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TRANSCRIPT

The Truth of the Matter

“Global Jihadist Shot in the Arm”

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Andrew
Schwartz:

I'm Andrew Schwartz, and you're listening to The Truth of the Matter, a podcast by CSIS where we break down the top policy issues of the day and talk with the people that can help us best understand what's really going on.

To help us get to the truth of the matter today about what now in Afghanistan, we have with us Dr. Seth Jones of CSIS, who's our senior vice president, head of our International Security program. And we have another very special guest. We have Mike Vickers, who is basically an American defense and security legend. He most recently was undersecretary of defense for intelligence, appointed by President Barack Obama in 2010. But his career goes way, way, way back. He was an army officer, served in army special forces, worked in the CIA, and some people even know him from *Charlie Wilson's War*. He was somebody who worked with the CIA and the Afghan mujahideen in their conflict with the Russians in the 1980s. So, Mike, thank you for joining the podcast today. We've got a lot to talk about.

Mike Vickers:

My pleasure.

Andrew
Schwartz:

So I want to start out with both of you, just how bad is the terrorist threat now given that we're out of Afghanistan, we're withdrawing every day, and what do we do about it?

Mike Vickers:

So the terrorist threat is diminished in terms of catastrophic attack capability on the U.S. homeland from what it was at 9/11 and then in previous periods as al Qaeda reconstituted and the federal aid meshed tribal areas of Pakistan, and then ISIS in Syria, but it's still a global threat. The global jihadists are spread all over the world, and in multiple theaters and countries, their ranks are growing. Seth can talk about this, but the numbers are up. And so one of the key things we've learned in counterterrorism is that whenever you give global jihadist groups any sanctuary for any period of time, the threat room rises. And so there's that danger ahead as well.

Andrew
Schwartz:

Seth?

Dr. Seth G. Jones:

If you go on the numbers from some of the recent UN security council reports on Afghanistan including the June, 2021 assessment, before the Taliban overthrow of the Afghan government, there were about 10,000 or so fighters, terrorists, foreign terrorists, including Al Qaeda, some on the Islamic State Khorasan Province, some of the anti-Indian groups, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and when you add to that, the number of individuals that

have been now released from prisons in Kabul and in Kandahar and up at Bagram, we have added several thousand to that, you know, increasing 25, 30, 40%. So I, that terrorism situation as Mike appropriately noted, was under control in the sense that we haven't seen a lot of active plotting against the United States or the U.S. Homeland coming from Afghanistan. But the challenge is, is the U.S. now has withdrawn or is withdrawing the pressure against these groups with an increase with the prison releases, the pressure is going to be, and it's going to be almost no pressure, at least in the foreseeable future.

And if you look at a lot of the jihadists chat rooms over the past week or so, there's been a lot of activity and senior level jihadists now trying to reorient the focus away from primarily Syria, not, not that there's entirely a one-to-one trade-off, but away from just Syria and towards Afghanistan. Now, there are some challenges in getting to Afghanistan, especially if you're coming from Africa and some areas of the Middle East, but a big focus on Afghanistan as the big win now for jihadists. The Americans look weak, they've just left. This looks like a victory for both the Taliban and jihadists. So this is, I mean, this is a big, big win from their perspective. And I think that that creates some challenges moving forward.

Mike Vickers:

If I could add to that two points—those were excellent comments. One is just to reinforce that this is a huge just shot in the arm and motivator for global jihadists worldwide. I mean, they, they really feel like, you know, the red sea was partnered here and, you know, it's their day. The second thing that Seth also alluded to is that people compare Afghanistan to Yemen and Syria, two of our other principal theaters, or we do remote operations. There's a big difference though. And that is in Syria and Yemen, the global jihad, the Sunni global jihadist groups also face a hostile government. We're not aligned with them, the Houthis the Iranian backed group in Yemen and the Assad regime, obviously in Syria. And Afghanistan now they have a friend who has the state and they have long time relationships. As Seth mentioned with the Connie network with Pakistani Taliban, TTP, and others. And so one would expect the threat to go up considerably for in Afghanistan.

Andrew Schwartz:

I have to ask you both, all of a sudden, we're hearing about something called ISIS-K. What is ISIS-K?

