concerning about] the phenomenon is that it is so easily going from the encrypted world where you have a small number of people chatting about it to it being a wide open discussion. And the wider audience that these messages reach, the harder it is for law enforcement to know, to truly suss out who is a violent extremist, who is a keyboard warrior, who do we need to worry about mobilising to violence, and when it's so widespread, that challenge just becomes so much more difficult for law enforcement. I don't know, Kelli, if you have more?

KF: Yeah. If I could just add to that, I would say a concerning trend too, that we've seen even are online threats, hostile violent rhetoric, in comments on postings by major media personalities, by elected officials, individuals that, even if that original post wasn't violent in nature, people kind of feel galvanised and emboldened to jump upon that to issue their own kind of hostile rhetoric, and then that compounds. And like Meghann said, it's very visible, it's very out there. It's occurring on these major social media platforms. And we see it day to day as you have elected officials, have media personalities speak on certain issues that are unfolding, certain crises that are unfolding, they post and then it sparks comments. And with that kind of a flurry of this really hostile rhetoric, which is really incredibly difficult for us to get our arms around, and isn't that typical, small, tight knit extremist forum, it's much, much broader than that, which means the problem is much larger for us to get our arms around.

SG: Yes, it's very troubling and disconcerting, just how mainstream it's becoming, and as you were saying, earlier, Meghann, just trying to draw that separation between who is potentially a keyboard warrior and those that actually wish to do us harm. So, if we continue to build on this, one other as-

pect is that the propaganda, the narratives that are being pushed can be flashy videos, they can be memes, which are very easily re-shared. So, Kelli, why is that perhaps different to what we've seen previously? Because maybe that type of new media content was still out there in the past, but there seems to be some kind of shift, right?

KF: Yeah, I think it just lends itself way better to being shared broadly on these platforms. So, you're not just—and don't get me wrong, some of the types of propaganda releases from foreign terrorist organisations that involve these lengthy speeches, these lengthy very text based documents certainly still exist, but we're also seeing these memes that are reproduced, that are easily shared, even these large, I would say extremist, propaganda documents. So one, for example, there's this racially, ethnically motivated violent extremist accelerationist kind of network called Terrorgram that's released these really lengthy propaganda documents, but the pages themselves are kind of designed to be taken out of that context, and then shared individually within these extremists forums. And we see some times too, I'll see an image threatening, say, politicians or law enforcement broadly, and you do reverse image searches, and that meme, that image, has been circulating for five years. So, these continually get a lot of circulation on these platforms, and just because they're flashy too, they're more digestible, they're easy to look at. They're cool, frankly, for these individuals to be sharing rather than these more lengthy propaganda documents. So, I think there's just kind of a greater resonance there than there was previously.

SG: Interesting. Meghann, would you like to add anything to that?

MT: I think Kelli really touched on it, part of it, I think, is to avoid censorship and to avoid getting deplatformed or what have you by the social media companies. So, instead of putting something in words, or putting out some hateful or extremist propaganda, or reposting in the entirety of an Inspire guide or a certain ISIS tactical guide that will be flagged almost immediately by a platform, if you put out a meme of a smiley face that has a Hitler moustache painted on it, then you can propagate your message so much longer and so much further without getting without getting removed from the platform.

SG: So, people are kind of finding ways to, to get that hate out, whilst trying to pretend that there isn't necessarily a specific agenda.

MT: Yeah, and it's successful, right. As Kelli said, we could do a reverse image search, and we'll see some images popping up across the ideological spectrum and across platforms. It's very easy to create a meme that's going to appeal to—especially if you're looking to recruit and you're looking to kind of have an impact on the younger generation. The meme, the video, that is chaotic, and is dissonant, appeals to a generation that has grown up looking at this, living in this online environment. We are definitely long past the days of the Zawahiri video of the long speech from a terrorist leader—no offence to Zawahiri. But it is just not going to appeal to people in the way that a meme appeals to the youth.

SG: Well, indeed, and I think, al-Zawahiri was an interesting example, biassed opinion, of course, anyone who knows me knows my book is coming out on Ayman al-Zawahiri. He certainly brought in the concept of new media, I wonder how he would have looked at the role that memes would be playing in getting the narratives out. Speaking of which, certain narratives are persuasive across ideologies. And one very disturbing trend is misogyny, that has been a consistent line that has gone across many different ideological beliefs and has contributed to violence itself. Meghann, perhaps, if we start with you, where are we at when it comes to misogyny and violence and these narratives that are emerging in the current environment?

MT: So, I'll start in the most obvious, ideological realm and that's the involuntary celibate, whose primary narrative is misogyny, it is their primary driver. And what is then frightening in that narrative in the incel community is that we do see a lot of overlap with the incel community and accelerationist and other racially, ethnically motivated violent extremists. So, what starts out as an incel, on an incel forum, about just hate directed at women for existing, for the most part. It is so much about women having to know their place; their participation in society is just to be there as an object for men, as far as the incel community would like it. That then gets transferred into the REMVE (Racially or

ethnically motivated violent extremists) space, and then what we see the misogyny in the REMVE space, is what they consider a throwback to the 1950s, and the role of a female and how feminism has destroyed the U.S. and I'm sure other countries in the world, and so we see this theme of keeping women down or really to the sidelines of society, as having no impact in society. And then we see the same thing, obviously, in the Salafi jihadi side as well. So, it is something that we see that goes across the spectrum. And the primary undertone of it is, in fact, maybe not an undertone, the primary driver, is to keep women down or aside and to not have really much of a role in society at all.

SG: Yes, and that unfortunately seems to only be growing and proliferating more and more. Kelli, are there any other angles on that misogyny role that you'd want to bring in?

KF: Yeah, I would just say we see kind of these hateful through lines across ideologies, and I think part of it too is that some of these extremist groups and individuals know that there are kind of these grievances that they can link on to that will have a really broad appeal, not just within their own specific groups, but within broader extremists, communities. So, it's also kind of a way to get various individuals holding a variety of hateful beliefs to rally around certain causes, certain hateful beliefs generally.

SG: So, if we look at this further, there's a major faultline that's emerged in the Middle East: the crisis between Israel and Hamas following the 7 October 2023 attacks. What role does misogyny play in the fallout from those attacks? Perhaps if we start with you Meghann?

MT: Yeah, that's a really interesting question and I think what struck me and has really been very painful, as somebody who has worked in terrorism for 17 plus years at this point, is the the kind of very brutal use of sexual violence as a weapon and the attack on 7 October. To know that that exists and is widely understood and to still see and hear people parroting messages like 'Israel deserved this attack' or something along those line, it is heartbreaking as a female to think that there isn't a delineation between Hamas as a terrorist group, and the horrible, horrific things that they did. And obviously, their sexual violence is just one of many tactics that were used on 7 October. But it is, I would say, at least for me, the first time that that rape as a weapon has been so prevalent in a terrorist attack like this. We have, obviously [seen this before] with the treatment of the Yazidi females, it was horrific, and I'm certain very similar to what some Israeli citizens experienced on 7 October. But in an attack like 7 October, I just can't think of a time in which sexual violence and rape was used as a weapon in such a brutal way. This is anecdotal evidence of, in some cases, forcing people to log on to their own social media to livestream assaults on themselves and then their death. This is a next level brutality and cruelty.

SG: This 'next level brutality' is, I think, very significant and deplorable as to what has been uncovered from the aftermath of that attack. So, Kelli, let me ask you this then, how does one deal with that in terms of also educating people that this was a tactic, effectively, that was used by a group like Hamas? Especially when, within the social media space, there's so much disinformation going on, people questioning whether these things even happened. How does one even go about trying to firstly better inform people and then tackle that disinformation, that maybe these things didn't happen?

KF: Yeah, the disinformation piece has been a huge, huge challenge with this. And I think there's kind of that education piece, especially for our own officers, like I said, in terms of the products that my team puts out. We are always trying to learn from the tactics that we are seeing used in attacks abroad to try to inform our own officers in case they were to confront the same tactics here. So, there's that kind of broad education piece that's very inclusive of tactics. That live streaming piece that Meghan mentioned, was a really large portion of that. We've seen live streaming more and more as a tactic used by extremists across the ideological spectrum. But I think this is, as Meghann mentioned, the first time that we've seen, on a large scale, it being used in the context of live streaming via social media of the victims to reach their families to kind of increase the psychological trauma there.

On the disinformation piece in particular, I think it's just acknowledging that there is a lot of trauma, firstly, a lot of fear in the communities well beyond the area where these attacks took place, to here

in our own city. So making sure that our community knows that we are very much tracking these events as they unfold, not only the attacks themselves, but the extremist messaging, following them to make sure that we are getting ahead of any chance for that to reverberate here. We also in a broader sense really try as a bureau, as a department, as a whole to get ahead of some of the disinformation. So making sure the community is aware of all the initiatives that we're undertaking, making sure the community is aware that while we are very much on top of these threats, we're doing the investigations that are required, we're tracking extremist messaging, we are not aware of any specific or credible threats in that moment. So trying to get ahead, basically, of the fear, and communicate that this is something that we are extremely on top of.

MT: And if I can just add really quickly, I think your question is perfect because it's a tenant of intelligence analysis, right? It is what we're always seeking to do—make sure that what we are portraying is not biassed, it's unemotional, it is an analysis of the evidence that we have at hand. And so Kelli's team does a great job, when we're putting out products, we source it, we want people to understand what we are basing that assessment on. We do our best to try to suss out the disinformation and the misinformation, but we will caveat it if we don't have the details. We are basing this assessment on limited intelligence at this moment in time. But it is a particular challenge, especially if you have malign nation states that are very good at dis- and misinformation and propagating that to a very wide audience. It is a challenge to counter that. And I think Kelli really nailed it. It's truly about the communication and the transparency with the community and our partners, at different levels obviously. As Kelli said, we recognise the trauma that 7 October has an impact far outside of the region and is absolutely felt by citizens of New York City. And so making sure that they feel confident that we are doing everything in our power to identify the true threats, to review the extremist rhetoric, the hate rhetoric. And in most cases here in the US, a lot of what is being said is constitutionally protected. And in some cases, it is the amalgamation of all of the constitutionally protected language that's going to mobilise somebody to violence. But I think it truly is the job of an intelligence analyst to do our best to tell an unbiased, unemotional story, to get that out to the appropriate audiences.

SG: Yes, and it's very key that you do that. And I know how hard you all are working on that front. But let me ask you this, Meghann, based on what you had just been saying. So violent and conspiratorial rhetoric is only increasing, it's not decreasing. We're seeing it develop many tentacles in various different ideological hues. And that's being fueled by controversial events and developments around the world. So is this now the new normal? Is this something that is just part of the daily work that a CT analyst is going to have to look at?

MT: I think so. I don't foresee this going anywhere anytime soon or changing. I don't see our capability of identifying it right from the get-go as changing anytime soon, primarily because our adversaries are going to be just as good at manipulating social media and manipulating audiences as we would consider ourselves capable of trying to defeat. I think we are only going to see an increase, and I imagine here in the US, once we really get into the next presidential election cycle, it is going to increase exponentially because I think that even people within the United States but definitely malign nation states recognise the power of fomenting discord in elections. So I imagine here in the US it is only going to increase over the next year.

And I don't see that changing anytime soon. I know we all experience this right? When we are watching TV or listening to the news, and you hear something that is factually proven to be untrue, like there's video evidence of something not happening or happening a different way…it still just doesn't seem to matter because people get on social media, and they make one claim that it's a conspiracy by the government to do this, or it's a red flag to blame this. We see that all the time, Kelli I'm sure can speak more to it too, in extremist rhetoric. An incident happens, say the Buffalo attack and Payton Gendron. This attack happens, and we automatically see people coming out within the racially ethnically motivated violent extremism sphere, saying "Oh, this is something the government is doing to make us look bad." I just don't know how you counter that.

SG: No, and my only reason for my pause is because I'm just processing it all. It sounds like a lot to handle. Kelli, anything you'd like to follow up with?