Mike Vickers:

It stands for the Islamic State's Khorasan Province, Khorasan being an ancient land that spanned Iran, parts of central Asia, and parts of Afghanistan. One of several provinces, or as ISIS calls them are franchises, basically from, from the core group.

Dr. Seth G. Jones: As the Islamic state expanded, this became kind of a natural location for the Islamic state to start to expand. They have their origins, particularly in Eastern Afghanistan in areas like Orakzai. They have mostly former Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan members. The challenge though, their numbers were coming down. I mean, the U.S. and Afghan forces conducted pretty persistent strikes. Taliban a little bit as well. Numbers were probably down to about 2,000 of them up for maybe 6,000 a few years ago, but there's going to be now a lot of opportunity for resurgence. I'll just note, Andrew, just to follow on one of Mike's other points, is that the Islamic state and Al Qaeda, even in the region have had a pretty tense relationship. The ideology, right from the beginning in 2015 and 2016 as the Islamic State was putting out a range of propaganda, pretty, pretty nasty targeting the Taliban and Al Qaeda, as un-Islamic as infidels.

There's been, we've seen active fighting between Islamic State in southern Afghanistan, in provinces like Farah and Helmand, and then also in the east, in Nangarhar and a little bit in Kunar as well. So, there's been some active fighting. It's also worth noting, as we found out from Alan Colson from the *Wall Street Journal*, who had been interviewing prisoners just before the Taliban takeover, that the Taliban killed some senior Islamic State prisoners that the Afghan government had housed. So, I mean, that shows you even, even as of the last week or so Taliban have killed some senior Islamic state prisoners, part of that bloodletting.

Andrew Schwartz: You know, something I neglected to mention as I introduced Mike, is that Mike, you have worked across the aisle in both Democrat and Republican administrations. I think your first posting at the Pentagon was under Donald Rumsfeld during George W. Bush's administration?

Mike Vickers: Yes, actually, it was Bob Gates who had just taken over as Secretary of Defense, but it was right. Kind of transition.

Andrew Schwartz: Right? So my question is, is that with this threat that's emerging here, you just said, it's a shot in the arm for global jihadists, you know, under a lot of circumstances, the United States in our national security community would certainly be rallying together, whether they're Republicans or Democrats to really think about how do we address this big problem now. With the polarization we're facing, and we're seeing just in these last couple of weeks, partisan sniping going on about this withdrawal, do you think it's possible for the national security community, the intelligence community come together to try to work towards viable solutions?

Mike Vickers: Yeah, I think the professionals will, without any question, you know, the military and the IC and those focused on counterterrorism and the state department of Homeland security, FBI, et cetera. Politically, of course, as you said, it's a very difficult environment now. So that'll be somewhat challenging. I think no one wants another attack on the Homeland. And so this may be a lot of smoke, not necessarily a lot of inhibiting action, you know, at the end of the day. The key thing though, is, is having the right policies. You know, we, we didn't have the right policies in the 1990s. One of the reasons we got hit on 9/11, you know, we switched strategy from kind of reactive to proactive and sustained. And then after we ejected the Taliban from Afghanistan in '01, they were able to reconstitute and it took us a while to really develop the right policy that really dismantled core Al-Qaeda and the Afghanistan Pakistan border region. That started under president Bush and was sustained by President Obama, the first three or four years, his first term, essentially. And it really broke the back of core Al-Qaida whether it will do that kind of aggressive policy again, is that if the threat rises and whether there'll be bipartisan support is an open question.

Andrew Schwartz: Is it possible for us to formulate good policy now that we're out of there? Russia, China and Iran are all present now in Afghanistan and we're out and how are we going to be able to know what to do if we don't have a presence there?

Mick Vickers: Yeah. So not having a presence has a number of operational impacts. One is you lose the forward basis that you had. So flying over, you have a lot more time and transit coming from much longer distances than any other counter-terrorism theater. And you lose the benefit of the intelligence that you can only get from having people on the ground, having a presence there, both diplomatic and military and intelligence. But also, as you said, you're not only facing a potentially hostile regime that's telling us, make sure we get out by the end of the month here, but also potentially some backers that may want to help them in various ways, making our life more difficult. A lot of our counter-terrorism operations take place in uncovered areas. That's naturally where global jihadists go, but it also means we have some freedom of action in various areas, other areas we're very dependent on a government to allow us to overfly, et cetera. So it is an open question about how cooperative or how, how much we'll be able to operate.