KF: Yeah, I think something that we're kind of always battling against in these situations is that people are inclined to believe something that confirms the pre-existing mindset that they already have. So when you have these extremists, these malign malicious actors pushing these certain narratives, they know that there is that audience that is already kind of predisposed to be very receptive to what they're pushing out there. And around all of these attacks, all of these really, I would say, controversial hot button developments, you always see the conspiracies follow, and they really prey too on these broad fears, this paranoia that is already out there, and it just makes it easy for them to push those narratives.

SG: Very dangerous narratives. So then, Kelli, let me ask you this: you've done research on what can be described as catalytic events and triggering violence. Could you explain firstly, what catalytic events mean and what the significance of that is in the current context?

KF: Yes. So, I would say generally something that I've become more and more passionate about on the most basic level is understanding, firstly, what drives an individual to violence, and then secondly, how those driving factors influenced their attack planning. So as part of my thesis at the Center for Homeland Defense and Security at the Naval Postgraduate School, I focused on just one small piece of that puzzle. So that's the role of what you hear me refer to as catalytic events in pushing an individual to violence. And on the most basic level, I define a catalytic event as anything that plays a meaningful role in an individual's decision to mobilise to violence. So as part of my thesis, I looked at plots and attacks that I assessed to be driven at least in part by three major catalytic events: the COVID-19 pandemic, the police murder of George Floyd, and the 2020 presidential election, with really kind of an ultimate goal of developing a framework for understanding and confronting that type of violence. So here, I'll also caveat, you could say there are internal catalytic events that are more personal, more specific to that individual, and then there are these external catalytic events which an individual may not have a personal link or connection to, but that can still play a role in mobilising them to violence. So through my research, I found that catalytic events have the potential to trigger a range of individuals to violence, some with extremist beliefs, some with ties to extremist groups, some not. And they really significantly impact both the targets that individuals choose, as well as the timing of their assaults, so in some cases really rapidly mobilising individuals to violence.

So I found that there were kind of different buckets in terms of the ways that catalytic events mobilised individuals to violence. One big one is that they can present what a malicious actor perceives as an opportunity to maximise violence or capitalise on chaos. So this could be an individual who is already planning on perpetrating an attack, has explored a range of targets, but the catalytic event is what kind of focuses that attack planning. In one case in particular, there was a racially motivated violent extremist outside of Missouri who explored a variety of targets for an assault but ultimately settled on plotting to blow up a hospital at the onset of the pandemic to exploit public fear. The second category is catalytic events that really exacerbate grievances individuals have and contribute to their radicalization, so individuals who may not have had ties even to extremism before, but they're really driven by rage.

Looking at all of this in totality, my goal was, okay, now as law enforcement, what do we do about all of this? I recommended potential law enforcement prevention and mitigation measures that could correspond to the different ways that catalytic events mobilise individuals to violence. And there are a variety of actions that we could take, assessing the resonance of a catalytic event with current investigative subjects, individuals of concern, so someone with potentially already ties to extremism, already considering doing something, and this could be that last push; implementing protective measures at locations that could be high-value targets associated with that catalytic event, so in the case of the Israel-Hamas conflict, of course, you're looking at religious targets, whether that be mosques, whether that be synagogues, other locations associated with the Jewish and Palestinian communities. And then, I think a central part of this discussion, just looking at relevant online threats and propaganda linked to them, both to generate investigative leads, but then also to kind of take the pulse of and assess that current threat level, and maintain an awareness once again of that tactical and targeting violence so that we can get that out to law enforcement. So basically, being proactive and recognising that not everyone who's considering carrying out an act of violence is already on our radar. We know that individuals—and I saw it in my research based on the cases that I looked

at—have a tendency to respond to these catalytic flashpoint events. So how as law enforcement can we identify these potential catalytic events and then get ahead of them in terms of our posture with respect to prevention and also mitigation?

SG: Well, that sounds like very interesting research. If you haven't copyrighted the term 'catalytic event,' I would do that before anyone steals it, including me. Meghann, anything you'd like to add to that?

MT: Kelli has done so much great research on this, and we have definitely seen this play out in our security environment here in New York City. So Kelli focused on COVID, George Floyd, and the 2020 election, but we could point to the search warrant at Mar-a-Lago and the volume of hostile rhetoric online, and then we see what happened at the FBI office in Cincinnati. Here in New York City, we had a complaint, an indictment against the former president, which led to just an exponential growth in online threats, hostile rhetoric directed at the district attorney of Manhattan and also the state attorney general and the office itself, other prosecutors, other government facilities in New York. And so while these grievances already exist in society, this kind of pseudo-catalytic event of dropping a criminal complaint or indictment then brings everything to the surface and just creates this huge divide. And for us, our immediate concern is keeping people who have the constitutional right to protest safe. That's all we want to do. People are going to protest. They have a right to do that. We want to make sure that they are safe when they do that. But we also need to ensure that the people that are getting targeted are safe. And so we are monitoring online, we're working with partners to sift through the noise and truly, I know it's probably an overused term at this point, but finding the signal in the noise of a post-catalytic event type development is a real challenge. We're up to it, but it is a challenge.

KF: Yeah, and if I could just add to that too, something that kind of prompted me to look at this even more is what I see as a sense of urgency as we approach the 2024 presidential election, given all of the vitriol, hostile violent rhetoric and the US Capitol riot that we saw following the 2020 presidential election, like Meghann said, the volume of threats that we see around public officials I would say is pretty unprecedented, at least in the last few years. And we see that in response to, like Meghann said, high-profile raids, high-profile arrests, but also even on a local level, in response to some particular policy decisions that you wouldn't expect to resonate as much as they do. So that's something that we've really kept a close eye on and will continue to, especially as we approach the election season.

SG: Well, this has all been very thought-provoking, our entire discussion, I feel like as we reached the conclusion of it, we need to have some positives as well to try to make everyone feel a bit better if we can, because there's just so much bad news in the world. Let me start with you, Meghann. One thing we've spoken about in the past many times is the role of women in counter-terrorism. You mentioned the flipside of how violence towards women and radicalization has been a challenge, and based on recent case studies, that's been demonstrated. Where are we at when it comes to women being more engaged, involved, and allowed to grow within the CT network? Not just in, say, New York, but within the US and globally? Where are we at on that?

MT: I think that we are at a really great moment in time in women having an impact on the national security environment, especially in terrorism. Here in New York, we just had our new Deputy Commissioner named, Rebecca Weiner, and that's a great thing for women, and I think that's a great thing for younger women to see that these opportunities exist. For me, I started out my career at the National Counterterrorism Center and seeing Director Abizaid named as the first female director of NCTC was a huge inspiration to me, to see that a female is given this task and quite frankly just doing a phenomenal job at it. Same with the DNI and and DNI Haines, it's really, really empowering for me to see that, and I can only imagine, for younger females who are just getting into the business, to see that there is this pathway to the very, very top, in the CT national security space, to have the the Director of National Intelligence, a female, that's the highest that you could aim to be I would think. So I think that we're at a really, really great place with empowering females, females looking out for other females in this world. There's a lot of great conferences that exist that are focused very specifically on women in law enforcement or women in counterterrorism. So I do think that we're at

a great place in the community with women being empowered and having an impact on the mission.

SG: Well, you certainly cited a lot of important people there, including our mutual friend, Rebecca Weiner, friend of the podcast as well. We've had her on before. And Kelli, let me ask you what your thoughts are on this.

KF: As one of those women who is earlier on in my career, it's definitely really encouraging and really empowering to see people like Meghann, like Commissioner Weiner, in the positions that they are. You come into law enforcement, and you know that that's going to be much more, or has historically been a much more male-dominated space. But in seeing these leaders, I see myself, I see other women represented. And I think that's really encouraging as far as seeing a trajectory for yourself and growing within those organisations, and seeing these voices that you really respect taking these really important roles and really guiding the direction of our department. It's amazing to see, like Meghann said, in the intelligence community writ large, but also in our department specifically. I tell the analysts, some of the junior analysts who are women on my team, you know, you will walk into some environments where you are the only woman in the room, and you can choose to be intimidated by that or you can choose to be really empowered by that. And that's at least the view that I always take. I always appreciate being in environments where my voice can be heard and just being able to look at people like Meghann and like Commissioner Weiner is really amazing.

MT: And I would add, it is outside of the counter-terrorism and intelligence space at the NYPD, there are a lot of really, truly incredible female leaders within the NYPD that are having a real impact on public safety in New York City. And within the Intelligence and Counterterrorism Bureau, and both the Intelligence Division and Counterterrorism Division, there are multiple females in leadership roles that I have just the utmost respect for. It's been so incredible for me at the NYPD to really learn from so many different women who have had different experiences than I have, maybe more on the operational side, have had different roles within this kind of mission space. And you really learn from each other. And it's truly a team effort. To build off of the positivity vibe that we're wanting to put out at the end of a kind of depressing conversation, what we accomplish is accomplished because of the team that is all on the same page and wanting to fight the same fight and really be dedicated to our public safety mission. I am a better leader because of what I've learned from an operational counterpart, who has maybe a slightly different leadership style than I do, or a different perspective that I hadn't even thought of because I don't have the experience of being a detective working a case. So there are so many females that I'm incredibly grateful for at the NYPD, some that have just recently been promoted into executive officer positions in the intelligence division. It's just a very cool time for females in the NYPD, and also in the counter-terrorism mission space.

SG: These are great comments by both of you. And Meghann, one thing I'll say about you is I will remember when we first met, which was at one of the Five Eyes conferences that was organised by the NYPD some years ago, and I remember you speaking, and I was very taken by what you had to say and the leadership role that you've had within the NYPD. And I always saw that you would be a great source of inspiration to a lot of people, not just women, but men too. And more power to you. And the NYPD I think is a very leading example, especially the analysts that you all have, I've seen how many women work there and how much importance they have in providing that safety and security to New York. So it's really, really encouraging, and I hope more and more women continue to engage in counter-terrorism because we need them. And I would make the point that with the challenges of misogynistic violence, tied to ideology, with conflict zones around the world that are fueled by hatred towards women, we need to have more women in counter-terrorism to counter that, to challenge that. So Meghann and Kelli, the role you're both playing is so critically important.

MT: Well, thank you. That means a lot to me, more than I could probably put into words. But I think you're right. I think that this is the time that women's voices need to be heard in the counter-terrorism mission space.

SG: Most definitely. Well, let me thank you both again, Meghann and Kelli, for being on the NATO DEEP Divepodcast. And yes, the conversation was challenging, but it's very important that we are better informed about what's going on in the world. And you both have done that with great detail.

So my appreciation to you both.

MT: Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having us. It's truly an honour to be on your podcast, and it's truly an honour to have been your friend over the last couple of years and to learn from you as well. Very excited that we were able to do this.

SG: My appreciation to you.

KF: Yes, thank you so much.

Episode 54 – Joseph Votel and the Threat from Iran and Beyond, February 2024

Key Reflections

- **Iran benefitted tactically from Hamas' attack on Israel, however, it has been more cautious in its strategic approach, opting against attacking Israel directly itself. This is due to a lack of widespread domestic support, Israel's military readiness, and China and Russia's uncommitted stance on the current conflict.**
- **In the aftermath of the Hamas operation, Iran has taken the advantage to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and Israel, who were on the path to diplomatic normalisation prior to 7 October 2023.**
- **The U.S. needs to send a message to the Houthis and other regional militias that it will not tolerate attacks on its military bases, personnel, or interests in the Middle East.**
- **Great power competition is not just limited to the Asia-Pacific. It takes place all over the world, particularly in the Middle East which has been at the centre of competition between great powers since the Cold War.**
- **The Doha deal with the Taliban in February 2020 is when the eventual collapse of Kabul actually began. This agreement undermined the confidence of the Afghan military and government who could see that the U.S. would soon withdraw from the country.**
- **Terrorist groups morph, grow, and evolve over time, especially without constant pressure from forces like the U.S. military. This pressure is present in Iraq and Syria with ISIS but is absent in Afghanistan regarding al-Qaeda.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

JV: Joseph Votel

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, I'm your host Dr. Sajjan Gohel and in this episode I speak with General Joseph Votel, the former commander of the United States Central Command and Special Operations Command.