Dr. Seth G. Jones: Andrew. I just wanted to add one other comment just to reinforce this point that Mike is making. And that is, if you look at some of, even the more successful counter-terrorism campaigns over the past few years, the U.S. has had forces in Somalia, and it's also had the ability to station aircraft, including MQ-9s, very close in and around Djibouti. So that's a pretty short distance, same thing on the Yemen side. In Syria against the Islamic State, the

U.S. was on the ground in both on the Iraqi side and then it's partnered with, uh, Syrian Democratic Forces on the Syrian side of the border. One cannot overstate how difficult this now is with a regime that is going to be anti-American. And one, that's also going to be allied with some of the very groups that the U.S. is now going to target. And at least as far as I'm aware, we do not have any negotiated base in central Asia to fly assets.

So that means we've got to rely on the Indian ocean or the Persian Gulf, including al-Udeid base, and that's a long way to go as, as Mike mentioned, about six hours or so each way, assuming you get overflight rights. So there are all these challenges now that we have not had in most of the other counter-terrorism campaigns recently, where, you know, I think the U.S. has done a reasonable job of weakening a number of groups and preventing further attacks on the U.S. Homeland or against us infrastructure like embassies overseas. And this is going to be about the toughest case we've now had.

Andrew Schwartz:

What do you think China does next? What do you think Russia does next and Iran? This is something that, you know, not a lot of people are really talking about, but I know it was on your mind Seth.

Dr. Seth G. Jones:

I don't entirely know what all these countries are going to do mid- to long-term, but I think we've already seen the expansion of Islamic Revolutionary Guards could force activity in western and parts of central and northern Afghanistan. They've been active anyway, over the past couple of years and decades for that matter. But the current head of the IRGC Quds Force in part, cut his teeth in the Afghan theater and had worked both counter drug operations with custom Soleimani, but it also has a long history of working in Afghanistan. So this is kind of the backyard of the IRGC Quds Force. So, if you look at now where the Iranians are active on the clandestine side, they still have a relationship with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Then they have managed to develop relations during the campaign against rebel groups in Syria that are active on the ground in Syria.

Then obviously the Hashd al Shaabi and some of the Shia groups in Iraq and Iran itself. Now it expansion of activity in Afghanistan. So, I think for the Iranians, this is an expansion of their clandestine capabilities. The Russians have been active. Anyway, we know that from some GRU assistance to the Taliban was on, which became public last year. Russia is probably have to be careful. I mean, Mike knows the Russians much better, including from his time involved in the campaign to support the Mujahideen in the 1980s, the Russians have to be a little bit careful with an overt presence, but they've been heavily engaged in covert activity. They've been heavily engaged in diplomatic activity with some of the negotiations right now about forming a government. The Chinese—it's worth noting—certainly have an economic

interest in Afghanistan. They own a number of mines—including copper mines—in Afghanistan. They've had a bit of a challenge in extracting resources in the middle of the war, and of course the Chinese also have an interest in preventing some of the groups like the East Turkistan Islamic movement from using Afghan territory to fight or aid some of the groups operating in Chongqing in Western China. So, the Chinese probably have multiple interests as well.

Mick Vickers:

And then a fourth actor—maybe the most influential—is Pakistan. They supported the Taliban since their creation in 1994, helped them get into power, and gave them sanctuary after we kicked them out of Afghanistan. So, they'll be playing a role of some kind as well.

Andrew Schwartz:

So, Mike, I want to ask you, you have experience with what was the Northern Alliance under Ahmad Shah Massoud, who of course was assassinated just days before 9/11 and commanded the Northern Alliance. Now his son who's 32 years old, Ahmad Massoud, is commanding the opposition forces to the Taliban, a small resistance group. What do you make of them, of this group, and their chances in Afghanistan and whether the United States will come to their assistance?

Mick Vickers:

Yeah, well, it looks like another former colleague of mine, Amrullah Saleh, who was a head of the Afghan Intel service for quite a period and most recently vice president has also gone to the Panjshir. He's an ethnic Tajik, uh, to work with the group there. Panjshir is a tough place and another Soviet did offensives up there many, many times, never could hold it. Taliban are trying to eradicate that. One of the things that Taliban have done quite successfully in the last decade or so is expand from their traditional posture and heartlands of the south and east into the north, and have essentially cut off some of the supply lines that might be there to the Panjshir by their groups, affiliated with them and in the north. And so that makes the resistance challenge of it more formidable. You know, the Taliban only have right now maybe 60, 70,000 fighters, and they had to mobilize a lot for this offensive. Afghanistan's a big place, size of Texas and if you add in the mountains, it's much bigger than that. So they can find a rebellion breaking out in a lot of places. The Hazaras to the west of Kabul, where the Hazara is, are they're very anti Taliban, Taliban are very anti them and so could spread more, but we'll see.

Andrew Schwartz:

What do you view as the biggest problem facing the United States in the immediate sense?

Mike Vickers:

Well, I think the biggest problems Seth alluded to are really long-term, which

is an area that we basically had under control now is open again with a regime, very friendly to al Qaeda and so given some time, a couple of years, maybe Al-Qaida could really reconstitute in Afghanistan, et cetera. And so the counter-terrorism threat could go up significantly from an area where we would have enjoyed our biggest success. The bigger strategic problem is the perception I think that we were driven out of Afghanistan, that we lost the war and that the U.S. you hear this from the Chinese and to a lesser extent from the Russians that we're in decline, and this will reinforce those views. And so the strategic risk to the United States in terms of other actors, including a great powers and regional powers deciding now's the time to really push thinking they can get away with stuff I think has gone up as well. And so that's probably the longer term strategic risk is not only terrorism emboldened but all our adversaries are likely to be emboldened by this action.

Andrew
Schwartz:

Seth what do you make of that?

Dr. Seth G. Jones:

I agree. In fact, I think there's going to be an impetus, frankly, to demonstrate that the U.S. is not weak if that's possible at this point. I mean, in Afghanistan, I think us going to have to be careful while there are forces in and around Kabul right now, trying to get U.S. citizens and those that have visas and others that have worked with U.S. diplomats, intelligence officials, military out. I think you want to be careful on doing too much right now, because we are negotiating with the Taliban on using the airport. I know there are other compounds, including the UN that have also tried to helicopter people in and out of the country, or at least out of the area to the airport. But I think the question is once the U.S. actually fully leaves, whether it's this month or the beginning of September, I think the U.S. is going to have to start to hit some targets in Afghanistan.

If we see if we get actionable intelligence on Al-Qaeda or camps, or, you know, senior leaders, I think we've got to show pretty quickly that we are not going to back away from striking targets. If we have actionable information, otherwise it's going to be, because I think what you want is to indicate to anybody that's interested in coming to Afghanistan, to fight as a jihadist, that this is not entirely going to be sanctuary, that we're willing to conduct some aggressive operations. Now, whether we're willing to do that or not obviously is an open question and it's a policy question.

Andrew
Schwartz:

Well, what do you think guys, is this something that there's a will to do in the United States, even though the American people seem resolved and this president seems resolved to be out of there?

Mike Vickers: Well, it depends what you mean by out of there. So if it was to bring the last American troop home yeah, no, I think that's pretty clear that we very difficult to put anything back. If it's to protect Americans from the terrorists, threat which the administration has said it will do, and it's confident it can do it, then I think there's good chances they will take some action there. Now, whether they do what Seth recommended or whether they wait and watch for awhile, I think remains to be seen.

Andrew Schwartz: And it all really begs the question to begin with. If we're trying to protect against the terrorist threat, why did we abandoned our air bases there? And why didn't we leave a small force there in the first place?

Mike Vickers: Well, not only that we lost our partner, you know, it's always great to have a partner on the ground. And we had that with Afghan special forces and other elements that we could partner with. And that's all gone. Now.

Andrew Schwartz: I don't want to put words in either one of your mouth, but it is, this is far away from us as it's been in, you know, certainly in 20 years now. I mean, are we, are we really having to start completely over if we're going to have to try to check the terrorist threat that you guys are both described here?