In my discussion with the four-star general we talk about the current challenges in the Middle East and Afghanistan, losing focus on the conflict in Ukraine and how to handle the growing influence of artificial intelligence.

Please note that this podcast was recorded before the U.S. and U.K. conducted airstrikes against Houthi militia-controlled areas in Yemen and before the drone attack on a U.S. military outpost in Jordan by an Iranian-backed militia group.

General Joseph Votel, a warm welcome to NATO DEEP Dive.

JV: I'm glad to be with you. Thanks for the invitation.

SG: It's a huge honour for us. As we begin this discussion, how do we evaluate Iran's strategic and tactical role in the Hamas attack on Israel that occurred on 7 October 2023?

JV: Yeah, I think that's a great question. And I think it's an important point to pay attention to. I think, from a tactical point, we see Iran taking advantage and providing support to Hamas and for their broader resistance network around this. I mean, we saw them actually orchestrate an attack in support of some of the things that have happened in the Red Sea; we've seen them do a lot of work in

the information space; we've seen them welcome Hamas leaders and other resistance leaders and be at the forefront with all of that; and, of course, we've seen them supporting the militias, which are very closely aligned to them in Iraq and Syria, principally against U.S. influence and locations.

So, I think we've seen a lot on the tactical side. I think they see the advantage of what has taken place here as a way to pursue some of the longer-term goals that they've had for the region through some, what I would consider to be some, tactical kind of activities, like we just described.

I think the strategic aspect of this is a little bit more nuanced. And just having done a lot of reading here recently and looking back at this relationship between Iran and Hamas. Hamas is not analogous to Hezbollah; the relationship is not the same as Iran's relationship with Hezbollah. But there clearly is an alignment here. But the relationship is not the same. And I think that that impacts some of the strategic approaches that Iran takes. And I think as a result, they've been more cautious in terms of their overall strategic approach to this.

There was some discussion about whether Iran would use this as the precipitating event for a broader attack on Israel, and really, across the region. Of course, we haven't seen that, I think there's a variety of reasons for that. One, I don't know that they necessarily think they can rally their own nation behind this. They have challenges internally with their own people. So, I think they have to keep that in mind when they think about things more strategically.

The Hamas success, I think, does not necessarily open the way for them to actually apply a lot of the key capabilities that Iran has. So, because Hamas has been successful or was successful at surprising Israel doesn't necessarily mean that Israel will be susceptible to some of the ways that Iran would actually attack them, which, of course, would be through a large part of their missile capability that they've built up over the last number of years. I think they're closely watching China and Russia, and how they react to this. I think it's important for Iran to maintain long term relationships with them, they clearly value that, they derive a lot of benefit and strengthen that. But neither of those two countries have really, substantially come off the fence in this particular conflict. And I think as a result, they're watching very, very closely.

So, I guess what I'm trying to paint for you here is that there's a variety of reasons why strategically, Iran would be more cautious in their approaches, then they might be tactically, in terms of doing things that aren't necessarily going to precipitate things. There are things that we would expect Iran to do, be active in the information environment, be provocative, push red lines in places like Iraq and Syria. So, that's how I'm thinking about this right now.

SG: You do a very good job in contrasting the strategic and the tactical nature of Iran's intentions. When we look at it further as to what Iran was potentially wanting to achieve from the chaos, there has been some belief that it's connected to the potential of the Saudi Arabian diplomatic strategy with Israel, and that they were hoping to form diplomatic ties down the road. And now in the aftermath of the Hamas operation that looks largely to have been scuppered. Is that now derailed, do you think, long term? Is that an objective that Iran was hoping to achieve?

JV: Yes, I think that that it was, now whether it was actually an objective that Iran had, pre-emptively with this Hamas attack, I don't know if I can say that. But I definitely feel that in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks on October 7, they definitely saw the benefits of this, of really putting a wedge in this potential relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia. So, I think they definitely saw the advantage of that and, of course, have used a lot of their tactical tools and other things like this to continue to keep this in the forefront as time has gone on. So, I think there are some concerns about that. I think it's important to appreciate that Iran has long standing goals and objectives for the region, one of which is they want to expel the United States and Western powers from this, and I think they would lump Israel clearly into that. And so, they've had these objectives for quite some time as they've done this, and the Hamas attack also gave them some potential for doing that.

As to whether the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia is scuppered. I don't know, it's certainly, I think it's fair to say, it's on a little bit of a hiatus right now. But whether that will be a long-term

state I think is to be determined here. But my personal view is I don't necessarily think it's in Saudi Arabia's interest for this to go away. I don't think it's in the interests of any of the Gulf Arab states for these relationships, these budding relationships, to dissolve. I think they all see economic, diplomatic, [and] informational advantages to more normalisation with Israel. So, I don't know that they necessarily see these going away.

I think that there is, of course, the whole Palestinian aspect of this, which is something that I think has to be calculated. And this is one of the underlying reasons why Saudi Arabia hasn't been very deliberate in terms of doing this because of these types of situations. So, I think they're going to continue to be very, very cautious and deliberate as they move forward. I don't know that it's completely scuppered. But Iran sees blood in the water and is looking for an opportunity to really drive more of a permanent wedge in there in terms of that initiative.

SG: When you say Iran sees blood in the water, we also have seen that Iranian backed groups, and militias have launched multiple attacks on U.S. military installations in both Iraq and Syria, which you were mentioning earlier in our discussion. Do you see this continuing in 2024? And what options does the U.S. have to counter this?

JV: Well, I do see it continuing in 2024. And I think I see it continuing until the United States and or Iraq, or any of our Western partners that are there, can apply enough pressure onto these groups to convince them that the cost of orchestrating these attacks exceeds the benefit that they derive from it. I just don't think we have been able to do that yet. And while I'm glad that we have struck back, these still are largely defensive measures and I do think we need to be a little bit more offensive in terms of this. And so, I think that we have got to be willing to go after those that are perpetrating these attacks. I'm not necessarily saying that our response should be extended to Iran, that's a different deal there. But clearly, we have the ability to understand how networks operate, to attack networks, and I think we ought to apply some of these techniques we've learned in the current terrorism fight to this right here and go after these networks that are orchestrating these attacks.

They haven't been all that effective. We've obviously absorbed some casualties and I'm certainly not minimising any of that. But they certainly could have been worse, and we only need one of these attacks to be successful and we're in a different place, frankly. So, I am concerned. I think we definitely have to take more direct action and we have to put more pressure on the Iraqi government to do their job with us. I think that's important, as well. And I think we have to make sure to remove uncertainty from the situation. I think right now, a lot of these groups don't know exactly where our red lines are and so they're going to continue to push until they actually find out what those are.

We saw that a little bit last week when one of our service members was very severely wounded, and we responded very, very quickly and very decisively in terms of that. But that's got to be the norm in terms of how we get after this. I would just say this, I think the situation in Iraq is really—there's an excellent article that came out in the Westpoint, Combating Terrorism Centre Monthly Sentinel that basically goes through and talks about how Iran has played a role in Iraq in strengthening the hand of the militias through things like lawfare and other things like this, they really created a situation here, where the militias have the upper hand. So, it's a very difficult situation for the Iraqi government to deal with. They're not strong, they are weak, and they're they obviously live in a difficult neighbourhood, and they're trying to balance their interests between really two competing parties, the United States and in the coalition that is there for the defeat ISIS mission and Iran, who is their very capable partner and the neighbour in the East, so it is a difficult situation in Iraq.

SG: Difficult situation, which is also having further ramifications with other aspects of Iran's affiliates. The relentless Houthi attacks on merchant vessels and commercial boats has pushed several of the world's largest shipping companies to cancel transit through the Red Sea. This seems to be a really big problem, especially when it comes to supply chains, the economic impact, what can be done to deal with this?

JV: Well, I think the United States and some of the coalition partners they've worked with are begin-

ning to do some of the right things. The establishment of this task force in the last couple of weeks, I think, is an important step. That's a proven method that we've used in the waters of the Middle East and other places here to help address specific problems, whether it's trafficking, whether it's terrorism, whether it's piracy. We've been successful with this in the past, and I think that's a key piece of it. And, of course, the work that some of our U.S. naval vessels and some of the other coalition vessels have been doing lately in terms of shooting down missiles or drones and in the case of the United States, destroying three of the Houthi fast boats that were attempting to encroach on them, I think, are good steps. But these are all largely defensive measures. And again, I know I seem like I'm a little bit mongering here, but we do have to send a very clear message to this, there are vulnerabilities in our coastal defence radars, in our coastal defence missile systems, there are command and control facilities that could be very vulnerable.

So, again, we need to send a very clear message to the Houthis, that this is not acceptable behaviour, and it will be met with force. And in addition to all of that, both in Iraq and here down in the Red Sea, we also have to leverage all the other elements of power that we have, I mean, the diplomatic power, we've got to put pressure on others here to push on the Houthis, we've got to use the information space, we've got to use economic power where we can to augment some of our military power, there really needs to be a full effect here for what we're trying to achieve. But I think we do have to be a little more forceful. My assessment is I think our administration is concerned about expanding the span of the conflict, I think that's a fair concern, but the fact of the matter is now when we see big companies like Maersk and Hapag and all these others pulling back, this is pretty significant. I mean, 30% of the world's container traffic goes through the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb, that's significant. A significant amount of oil, natural gas products go through here, and some 25,000 ships a year go through this particular waterway. So, it's not an insignificant location. And by the way, the free flow of commerce and navigation through the global commons are long standing U.S. interests. And so, we have to take measures to protect and preserve those interests long term.

SG: Very important aspects that you bring up. I remember when we'd had a conversation a little while back, you spoke about the fact that the Middle East is in many ways the centre of what should be looked at as great power competition. So, prior to all these events that we've been talking about, there was a perception that the Middle East was less of a priority for policymakers in the West, and yet we saw China and Russia expand their role in the region. Tracking back to that earlier discussion that we once had, surely the Middle East needs to be factored in as part of the great power competition? And if so, how does the West try and redress that now?

JV: Yes, I think this is a really critical point and one that I know we've talked about, and I've talked about with a variety of others, and many others are talking about this as well. The Middle East is and has been, for a long period of time, an area of competition. Between the United States and the Soviet Union back in the 70s and into the 80s, this was a this was a place where things played out, and we've built alliances and relationships and fought for and supported our objectives, just like the Soviets were trying to do with theirs and so, I do think it's important. I think there's a couple of things that I would really highlight, I think it's important that one of the things we need to do is we need to reconcile our strategy, I think, from the United States standpoint we need to look at our overall strategy, there's no doubt that China is the pacing threat for us that this could be existential.

Even as a former CENTCOM commander, I have testified to that fact and I certainly understand that. But this idea of competition is not something that is just limited to the Asia-Pacific, it takes place all over. And what we find when we step back from locations is that the Russians, and more prominently, the Chinese, will fill in and will step in and fill those voids. And the cost for doing that is relationships, and trust, and reassurance around our own national security objectives in different parts of the world. So, I think we have to look at our overall strategy and we have to take a more comprehensive look at not just how we are trying to maintain our competitive edge against China in the Pacific, but how we do that on a more global aspect.

I think we have to get to a point also in the Middle East where we have a sustainable force presence. This has been a little bit of a whipsaw here for a while, we've had hundreds of thousands of

troops and then over the last couple of years, we drew that down to a very, very moderate, very low number. And now of course, with the Gaza thing, we've moved a whole bunch of resources back in there. I think what is important for our partners in the region, I think important for the U.S. military is to is to identify what that sustainable level of force that we are willing to commit to this area, that can help working with the other elements of power, can help look at how we preserve our interests in the area, and it doesn't necessarily need to be tens or hundreds of thousands of troops.

There does need to be a maritime presence, it does need to be ground presence, it needs to be air presence, soft presence. But these can be done in more economical ways, and we're relying on surging capacity right now. The long-term impacts of moving two carrier groups and a bunch of fighter squadrons and troops on the ground really is very significant for the U.S. military because at some point that has to be reconciled. It has to be recovered and it makes it very, very difficult. So, the more we can get into a sustainable approach, I think it's important.

The last piece I would just say on this is I would agree that the Middle East, and the threats we face there, are pale in comparison to what we are dealing with China. And so, we do have to dedicate more of our military resources to that part of the world. But I think what that does is also puts a premium on our diplomatic efforts as well. And I think one of the areas where we could make a lot of progress is really by making sure that our country teams, our ambassadors, others out there are well resourced, well set up to do the missions that they've been established to do. We've been sometimes slow in confirming ambassadors.

I can't think of a more direct negative message to a partner than the fact that we can't confirm an ambassador to get into their country. And well, resourced country teams are incredibly powerful tools. And really, I think that really helped leverage all the unique capabilities of the U.S. government, in protecting our interests, to include the military, which plays a supporting role in all that. So, I think we have to look at the diplomatic aspect of this as well to make sure that we are well postured in that regard.

SG: Building on that dynamic of diplomatic and military support and having a positive influence within the Middle East itself. Conversely, will events in the Middle East impact negatively on the war in Ukraine? Are there factors that are now taking place that could impact on the West's ability to continue supporting the Kyiv administration?

JV: Well, yes, I guess it's a good question. I mean, to some extent, I think they probably are. Now, obviously, we've been sending a lot of military aid to the Ukrainians, and we've been sending military aid to the Israelis, as has been announced, in our media environment. For the most part, I think those things are not necessarily competing, what we're sending to the Israelis is probably different than what we're sending to the Ukrainians. So, they're not necessarily directly competing for similar resources going to all those. But I think the bigger challenge is that the authority and the money that goes along with doing all that, as you move up the chain, particularly when you get into Congress, becomes a little more fuzzy. And so, as you're seeing in our country, right now, there's a significant debate about continued funding for Ukraine, at the same time, we're trying to fund Israel. So, I think that could certainly have an impact, I think as to the support of this. And then, of course, when you throw in other contingencies that may emerge here, then this puts more pressure on the system. And I think that does make it more difficult, and it will impact what we want to try to do there.

I also think that some of what we've been talking about, some of the things we talked about in the Red Sea, exacerbates some of the supply chain problems that have actually resulted from the Ukrainian-Russian war. So, in my view, and my assessment is that is actually making it worse, the difficulty of moving supplies around the world, the fact that you can't go through the Red Sea that you have to go around the Cape of Good Hope, combined with literally the world's breadbasket, green basket, really having difficulty getting their stuff out of there. I think it does add a lot of pressure onto this and makes the situation worse.

And then finally, I think just the diplomatic efforts that are necessary in both these cases. I think

we've seen very heavy U.S. government diplomatic efforts in both of these places. I mean, we saw streams and streams of U.S. officials going to Ukraine, U.S. officials going to Israel, being able to sustain that and look at other things that are ongoing, I think these are things we have to take into consideration as well. And I do fear that we will have to choose to prioritise one over the other as we move forward. Well, both of them are pretty darn important.

SG: We shift from one country that's facing inherent problems to another one, namely, Afghanistan. I remember very vividly a conversation that we had back in June of 2021, you expressed serious concerns that the Taliban could take over Afghanistan quite quickly, once the West withdrew, and tragically, it proved to be the case. How could an infrastructure collapse so quickly, especially as many nations gave blood, sweat and tears to building Afghanistan across two decades? It's sometimes hard to fathom just how quickly it fell. And what lessons can we learn from this?

JV: Well, I think what I think what led to the rapid collapse, particularly in those real difficult days in August of 2021, when that actually kind of came apart there in Kabul, is that we fundamentally undermined the confidence of the of the Afghan military leadership, and those who were doing a lot of the fighting and dying. And so, when we made agreements with the Taliban in February of 2020, with one administration that was passed on to the Biden administration, and then kind of extended a little bit longer. I actually think that when that agreement was put in place in 2020 was actually when the eventual fall of Kabul actually began. And that was because those that we had worked with so closely, could clearly see the writing on the wall that we were going to leave. And they, at that point, went more into self-preservation mode and did things that they needed to do to protect themselves and their families, and made deals and other things with the Taliban that would ultimately play out in the last few weeks there. And so, there was this loss of confidence that can't be made up in military aid, can't be made up in training, can't be made up in informational support, 'try fight harder' kind of stuff. We undermined this basic tenant of this confidence and trust. And that's what led to the rapid collapse. And I think it explains why after billions of dollars and decades of time here, we were not more successful in this endeavour than we all had hoped we would be.

SG: Certainly, it's a very depressing situation that unfolded. And we still don't even know the full ramifications of that and that leads me to my next question. We've seen that there's been a difference of assessment as to what is unfolding in Afghanistan currently. So, for example, the UN sanctions monitoring team has spoken about the fact that al-Qaeda and its affiliate AQIS, although had been weakened, due to counterterrorism operations in the past, they are showing signs of some regrowth, that they are being protected by the Taliban, they are able to operate in various provinces, and that's even after Ayman al-Zawahiri, the last leader of al-Qaeda was found in a palatial residence in Kabul, which I mentioned in my book.

Conversely, you've got the U.S. National Security Council, which has taken a different point of view in that they believe that al-Qaeda is not really growing, and that the Taliban could actually be potentially cooperative when it comes to counter-terrorism. So, we have two very differing perspectives and where do you stand on this? How do we untangle this disconnect?

JV: Well, I think where I stand on this is I would probably be more aligned with the UN monitoring missions assessment of this than I might be with our own government's assessment of this, and I don't say that lightly. I mean, I have extraordinary respect for the U.S. intelligence community, I think they're one of the jewels in our crown right here and I think they are trying to make the best assessments they can. But my experience working with terrorist organisations are really informed by what we just saw in October here in Israel. It just tells me that these organisations, they morph, they change, they innovate, they take their time, they're patient, in terms of trying to recover and look for new ways of coming back onto the scene, and I just think that that is what is likely to take place here.

We have found when we have not maintained pressure on these organisations that they have found ways to come back. I mean, this is the importance of the mission that we're doing in Iraq right now. In Iraq and Syria with both the Iraqi Security Forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces, [there] is, again, a small nominal number of troops on the ground there for the specific purpose of helping our

partners keep pressure on these networks. And frankly, it's working, it demonstrates that it works. While ISIS is still present there, they have not been able to rise to a level where they pose a threat. And most of the challenge can be handled largely by the partner forces. And that's, to me, the lesson that I learned out of this, that you have to keep pressure on these organisations, they are extraordinarily resilient, they are looking for ways to come back onto the scene and they're patient in terms of doing it.

So, I am concerned about what happens in the places where we can't. I don't know everything that's taking place, there is probably a lot that I don't know, I hope that I'm wrong in terms of this, I hope that our assessments are more accurate, and that our insight into this in an informed way is better than I may give credit for. But I am very concerned about these organisations. For example, I would just remind you that we still have displaced fighters, we have foreign fighter camps in Syria. I know that's not Afghanistan, but the point is that this is where the seeds of the next violent extremist group comes from. So, I mean, all of these elements remain in place in these countries, and we have to pay attention to all that.

SG: The point that you raised, has made me think of just how complicated and challenging the whole Afghanistan, Pakistan, Middle East, North Africa situation is. You were the former CENTCOM commander, you were in charge during a very important time where you directly led to degrading ISIS' operational capability. If we see what's unfolding with the Hamas operation, the Houthi militias carrying out operations on the Red Sea, targeting cargo vessels, and attacks on US installations in Syria and Iraq. We've also seen al-Qaeda potential regrowth in Afghanistan, the TTP, the Pakistan Taliban, asserting itself in Pakistan, all the way from Israel to Pakistan, there are now major security challenges that are emerging. They're not necessarily always interconnected, but it forms a very problematic picture. Where do you see this unfolding throughout 2024?

JV: Well, I mean, I think you painted a very good but dire picture of the region that I would largely agree with. I think this is an area that has always been challenged with very deep underlying tensions that have not been adequately addressed. And so, I think going forward, I think we're going to see more of these playing out. Just look at what is playing out right now in terms of the war in Gaza, fundamentally this is an issue over the Palestinian question, so to speak, how we resolve that and—during my time in CENTCOM, while that was a very present thing, it was being managed, it seemed to be in a controlled place, and we were we were, I don't want to say comfortable, but we categorised that into the moderate risk area here and allowed us to focus on other things that we needed to do. But it is these underlying tensions that often erupt and cause problems in the region.

I think we're going to continue to see this for the long term. I think it's in our interest, it's in the interest of other countries to try to help these countries in this part of the world to work through some of these issues. And I think it's important for us, I think we have to look at what our interests are in this area, and then take the measures to preserve those interests as we move forward. So, I think 2024 is going to be another difficult year for the Middle East.

SG: A final question to do with what we may see unfold in 2024. And building on the momentum of 2023 is the geopolitics of artificial intelligence. Governments may seek to regulate AI but also simultaneously choose to force domestic AI innovation to compete geopolitically. It's inevitable that AI is going to be a central dynamic in the U.S.-China relationship. What is your take on the phenomenon of artificial intelligence? And does any of it concern you? From my perspective, it frightens me.

JV: Well, yes, there are certain aspects of this that I am concerned about. But I think in the overall look at it, I think that artificial intelligence can do a lot for us. And so, I'm generally an advocate for this type of technology and moving forward with it. Again, this is a very difficult one, it's very hard for a lot of people to understand and appreciate, it's not like other innovations that we've had in the past. So, I do get the level of uncertainty, the level of mystery around all of this, I think, does make it difficult for people to get their heads around. And it does lead to a lot of concerns on this, but I do see a lot of opportunities where AI can help. I mean, whether it's leveraging it for back office functions or making better decisions, or in the medical arena or other things right here, I think it can certainly

help us in great ways, sifting through the mass amounts of data that we are generating in today's kind of digital economy here and understand that better. So, I think there are some really positive things that can come from this.

But as you raise, I mean, I think there are some, there are some challenges going forward. I actually think the conversation that is ongoing about this is a healthy one, in many different places, in Europe and the United States and other places, I think that is a healthy one. I know, in our own U.S. Congress, there's actually a lot of discussion about this, and people have taken positions on it, and actually, Congress has enabled a couple of important pieces of legislation that are really focused on artificial intelligence to better understand it to help with the responsible creation of it, I think those are those are important things to do.

I am concerned about AI, particularly generative AI that can really pose a significant concern. I would share with it that I'm also concerned about trying to overregulate this kind of stuff and making it a commodity that entices groups to go after this and use it in much more nefarious ways.

I guess I look at this a little bit like manned flight, for example. When aeroplanes first came onto the scene, there was a lot of proliferation, there were airlines standing up, there were people flying and stuff like that. And then eventually after we got the lay of the land, then we instituted things like the Federal Aviation Administration and rules for regulation of this where it is viewed as something positive, that enhances our lives and enhances the mobility of our citizens, both in the United States and globally here. So, I do think that there will need to be some kind of regulation of this at some particular point.

My approach would be less is more at this particular point until we fully understand what needs to be regulated in this as we move forward. It's an extraordinarily interesting and topical area obviously here but I think it has the potential for being a good game changer for us down the line, but I do acknowledge there are some concerns that will have to be watched and addressed as we move forward.

SG: Certainly, does have a lot of positive potentials, hopefully it won't end up being like Skynet in The Terminator!