Mike Vickers: Well, I hope not. I mean, you know, on one hand it looks like we've just reverted back to, you know, in counter terrorism turns to pre 9/11, that Afghanistan is in Taliban hands again, that we're some distance away and so it'll affect the effectiveness of our operations and then its policy choices about how much we actually do. We didn't do very much in the 1990s. You know, we launched a few cruise missile strikes after our embassies were bombed and that was about it. You know, on the other hand, we have 20 years of experience and multiple theaters with counter-terrorism. We have a lot more capability today than we did then, you know, both in intelligence terms and in strike terms. And so if there's a will to use it, there are certainly more capability. I would not have preferred this situation by far. I mean, I would still rather have a partner in country intelligence and country bases in country. No, it's not preferred to do this from remote distances. You know, you're always sacrificing something to do that.

Andrew Schwartz: Seth

Dr. Seth G. Jones: This'll be a very difficult campaign to prosecute, but I think Mike is, is right, the, you know, we're not starting from scratch either. And even on the intelligence picture side, we've been there for 20 years, you know, we know Afghanistan much better than we did around 9/11. I mean, there were

certainly small elements of the us government, including the CIA that had a historic relationship with some of the folks in the Northern Alliance, which made it relatively easy to go in in late September when they did, this was the job breaker team. But we know now, you know, most of the U.S. collected a lot on the, the major television networks, the Al Qaeda networks there, the Islamic state networks, there's much better understanding of the terrain where some of the key sanctuaries are. There's probably a better relationship with some of the neighboring countries.

Pakistan has at times been helpful in some respects against some organizations. I mean, Pakistan has generally been pretty adamantly hardcore against Islamic State operatives, which go back and forth across the, the Afghan Pakistan border. So we don't have to start from scratch. Again, the challenge that we'll have is we don't really have boots on the ground, certainly not military boots on the ground. And I think one question is, you know, will the president take some risks in keeping a covert presence on the ground in Afghanistan, either from the U.S. intelligence community or U.S. military forces, special operations forces operating under title 50 authority that have at least a limited presence in the country because I will say it is beneficial to have a presence in the country on collecting of information on working with some partners and we know as Mike said earlier, that there's still some resistance in areas like the Panjshir.

Andrew
Schwartz:

Given the events of the last couple of weeks. Do you, either of you think it's incumbent upon this administration to show countries like China, that the United States isn't in decline?

Mike Vickers:

Well, our competition with China is long-term and of course we also, you know, face numerous challenges from Russia, the other, maybe the lesser great power, but the more aggressive, great power in some respects right now, but what those opportunities will be, you know, our, our, our competition with China's economic influence worldwide, cognition and emerging technologies, uh, countering their military capabilities with, with some of our own and so it's a different kind of competition. I don't know that we'll necessarily have that opportunity right away. One thing Seth talked about is if we had the opportunity to strike terrorists, particularly in Afghanistan, that sends some signal, but it's not going to erase that we just got kicked out of a place. You know, you know, it's a little, it'll only mitigate some of that perception that you know, that we can be pushed around.

Andrew
Schwartz:

So even if we had some precise strikes that took out some serious targets, there's still this lingering perception among our adversaries that we were kicked out and we left with our tails between our legs.

Mike Vickers: Yeah, no, I think, I think that's unfortunately true. And the more we do have that, you know, the more good, I think that a cruise, not only for protection of American interests, but for sending that kind of signal, but this is going to be hard to erase.

Dr. Seth G. Jones: I think there's no question unambiguous that there will be a perception much like there was in 1989 when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, that the U.S. lost the war. That is the way it is perceived in Islamabad, that's the way it is perceived in Moscow and in Beijing and Toronto, that's how it's perceived among the Taliban, that's how it's perceived among the jihadist community right now. They're very active in saying this online. So it almost in that sense, whatever we tell ourselves, the reason is that is what they now believe. And I think that is important to recognize as part of competition, that this is now being viewed as a defeat for the Americans in Afghanistan. And, you know, I think that does raise questions about whether there will be attempts by these governments, whether it's Beijing to continue to push there. And because they, they smell blood.

Andrew Schwartz: Gentlemen, thank you for helping us get to the truth of the matter on this extremely complex set of geopolitical issues and about the potential for terrorism that is following in the aftermath of this withdrawal. Thank you very much.

Mike Vickers: My pleasure.

Dr. Seth G. Jones: Thanks Andrew.