JV: I know I think that's again our desire to watch Hollywood and see things and try to understand them always, I think does feed a little bit into that. And again, I share the concern about artificial intelligence and cutting humans out of the loop. As a commander, there is no replacement for human judgement and while it appears that some quarters of artificial intelligence, we may be getting close to that, the connection to a soul to a heart or brain I think is very, very important in all this. And so, we do have to make sure that as we design decision loops and other things like this, that we are not losing the human aspect of decision making.

SG: Well, General Votel, you've been very kind with your time, as you mentioned, soul, heart and brain. Your knowledge throughout all the topics we've covered is always so prescient, and you are very much always able to forecast some of the challenges ahead as you have done in the past. So, very grateful that you could spend the time on NATO DEEP Dive and hope you can join us again in the future.

JV: Thanks very much. I appreciate it. As a NATO officer, I always kind of characterise myself that way, having served at the headquarters down in Naples, Italy, and working with a lot of our NATO partners throughout my military career, I'm very proud to have that relationship and I'm really glad to be able to participate and contribute in this podcast. Thanks for inviting me.

SG: It's been a huge honour for us.

Episode 55 – Mahmut Cengiz and Terrorism After October 7, February 2024

<u>**Key Reflections**</u>

- **State actors like Iran have exploited tensions in the Middle East whilst promoting their agenda. Non-state actors like ISIS and al-Qaeda have utilised the events to radicalise and recruit individuals to their causes.**
- **Questions surround IS-KP's claim of responsibility for the twin blasts in Kerman, Iran.**
- **Iran-backed militia groups will continue to carry out more attacks as they are emboldened by the current crisis.**
- **The Houthis have successfully held territory in Yemen and using that foothold to attack cargo vessels in the Red Sea.**
- **Al-Qaeda's global affiliates remain active, with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in the Sahel, and al-Shabaab in Somalia. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is also increasing its online propaganda campaigns.**
- **Fentanyl is another major threat to life. In the U.S. over 100,000 deaths from overdoses of the synthetic drug were recorded in 2023. Fentanyl precursors are often imported from China to Mexico before being used to create the drug and smuggled into the U.S.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

MC: Mahmut Cengiz

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel, and in this episode, I speak with the noted academic Mahmut Cengiz about the various geopolitical challenges that have erupted across the Middle East and Afghanistan-Pakistan.

Mahmut is an associate professor with the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC) and the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University. Mahmut is also the author of The Illicit Economy in Turkey: How Criminals, Terrorists, and the Syrian Conflict Fuel Underground Economies.

Mahmut Cengiz, warm welcome back to NATO DEEP Dive.

MC: Thanks for having me.

SG: It's great to have you again. In light of the Hamas October 7, 2023, operation in Israel and the subsequent fallout across the Middle East, we've seen two distinct narratives being pushed out. One is from state actors, such as Iran, that has seen itself pushing the so-called Axis of Resistance. The other is from non-state actors, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. What are your thoughts on this in terms of these two very contrasting narratives?

MC: The conflict in Palestine and Israel always has been seen as a reference case for jihadist terrorist organisations. Of course, after this attack, we have debated who are the winners and who are the losers, or who can exploit these attacks in the world. And we saw, for example, Iran is maybe aiming to again exploit these attacks, and show that this is a war between the West and the East. So, Iran is in a position of trying to represent the Islamic world, so this is their ideology. When it comes to non-state actors, of course, ISIS and al-Qaeda have used the conflict in Palestine as a reference case. Of course, there are some other ones in Jammu and Kashmir in India, and also in Africa, so whenever they saw the persecution of Muslim communities, like some overreactions from the state actors, they created some stories, and they just began to exploit these stories, and because they

aim to radicalise more people, because if more people become radicalised, it means that they can recruit more and more people.

So, after the Hamas attacks now, it has gone beyond being a regional conflict, because in some platforms, it is seen as the war, again, between the West and the Islamic world. I think, for the Western world, there are some lessons similar to the 9/11 attacks, because we should not really confine this conflict to one group, because Hamas acted like ISIS or al-Qaeda, because Hamas acted and did a terrorist attack in the region. But when it comes to its results and its unintended consequences, the state and non-state actors always position themselves to benefit from and to exploit these conflicts. So far, what happened in the region, al-Qaeda and ISIS are now again showing this is a 'conflict against Islam.' Of course, again, Iran is aiming to get another leading position for the Islamic world.

SG: These are really important points that you're covering here. If we stick to Iran for a second, so IS-KP—the regional affiliate of ISIS, Islamic State-Khorasan Province—they claimed responsibility for the twin blasts on January 4, 2024 that killed 84 people and wounded scores of others, which was near the memorial of the former head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qasem Soleimani. That was in Kerman in Iran. What are your thoughts of that attack? What does this tell us about what is unfolding?

MC: In my recent article, I tried to ask the question about who is the perpetrator, because ISIS was one of the most reliable organisations in its early years, in 2014-2015, when it comes to claiming responsibility. But then when ISIS began to lose power, the organisation jumped to claim every notable attack, even criminal ones, and showed that they are the perpetrators. So, it's a big question, how much we can rely on the claim of responsibility by ISIS. There are even some discrepancies in ISIS' statement, because ISIS was saying that in the early hours, 300 people were killed by two suicide bombers. But when we look at the details of this attack, we saw that just 80 people lost their lives, and also there were remotely controlled explosives used in this attack. So, these big discrepancies are creating some questions around whether ISIS really is the perpetrator. Of course, on the other hand, why ISIS is claiming responsibility may be because it created a chance and an opportunity for ISIS to be a popular organisation again because these organisations are always seeking such popularity. They know well that it means more recruiting, more funding for these organisations.

And for Iran again, it's a question, because Iran blamed the Western world, Israel and the US, for masterminding these attacks in the region. And it is a little bit complex, very confusing. But on the other hand, ISIS maybe? IS K-P, they target civilians and crowds. We saw in previous years how ISIS targeted and did some attacks in Afghanistan, like targeting mosques or some religious gatherings. So, in terms of the tactics, yes, it is fitting well with IS-KP's tactics and their target types. But when it comes to what's happening in the region, in Iran, also these complex relationships in the region, don't think that we will learn in the future who is the real perpetrator behind these attacks in the region.

SG: Yes, as you say, it is very complex. And if we keep that complexity in mind, so back in January of 2024, we've seen that Iranian militias, or Iranian-backed militias, I should say, have carried out attacks across Syria and Iraq on US installations, military installations, and one in particular was an attack on a US military base in Jordan, Tower 22, as it's called. So, we've seen that Shia militia groups that have targeted the US in Iraq and Syria, but this was the first time that it happened in Jordan. What does this tell us about the agenda of these Iranian-backed Shia militia groups? And is this something that is going to continue? Or is this perhaps an aberration of what happened in Jordan?

MC: We have discussed some of the consequences of Hamas' October 7 attacks. Also, I think another consequence is that now the world is aware of these existing militia groups in almost every country in the Middle East. So even these militia groups in Iraq and in Syria, they are more threatening than ISIS and al-Qaeda because these militia groups targeted American bases and facilities more than ISIS and al-Qaeda. So, these groups are active in several Middle Eastern countries. For example, in Iraq, the Popular Mobilisation Forces, it was a big umbrella group, consisting of more than 100 Iran-backed militia groups. We saw several of them are really active, Hezbollah, and also some others as well. So in Syria, again, there is a strong presence of these Iran-backed militia

groups, partly composed of Afghan Shias, and they were trained and then transferred from IRGC to Syria, just to fight for Bashar al-Assad, because Iran is taking the side of the al-Assad regime and aiming to keep Bashar al-Assad in his position. So, there was another well-known and popular group in Syria, they are the Pakistani Shias, again, the same method by IRGC, training and transferring them to Syria, to fight against ISIS, al-Qaeda, or another group targeting Bashar al-Assad's group.

So, when we look at Yemen, there are the Houthis, but after Hamas' October 7 attacks, these militia groups came together, six of them, and they created an umbrella organisation, which is the Islamic Resistance in Iraq group. So, this group was the perpetrator of the attack in Jordan targeting US forces. So, for your question, considering their current operational capacity in the region, it wouldn't be wrong to say that in the long-term, these groups will keep attacking Western forces, including US forces, because they aim to drive these forces out of the Middle East. And also, we are aware of this ongoing and current regional-level cold war between the Saudis and Iranians, so they just target each other to be the regional hegemon. And so far, Iran seems to be the winner. They're really active and dominant. Also, in some cases, they're using these militia groups as part of their strategy. So, in the future, we will see more attacks and more threats, especially coming from these Iran-backed militia groups.

By the way, also in terrorism databases, in the last two years, 6% of terrorist attacks globally were committed by Iran-backed militia groups, which accounted for 500 or 600 attacks every year. But this year, after Hamas' attacks, I believe it will be much higher, because Hamas and Hezbollah also are really very active this year after Hamas' attacks, so including Iran's linkages with the groups in Palestine, and also Hezbollah and some other regional and local level militia groups, it wouldn't be wrong to say that we will see increasing numbers of attacks by these Iran-backed militia groups in the Middle East.

SG: One of the entities that's getting more and more attention is this Iran-backed Shia militia group known as Kata'ib Hezbollah, who were considered to be part of the movement that targeted Tower 22 in Jordan. What do we know about this group? Are they similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon? They seem to certainly model themselves on that. Are there any differences that we should be aware of?

MC: They are really similar because Iran is using the same model. Hezbollah is seen like a success model for Iran, because it was formed in 1982, and today, Hezbollah is a global organisation, according to some people, they are a political organisation, but we have seen their strong involvement in criminal activities. So, you can see how Hezbollah is part of global networks, I think in Latin America, like in cocaine and cigarette trafficking or drug trafficking.

Also, on the other hand, they are based in Lebanon. So, Hezbollah, for example, after Hamas' attacks, terrorism databases recorded 238 attacks from Hezbollah, but it was like 10 or eight, before October 7 attacks. But then the world saw how this organisation is capable of doing attacks in the region. So, just copying this successful model Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Iraqi branch—of course, it's another question to see how Iran is influential on Iraqi politics after the U.S. invasion, after 2003. So, we saw increasingly how Iran has become influential and today, Iran is influential on the government, and also there are these militia groups, and then also, the PMF, Popular Mobilisation Forces—actually PMF got some sympathy when they're fighting against ISIS, but then Kata'ib Hezbollah and some others left from PMF, and today, they operate independently. So, in the future, I believe, there will be another Hezbollah, mostly operating and based in Iraq.

SG: We're having quite a detailed discussion on all the entities that Iran is supporting by proxy. So, if we continue that discussion, another group is, of course, the Houthis that are based in Yemen. They seem to have been very effective in hurting global trade, especially the vessels that travelled through the Red Sea. What can be done, Mahmut to deal with that? Can countries like China that have good ties with Iran help to resolve that? Or is this something that the Houthis have now realised is a successful tactic to hurt the global economy and use it for their own propaganda purposes also?

MC: Yeah, Houthis are also successfully operating in Yemen, because they seized the capital Sana'a in Yemen in 2014, but after that, Houthis [have been] able to control territory in Yemen. So, there are Saudi-led coalition forces, I think composed of more than 10 states, but they all failed to

fight against Houthis in the region. So, recently, as you just mentioned, they targeted the commercial ships on the Red Sea. So, then there have been some debates in the United States about whether to designate the Houthis again as a terrorist organisation. Also, they are another group controlled and directed by Iran, so mostly serving the interests of Iran in the region. I don't think that in the short term, we will see effective results to fight against or to stop their fighting or their targeting in Yemen or in the Middle East.

So, recently, the US government put Houthis in the list of specifically designated terrorist organisations. So, we will see, again, some sanctions over the Houthis. But when it comes to fighting against Houthis, I don't think that in the near future, we will see some effective fight against Houthis.

SG: This is obviously going to be another ongoing problem and challenge. You've also written on al-Qaeda's affiliates, [saying] that they are growing, they are potentially causing global challenges in terms of their agenda. We've seen that AQAP in Yemen, another faction, a non-state actor, although this is a Sunni jihadist group based in Yemen, that is seeking to cause disruption in the light of everything that's happening in the Middle East. They've restarted the Inspire series of online guidance to terrorism and propaganda, which is of concern. Which of al-Qaeda's affiliates are concerning you and why do you think they've become so emboldened?

MC: Yeah, actually, in the Western world, there is a common belief about jihadist organisations. So, ISIS and al-Qaeda, they are defeated organisations, so they're not [a threat] any more to the Western world. But when looking at terrorism databases, every year more than 1,300 terrorist attacks were committed by ISIS and its affiliated organisations. So, every year more than 800 terrorism incidents were committed, again, by al-Qaeda and its affiliated organisations. So, when it comes to answering your question, what al-Qaeda groups? Of course, before that there are currently al-Qaeda affiliates operating in many regions. So, there is one in Syria HTS, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, actually al-Qaeda used more localization policies, and then merged local jihadist organisations and created umbrella organisations to fight for al-Qaeda's ideology in many regions. So, HTS is one example, merged by jihadist organisations, more than 10 groups came together that created HTS in Syria.

We're looking at databases. So, we can see every year that HTS are the perpetrators of more than 200 cases. Even today, HTS is able to control territory in Idlib in Syria, but last year, what we saw was some fragmentation from HTS. Several of its militants left the organisation, then began to operate independently. So, we should be giving our focus and attention to HTS in Syria. There's another one in the Sahel. Of course, it is more related to grievances of the Muslim communities in Africa. Of course, it's related to the impacts of post-military coups in some Sahel countries. So, we saw how these issues are creating some security vacuums, and then how immediately these organisations are filling in these vacuums and operating in this region.

So, for the Sahel, for Africa, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, the acronym JNIM, is really very active. So, recently, for example, this group spread its operational capacity to neighbouring countries of the Sahel, like Togo and Benin. And also, increasingly we saw JNIM's attacks in Burkina Faso and Niger as well. So, we should be focusing on JNIM as well. And there's another one, al-Shabaab in Somalia. So, this is another top terrorist organisation, every year they are one of the top groups with the most terrorist incidents, even though there have been some decreases in the number of terrorist attacks by al-Shabaab, but when we look at its tactics, you can see more complex tactics have been used by these organisations like vehicle borne IEDs, or suicide bombings, again, were used by al-Shabaab. So, complexities of tactics, and also the spreading of JNIM in Africa, I can tell that we should give our focus to al-Qaeda groups in Africa.

And on the other hand, AQAP is another one. I think this group was active, doing several hundred attacks in 2016 or 2017. But in terrorism databases, today, this organisation is the perpetrator of several 10s of incidents. But as you mentioned, like online propaganda, and then we saw again, there are some increasing activities of AQAP. Maybe the last point is in Asia, in Africa, in Afghanistan/Pakistan, because I think we should talk about maybe Lashkar-e-Taiba or Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). So, they are, again, two active organisations which we need to look at, again, these two groups as well in Pakistan.

SG: So, these are important regions that you're identifying where non-state actors affiliated to al-Qaeda continue to operate with impunity and pose major challenges, not just locally, regionally, but maybe transnationally as well. Talking about transnational, so another thing, Mahmut that you've been covering and analysing is the whole fentanyl smuggling challenge and crisis that exists. Now, fentanyl being a narcotic, of course, what can be done about it? And what are the current developments in trying to stop the proliferation and smuggling of fentanyl? And are there any particular countries/regions that concern you about where the fentanyl is moving around and how it's being trafficked?

MC: Yeah, I think sometimes we're all focused on terrorism and terrorism cases, we are recording every attack and the 25,000 people killed. But we look at fentanyl and the drug issue in the world. Just in the U.S. last year, more than 100,000 people lost their lives because of overdoses of fentanyl. So, who is bringing this fentanyl, in the U.S. case, you can see the Mexican cartels are blamed, because from the southern border, these Mexican cartels, they traffic and transfer this fentanyl from Mexico to the U.S.

So, what other states are involved, and therefore precursors of fentanyl? We know that China is a source country. So, these precursors have been transferred to Mexico, then in primitive labs in Mexico, they are produced and then transferred to the U.S. So, when it comes to how we can prevent this really complex issue, because we need multi-perspective approaches, like protecting the borders, of course fighting against transnational criminal organisations, global cooperation between the states, but considering current politics in the world, so it is not likely to see effective cooperation between U.S. and China. The U.S. is a destination country, but China is a source country. So, these challenges are just creating more and more opportunities for criminal organisations, so, that's why they just enjoy transferring these materials and then killing people, but on the other end, making millions of dollars from this type of trafficking,

SG: And contributing to global misery as well. So, this has been a very sobering discussion that we've been having on a wide range of security issues from terrorism, state actors, non-state actors, and of course, narcotics. Mahmut, let me thank you again for providing this very important and timely analysis and continue to read all your articles and important research and look forward to what you'll be doing in the future as well.

MC: My pleasure, thanks for inviting me.

SG: It's been our pleasure.

Episode 56 – Alexander Vindman and Curbing Russian Expansionism, May 2024

Key Reflections

- **Sergei Shoigu's reshuffle was a political calculation rather than one related to the war against Ukraine. It was designed to insulate Putin's rule for a further six years by replacing separate power centres from his inner circle.**
- **After Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, the Wagner Group was gradually brought under the control of the Ministry of Defence and state security services. Wagner now no longer resembles anything that existed beforehand.**
- **If Ukraine hopes to launch a successful counter-offensive next year, it needs to mobilise both its manpower and its economy.**
- **Continued Western support for Ukraine is the surest way to end Putin's aggression; the West must think more creatively about how to achieve this.**
- **Russian fingerprints are present and consistent when it comes to developments in other theatres, like Georgia's foreign agent law; Moscow can both subtly encourage indigenous pro-Russian pockets as well as take more active measures to influence, depending on the context.**
- **The West should lead with a values-based approach, rather than only engaging with other countries on a transactional basis; this is especially true for regions that have often been more neglected, like Central Asia.**

SG: Dr. Sajjan Gohel

AV: Alexander Vindman

SG: Welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Sajjan Gohel, and in this episode, I speak with Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, who was the Director for European Affairs at the United States National Security Council.

Lieutenant Colonel Vindman was also at the Pentagon as the Political-Military Affairs Officer for Russia and as an attaché at the American embassies in Moscow and Kyiv. While on the Joint Staff, he authored the US National Military Strategy for Russia. His military awards include two Legions of Merit and the Purple Heart. He is the author of the New York Times bestselling memoir, Here, Right Matters: An American Story. He also leads the Here Right Matters Foundation, a nonprofit organisation dedicated to helping Ukraine win its war with Russia and rebuild afterwards.

Lieutenant Colonel Vindman, welcome to the NATO DEEP Dive podcast.

AV: Thank you for having me on and looking forward to the conversation.

SG: It's a huge honour to have you with us.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has replaced his defence minister and long-term close ally Sergei Shoigu with an economist Andrey Belousov, at the same time Shoigu replaces Nikolai Patrushev, the Secretary of the Security Council of Russia. On the surface these seem odd changes, but in your opinion, what does this major reshuffle tell us?

AV: Sure. Again, thanks for having me on. I think it is both an interesting timing for the change and interesting changes. I take a little bit of a different view in that; some analysts seem to think that Shoigu is being demoted. I'm not quite sure that's the picture. I think in a way he's being rewarded

for his loyalty, and the Secretary of the Security Council, seemingly is a smaller portfolio, in that it's not the Ministry of Defence, but it sits astride of all of the power ministries, and Nikolai Patrushev, who had been in positions since 2008, was considered one of Putin's most loyal supporters, and a power centre in his own right.

Frankly in my mind when I thought about the day after Putin and I thought about some of the worst-case scenarios, I thought that Nikolai Patrushev could potentially be his replacement. Meaning that there's a group of hardliners that get together, in this hypothetical world and Putin is set aside, and you get an even more hardliner in the form of Nikolai Patrushev. He is a hawk. I've sat across the table with him on multiple occasions. And the fact that he is being set aside, to me, to a certain extent, is a way for Putin to further insulate his latest term in office, his next six years. And by eliminating a separate power centre, putting Shoigu into that position, somebody that's entirely loyal to Putin.

What's interesting is that Patrushev is also being pacified in that his son is taking a position as a deputy prime minister. Shoigu is moving out from the Ministry of Defence, where he was in kind of a technocrat role, he's not a classic technocrat, he's coming out of the Ministry of Emergency Services, but somebody that was supposed to be a manager, an effective manager. He's not proven to be a particularly effective manager. He's more of a loyal Putin supporter. So, the person that's replacing him is in somewhat the same vein, certainly in somewhat the same vein as the predecessor to Shoigu a guy named (Anatoly) Serdyukov, who is himself a deep technocrat, looked at implementing what was called new look reforms, major reforms within the Russian Ministry of Defence, and in again, a purely managerial role.

Now Belousov is interesting. He's an economist by background, by many accounts an effective technocrat that will look to leverage the military industrial base to support a war effort that's more based on the principles of attritional warfare and outproducing Ukraine and the entirety of the West to win Russia's war against Ukraine. All in all, it is still a bit of a strange shakeup. Russia has just launched what looks like it's going to be a major summer offensive; launched a campaign to pressure Ukraine second largest city Kharkiv and make some territorial gains throughout the eastern flank of the theatre of war. And it's a bit of a strange time to do it, unless you realise that the Ministry of Defence for itself doesn't play a critical role, it's really the General Staff, the uniform component of the military that plays the critical role, but still a strange time to do it.

The last thing I'll mention is that Putin did win a six-year term, 'win'—seize a six-year term of office—and from a political standpoint, that's when you start making some changes. So, I think these decisions are not really about Ukraine and the war effort so much, it's a factor, but it's a secondary factor. It's about setting conditions for six more years of Putin rule, insulating Putin, positioning people where he wants them. It's a political calculation rather than something purely around the war itself.

SG: You raised a lot of important and very interesting points that are very nuanced in understanding this dynamic. So, Shoigu effectively has remained quite a popular person in Russia and, as you mentioned, very close to Putin, Patrushev, effectively, some say was the second most powerful person in Russia, is now effectively also sidelined. And as you were talking about that, his ouster removes, I guess, an alternative power centre in Russia. Does Patrushev need to be worried about his own safety and security? Keeping in mind that people in Russia somewhat mysteriously die such as Yevgeny Prigozhin, who at one time was the head of the Russian private military company, the Wagner Group.

AV: Yeah, so I don't think Patrushev has that much to worry about. Unless he tries to challenge this reshuffle, which I don't think he will. I think Putin over the course of the past year since—it's been about a year since Prigozhin launched his pitiful coup attempt/insurrection and then was relatively quickly disposed of months later. I think over the course of that year, Putin has strengthened his hand to a certain extent, amongst the security services. I think that he's probably going to offer sinecure, it sounds like Patrushev is going to get a senior advisor role with some authority and access to Putin and Patrushev's son, who's been in the wings as the next generation princeling, has been offered a senior position to help kind of secure the Patrushev legacy and the fortunes.

So, I don't think Patrushev is going to follow the fate of more peripheral actors, because that's what Prigozhin was, a more peripheral actor. This is an inner circle individual that's now been shifted off. It's happened before, Ivanov, the former Minister of Defence, was sidelined several years back, [and now] is living comfortably and peacefully. I think Patrushev is likely to be in that same role, because

he's inner circle and is going to be resigned to his fate more than likely. So, I think that's probably the case here.

SG: And since Prigozhin's death, killing…murder…

AV: Murder.

SG: Murder, right. What has happened to the Wagner Group as an entity, does it still function as the auxiliary arm for Vladimir Putin's war machine?

AV: So, one of the critical components of Wagner and these private military companies is that there was a patina of independence or non-attribution to the Government of the Russian Federation. That doesn't exist anymore. I think the utility of PMCs as a whole, except for the fact that they're now funded by state owned enterprises that are footing the bill, but are subordinated and acting on the instructions of the security services and Ministry of Defence. I think that utility is now kind of gone. Step by step Wagner, over the course of the past year, was rolled in and subordinated in a very methodical manner into the Ministry of Defence and state security services.

I think that process was managed very, very well in that the risks of rogue elements of Wagner in far flung places where the Russian security services themselves were not strong, were really, really well kind of mitigated. The gradual process of making sure that the chain of command was reinforced and that it was the Ministry of Defence or the security services that were pulling the strings, that became increasingly clear. So, I think that Wagner doesn't really resemble anything that existed beforehand. It's now an extension of the Ministry of Defence and Security Services, not a seemingly independent, private military company doing the bidding of whoever's the payer. We know that of course, it was the Russian government and the Russian budget that paid for it. So, I think that the PMCs in general are not what they were a year ago.

SG: Well, thank you for clarifying that. As you mentioned, a little bit earlier, Russia is launching its most serious cross border ground assaults in Ukraine for quite a while, this summer offensive. There have been several months already of increased Russian air attacks on the city of Kharkiv amid a grinding advance in the Donetsk region. And there's been concerns that they are making slow but incremental gains. What has aided Russia's ability to escalate matters?

AV: So, I think first we should be clear that Russia is going to be successful in this very, very incremental approach. That's not going to stack up into a strategic threat. It's probably not likely to stack up into much of an operational threat, but they are likely to make some gains. The reason that that's the case is because in a lot of ways Ukraine didn't have an answer to the preferred techniques and tactics that Russia has been employing recently.

One of those reasons is that Ukraine had a deep scarcity of support from the west for an extended period of time. Without the interceptors for Western air defence systems, Russia was able to press an advantage with regards to air power and achieve some form of air superiority localised. In achieving that air superiority, Russia was able to deploy these CABs effectively to just demolish strong points, and then advance through a cleared area. In the next layer, Ukraine didn't have sufficient artillery to just repel advancing Russian forces.

Those were some of the key conditions, the rest of it is not entirely new. For instance, the Russians have been using these wave assaults relatively effectively to make really small tactical gains, just overwhelming Ukrainian defences at very, very localised levels. So, that's not new. It's the depletion of artillery, depletion of airpower, and, frankly, Russia's increased use of drones, FPV drones, that have allowed Russia to make some tactical gains.

Some of those dynamics are likely to shift in the coming weeks. The artillery scarcity is going to improve, Ukraine is going to have more ammunition, Ukraine is going to have more interceptors to impede Russian use of airpower. The F-16s, when they come online, are going to have an impact, a significant impact. The maths on the ability for the Ukrainians to employ F-16s with AM20 missiles that have about 160-kilometre range, will not allow the Russians to fly their air power close to the front and employ CABs. So, that part is going to change.

The part that's not going to change that much is the Russians are advancing the cause of producing more drones and are going to be able to use those more effectively. So, I think the situation is going to stabilise over the coming weeks and months, reducing Russia's ability to make gains, but Russia

is still likely to make some gains. For me this year is mainly about Ukraine holding and building. Holding back Russian gains, trading space for time, trading some character, the limited amount of territory for significant Russian casualties, for some breathing room to defend in depth, and then building, the work will amount to a significant offensive next year. I think that's the big picture. In the spring or summer of next year, Ukraine should have the capability to conduct some focused, successful offensives and put pressure on Russia.

In order to do that it needs to do a couple of things. These are probably the most critical things. It needs to mobilise. It needs to mobilise manpower; it needs to mobilise its economy. It has not sufficiently mobilised its economy, it's still running in a lot of ways in a peacetime economy. Even with the huge numbers of mom-and-pop drone shops, the industrial resources of Ukraine haven't been leveraged in a sufficient way, and the manpower question has to be fixed sooner rather than later. They need at least 300,000 troops, about half of that to fill in depleted units and to add units to be able to rotate worn down Ukrainian units offline and the remainder to train over the course of the next year and change to be able to conduct an offensive. So, that's the deeper picture from now kind of into next year.

SG: I have to say that it's very reassuring to talk to you about all of this, because very often there are these pictures of doom and gloom that are being painted and sometimes this aspect of war fatigue comes in as well. And you've been critical of the negative news coverage of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and sometimes the dire predictions that have been made. What more needs to be done to make people aware of why this war is being fought, why Ukraine needs to continue to be supported. You've explained a lot about the military dynamic, but what else can be done for people to be better informed as to the necessity of aiding and supporting Ukraine continuously?

AV: I think that that strategic picture is absolutely critical. Just a quick comment on the optimism or casting doubts over the most dire predictions. I think there's a lot in the story I just told between a potential successful Ukrainian counter offensive next year, and now—there's a lot that needs to happen. Some of those steps are already in place. The passing of a large Ukraine aid bill is going to be helpful, the Europeans stepping up in a big way is going to be helpful. There are still some decisions absent.

The West needs to make a decision about Ukraine winning. The West needs to make a decision about properly supporting Ukraine, dropping the incrementalism. The West needs to make a decision about training Ukrainians in a much more robust manner to conduct combined arms operations. Otherwise, it is hard to see how we get to a successful Ukrainian counter offensive.

Now in addition to doing policy work, I'm actually conducting programmes in Ukraine to help with command and staff training, to help with localising and repairing Western equipment. These are programmes that run through a nonprofit as well as a for profit because frankly, some things are just too big to do in a nonprofit space. So, I'm not waiting, frankly in a lot of ways, I'm not waiting for the U.S. to make the decision, from a civil society perspective, there's already some items that are in play that could help advance his cause.

The other side of the equation is that the Russians are really learning, they're adapting and they're making some changes to the way they fight this war, but they're still a basket case. They're still highly ineffective, they're not going to be able to fix the problems with regard to corruption, they're unlikely to fix the problems with properly training the force, they can't fix the problems with regards to properly resourcing the force, even as they accumulate manpower, because even massive industrial base and investments that are putting into work can't produce sufficient equipment for Russia's war effort, it's hard to see how they really make that turn. And increasingly they're relying on old Soviet-era equipment. So, that's not a formula for success. My balanced view is that I'd rather be in the Ukrainian shoes, and the Ukrainians have a better prospect, and a better theory for victory than the Russians do. The Russian effort is to grind and hopefully, in their mind, that grind is sufficient to put pressure on the Ukrainians to win. I don't think that's a theory of victory.

Now, the big picture to your question is this should not be delinked from the geopolitical picture. Too often, this is seen as a discrete war in Europe. It's interesting that we can make that kind of argument when the largest country in the world is fighting a war against the largest country in Europe, and the prospects of broader war spillover remain high, that, either by accident or miscalculation, Russia blunders into some sort of hybrid or direct confrontation with the West, not something that they want, but they can make a miscalculation about the resolve of the West and vulnerabilities around

NATO, that NATO Article Five is not sacrosanct, that there is a fracture to exploit. It's a problem, it's a legitimate concern, because the President, our President, President Trump has offered that kind of prospect, that Article Five is not sacrosanct, that Russia could attack NATO and the U.S. would sit out on the side. It's deeply problematic, and there's a lot of room for acts of miscalculation.

There's also, I think, a lack of understanding about what the rest of the authoritarian world, because if they're not outright coordinating in some sort of like villainous, buried chamber about how they want to operate, they're certainly observing each other, sharing best practices, communicating, and that these lessons of Western resolve, the West being able to adequately support Ukraine to defend itself and push back on authoritarianism, are lessons that the Chinese are drawing conclusions about, that the Iranians are drawing conclusions about. I don't think the inflamed atmosphere in the Middle East would happen if there was much more fulsome support for Ukraine from the beginning and Russia was more on its heels. I think the fact is that the lesson that the Iranians would be feeling is that the West is resolved, and that proxy warfare, or encouraging terrorist attacks wouldn't be there. I think that was a collective error by the West to not demonstrate that kind of resolve. I think the Chinese are drawing some conclusions about how far they can push it in the Pacific.

It is clear to me that the aggressive moves that the Chinese are taking in the South China Sea, with regards to the Philippines, is a way to test the Western resolve. It is a way to exploit Western distraction. And some people might argue, because of a hyper focus on Russia and Ukraine but I think it's less than that. It's a hyper focus on missing the picture on the threat to democracy and the inability to consolidate. The U.S. was attempting to lead a democracy union, a democracy summit to bring democracies together to defend our collective interests. We haven't really carried that notion forward even under the threat of a large-scale war. And I think our adversaries are picking up on that.

So, I think the urgency for support to Ukraine and resolve in pushing back on authoritarian aggression, is that these things are not only linked, they're connected, and that what we're seeing is a concerted effort of the authoritarian world to exploit potential vulnerabilities in the democratic world for gain and lock in those gains. So, it is a deep threat, it is probably the defining challenge of this part of the 21st century, and either the remainder of the 21st century will be one where you see a revival of democracies or one in which there is continued pressure and this trendline of a couple of decades of democracy unwinding persists.

SG: These are a lot of key points and you amply demonstrated the macro and the micro of all of this and the wider implications as to why it's so important to be invested in Ukraine, because the fact is, as we've been discussing, it can, if it doesn't go the way it needs to, it can embolden a lot of hostile state actors. There's so much to ask you just to build on all of that, but I wanted to look at you as a person before we move on, because very often for our podcast, we want to understand the person and what motivates you and your background is fascinating, and just to delve more into that. So, you were born in Soviet Ukraine, but left at an early age to live in the United States. I can imagine it can't have been easy to just migrate to because surely the Soviet Union wouldn't just allow people to leave back in those days?

AV: So, I think "migrate" is a nice way of putting; we left as refugees. We left as refugees from the Soviet Union with really nothing. We left as a result of the US and the West living up to its values and putting pressure on the Soviet Union to alleviate the oppression of the Jewish population. We launched sanctions, the Jackson-Vanik sanctions, prohibiting some forms of trade and limiting grain flows unless the Russians made the decision to release the Jewish population and allow them to flee as refugees.

Once my family made that decision, we settled in the United States. My dad was 47, arguably at the end of a professional career. He came to the United States with $750 in his pocket, and we started a new existence in the US. My dad settled into a professional role as an engineer, which is really quite unique to be able to leave without the credentials or anything of that nature. But he was quite specialised, and he was able to do that. And we grew up in the US as children of a public servant, a civil servant, who was a member of a union and had those social supports. It kind of shapes my own views towards a much more open-minded—I don't know if I'd call it entirely progressive, I'd say in the UK context, this would be conservative, that we need to provide some basic social supports, like living wages, like a health safety net and things of that nature. But it allowed my family that came as refugees to flourish and participate in the American dream.

SG: That's fascinating. You made a life and career in the military. What made you choose that path?

AV: I'm not sure if it was a conscious decision that I was going to be a career military officer. I did Reserve Officer Training, was commissioned as a second lieutenant, and initially thought I was going to probably do a short four-year stint or something like that, have some fun, maybe become a little more disciplined because I recognised back then I was not very disciplined and needed some way to focus my energies—probably a late bloomer, still somewhat immature. But what was fascinating is that the opportunities that the military provides in our system for advancement, for self-improvement, to learn a public service value set built upon the values that my dad inculcated into us.

I had some pretty amazing opportunities. I had the chance to lead troops—I was a staff officer and a company commander during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. I had the chance to then pursue something more specialised, leveraging my language and cultural understanding as a US Army Foreign Area Officer, so a soldier-diplomat; get advanced degrees from Harvard, a Master's at Harvard; pick up additional language; travel throughout the former Soviet space; really develop an interest and a passion to understand different cultures in different regions. And then I served in some pretty awesome positions. My first stint as a Foreign Area Officer was as an attaché in Moscow, you know, the World Series—the cricket championships, to put it in the UK context.

And then from there, I went back to the Pentagon and was the principal author of the US military strategy for Russia and the global campaign plan for Russia and how we operationalize the strategy—and then on that basis, I was selected to serve in the White House, to take the military strategy and implement it on a whole-of-government scale. And then after that, when I was forced out of the military after exposing Donald Trump's corruption, I finished up my doctorate at Johns Hopkins, on the topic of US and Western policy towards Russia and Ukraine. I just turned in my manuscript; it's my next book coming out in the winter. So, it's been a pretty awesome trek, both in formal public service and now in civil society, still in my mind in public service.

I get to run a think-tank called the Institute for Informed American Leadership, engage with the White House, now from the civil society perspective, engage with Congress in a whole host of relationships, providing policy advice, engage with your government's leadership on occasion and European governments' leadership, and when I travel to Ukraine, engage with basically the entirety of the Ukrainian national security establishment, still on the passions that I had for well over a decade and now implementing programmes as well as conceiving of ideas, so I feel blessed. Most people think about my story maybe more in a tragic setting—I think of it as doing the right thing, being forced out, and then just starting from scratch—much like my father did when he came to the US as an adult, but with better tools I guess.

SG: I think everybody who knows of you knows what a distinguished career you've led and how you led with a moral compass as well. It's interesting that you have a twin brother, Yevgeny, who also served in the army. Is that a twin thing? Is it that you both just grew up with the same ideas?

AV: I think there is a twin thing. My twin brother and I are very, very close. We talk to each other every day and spend as much time with each other as possible. I think that there is a stream of public service in my family. All my brothers have served in the military. My older brother served as a reservist, also in the army, my stepbrother served in the Marine Corps, and my twin brother and I made a career out of our military service. My twin actually was in the National Security Council with me and was also run out of the White House based on Trump's retaliation and retribution, but as an indication of the strong passion we have for public service, he's actually running for Congress in Virginia. And he might not say this, but I think by all accounts, by the political oddsmakers and so forth, he's the clear frontrunner, and he's likely to do well and probably, I don't want to jinx it, but find himself in the next Congress. So, he will continue to serve as an elected official, is the intent.

SG: Well, that's awesome. If we can move back to the current situation with Ukraine and then also some of the wider picture—you've already explained it very well and, in much detail, —but is it fair to say that Putin just simply won't stop with Ukraine? There is this argument that is made in some quarters that for Putin, this is just about Ukraine, this was about stopping Ukraine from joining NATO. Would he be wanting to stir up tensions as a follow-up to whatever is done in Ukraine? I'm thinking of, for example, tensions in the Republika Srpska, which is part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Transnistria, or even using Kaliningrad as a platform to antagonise countries like Poland and Lithuania. I guess what I'm saying is that this isn't just about Ukraine for Putin. There's a wider objective.

AV: Sure. So, I think let's start with that. I think the fact is he's the ultimate spoiler, he's the ultimate

troublemaker. His objective is to decrease stability because in chaos there's opportunity. In all of the different regions that you mentioned, there's an opportunity for him to stir that kind of trouble, distract, test the West. So that's just his kind of perennial role as a KGB—I guess he probably excelled at the KGB sabotage classes that he took at the KGB academy. So, I think that's part of the story of Putin in general; he looks for opportunities in chaos and division. I would say, if that's his general mindset, this war is entirely about subduing Ukraine.

There's a very famous Zbigniew Brzezinski line that's actually also in my dissertation and in my book, it's kind of the opening line, it's Zbigniew Brzezinski's refrain that Russia absent Ukraine ceases to become an empire, but with Ukraine subordinated and suborned, it automatically becomes an empire—probably not exactly right, but close enough. I think this is entirely about Ukraine. It's about the conception of Russian power, and the centrality of Ukraine to Russian power, that Ukraine adds a huge amount of manpower and has a huge amount of economic heft. It adds the potential for Russia, with Ukraine folded back, establishing its own Eurasian pole in a multipolar world. And as long as he sees an opportunity to do that, he will.

That's why I think it's absolutely stunning that we have not been much more thoughtful about how to bring Ukraine into NATO and end this theory. Because as soon as Ukraine enters NATO, that theory just evaporates. Putin is not in any way interested in a direct confrontation with the US or NATO, the collective power of NATO in the West is massive. The collective economic power is 25 times that of the Russian Federation. The military might is staggering, especially when you see the shortfalls of how the Russians have been performing. So, there is no interest in a conventional fight, and recognising that a conventional fight would be futile, and that you would automatically escalate to a nuclear war, there is no appetite for mutually assured destruction. That doctrine is ironclad. So, bringing Ukraine into NATO is the surest way to end Putin's theory of victory around Ukraine, around aggression, at least with regards to the Ukrainian context. And it's a problem that we're not thinking more creatively about this.

Getting back to these other regional conflicts, I think that they are not something that Russia has a huge amount of bandwidth or resources to mess around in, but within the hybrid war context, within the ability to use limited resources efficiently and generally cause trouble, to complicate and distract, I think the Russians will look at that. I think you're seeing that within the Moldovan context, Transnistria. Russia has a tiny footprint that would be absolutely and very quickly subdued—Moldova's military is pretty small, but Moldova, with Romanian support, with Ukraine coming in from the other side —those forces would be very quickly subdued, then Russia would lose its kind of frozen conflict in that region. So, I think they want to ratchet it up without triggering something there that eliminates their pocket. I think there are probably some indications that the unrest in Georgia is an opportunity not that dissimilar to the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine to also use that leverage, use that relationship with [Bidzina] Ivanishvili, the oligarch that basically orchestrates this…the party is escaping me, the name—it'll come back to me [Georgian Dream].

I think there are some hallmarks of Russian footprints in a more hybrid space in Georgia also, trying to gird the pro-Russian faction there and get them to subdue the will of the people, which is pretty amazing when you see how many people are out on the streets protesting against this anti-democratic step to have civil society register if they receive any foreign funds, similar to the Russians' own foreign agent laws. So anyway, I think I see Russian fingerprints in a lot of different places. I don't know if I would go so far as to be conspiratorial and say Russia has its own strings, but it's certainly kind of nudging and influencing in certain regards, and is playing a more active role in certain regards, and playing a passive role advancing indigenous pro-Russian pockets to cause trouble.

SG: Just to ask you also about Georgia a little more—you've got a huge amount of experience on that country—is that being shaped and influenced by outside involvement, especially when it comes to Russia, because Georgia's parliament has voted through a very divisive foreign agent law that has sparked weeks of mass protests inside the country. We've seen those images of the capital Tbilisi as well. Should we be concerned about that as a further expansion of Russia seeking to take advantage of its neighbouring countries and former satellite parts of the Soviet Union?

AV: I think so. So let me give you an example—it's not quite apples to apples, but relatively close. Before the Revolution of Dignity, you had Armenia that was making headway on an EU association agreement, and the Armenians were bribed and pressured to withdraw from that agreement and join the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia's version of the EU. In the Ukrainian context, you had an

eleventh-hour withdrawal of Yanukovich from the EU Association Agreement and a pledge to join the Eurasian Economic Union based on a bribe by some estimates 15 billion, but probably at least 10 billion dollars.

I think that there are similar pressures being put on Ivanishvili, whose fortunes are connected to trade with Russia, with incentives and pressure and sticks on Ivanishvili holding the line on his pro-Russian orientation. I think the fact is, because we're not privy to the intelligence, we can't know this with absolute clarity, but the hallmarks of Russia's approach are there and consistent. I think the tactics that are being employed will also bear the hallmarks of what amounted to failed policies with regards to how Russia encouraged Ukraine to act under Yanukovich. I think this is going to backfire.

The foreign agent law is definitely modelled on Russia's foreign agent law. And that doesn't have to be the Russians transmitting wholesale, it could be just some general encouragement. And then the indigenous efforts for Ivanishvili to neutralise civil society that's been protesting the democratic backsliding and the criticism he's been getting from the west. So, I think there's definitely enough circumstantial evidence to suggest that Russia is involved in some way or another, nurturing the domestic feelings of Ivanishvili and his party to secure their own power in a similar manner in which Russia has operated in other parts of the region and former Soviet space.

SG: My producers and I were just discussing offline also about Russia's role when it comes to some other parts of the former Soviet Union, in particular Central Asia, where we have seen Russia's role, its presence, for example, say, in Kazakhstan, where Russia sent in troops when it looked like there could be a growing movement against the regime there. How does Central Asia play out when it comes to Putin's agenda?

AV: More successfully, frankly, in a lot of ways. I think it's because it's so remote, and our resources to be able to support any democratic institutions have become much more scarce in that part of the world. Our interest in being able to engage with Central Asia has been very, very transactional and limited. I think frankly, in a lot of ways, it's a bit of a shortfall in how the US and the West has engaged with Eurasia as a whole. My doctoral dissertation and thesis is that the US should recognise the centrality of values to interests and use that methodology as a compass heading to be able to engage consistently with a region instead of transactionally on a case-by-case basis. I think we see that where US interests are clearer, more resources are going in, but where US interests are more remote, it tends to be far more transactional. Certainly during the Global War on Terror, we prioritised our relationship with Russia, and the kind of influence that Russia could leverage in the Central Asian states, and allowing us air transit rights to get to Afghanistan, and we underserved our values with regards to engaging with those countries and urging or nurturing any seeds of democratic tendencies. Now, Central Asia is a little bit different in that you basically had communist apparatchiks take over and rule uninterrupted almost from independence forward. So, we didn't really have as much means to be able to engage with Central Asia, but still, we certainly have prioritised Russia over our engagement with Central Asia in a lot of ways for large for large stretches of the post-Soviet period.

SG: It's fascinating, all the insight and detail that you're providing. A final question. You've been very gracious with your time, but we can't let you go without talking about your appearances in Curb Your Enthusiasmbecause both myself and one of the producers for NATO DEEP Dive, Victoria Jones, whom you've met before, we're both addicted to the show, and we both thought you've been brilliant in it. Quite frankly, I thought you stole the show in the very last episode of the last series, you put Jerry Seinfeld in the shade. How did these appearances on the show come about? How much did you also have some influence on the lines that were used in the show?

Sure. So, I'll start with that part. It's almost unscripted. I would say any script that they have is more of a guideline and then you can play with it. So I think we'd maybe do five or six or seven takes, whichever one seems to land with feeling—I call myself an actor, I'm an actor—hopefully that translates that I'm giggling at myself—might capture in that moment, as well the general mood and theme of the episode, they'll land on that kind of particular take, but lots of latitude. In the season before, I added the line of "call me colonel" in my last couple of words and stuff like that in that season. So, it was fun. I think I near nailed the role of playing myself but in a kind of a character manner. So, I think they casted well for that role. But I think in terms of how that landed, you know it almost didn't.

When I first was approached in the fall of 2020, I had just left military service and I declined because

I thought it was too kind of off-brand and probably took myself too seriously and felt like I had to maintain a particular type of image or something like that. Ultimately, when Larry David came back on and was charming and invited me to come back on, what won me over is that we had a niece that was born about nine months before, and we had not seen her yet, and this was an excuse for my family and I to get first-class tickets to fly out to LA to do the shoot. So, I agreed on that basis and what I quickly realised is that it was fun, and that I should be open to new experiences. So now my test is if it sounds like it's going to be fun, I'll do it and try it once. It was a good thing to be able to do.

SG: Well, we're all very grateful that you did do it. I hope in future series you'll continue to play a role in that because your humour was brilliant, I have to say.

AV: I'm the comedian in my family, so I mean its natural!

SG: Well, obviously your kids will probably find it extremely cool that you're in it. I'm very envious myself.

Well, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, you have been very gracious with your time. You are an exceptionally humble person. All your experience, all your knowledge is so important. You've helped provide us with greater depth as to what is unfolding in the world. And it has been a true honour to talk to you for the NATO DEEP Dive podcast, and hope you'll consider coming on the show again in the future.

AV: I look forward to it, and I look forward to meeting you in person. Thank you.

SG: Likewise.