

# CSIS Podcast Mixdown 1

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Irv Chapman, Outro, Emily Harding, Intro



### Intro 00:10

This is Update-1, the podcast of the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Update-1 provides a forum for listeners to learn about national and international stories focusing on journalism and communication issues, news and politics. Now the latest edition of Update-1.



### Irv Chapman 00:35

On this edition of Update-1, we'll hear from Emily Harding of the Center for Strategic and International Studies here in Washington. She previously worked for the Senate Intelligence Committee, and the White House National Security Council, among other intelligence related positions. I'm Irv Chapman, a longtime member of the National Press Club, and our subject is Afghanistan. Emily, for years, we've heard about the danger of Afghanistan again becoming a base of operations for al Qaeda. And then as the evacuation got underway, we heard warnings that the Islamic State was rearing its head and targeting the airport. Those warnings proved all too real. What do you know about the relationships between the Taliban and al Qaeda and the Islamic State?



### Emily Harding 01:18

The relationship between the Taliban and Islamic State has been one of competition. It's

been fraught, they they are not friends. We know that the Taliban and has tried to push the Islamic State out of their territory and the Islamic State views the Taliban as not extreme enough from them. On the other hand, though, the Taliban's relationship with al Qaeda is very close. Not only did they house al Qaeda in the run up to 9/11, those two groups have intermarried, they have formed longtime relationships, the leaders of the two are very close.



Irv Chapman 01:54

Is al Qaeda going to try to become part of the new leadership of Afghanistan?



Emily Harding 01:58

It's entirely possible. The Taliban has had 20 years to reject al Qaeda, and they haven't done it. They are making certain promises that Afghanistan will never be used as a safe haven for a terrorist group and no attack against a foreign power will ever emanate out of Afghanistan. But it's very hard to take them seriously when they say that, given the close ties between them and al Qaeda.



Irv Chapman 02:21

Well, the U.S. and allies suggest they have leverage over the Taliban because of its need for budget support. And others say the Taliban can raise cash as a transit hub for South Asian trade, and from continuing to grow opium poppies, and therefore they don't care what we think about them and al Qaeda. What's your view?



Emily Harding 02:40

If it's leverage, it's extremely weak leverage. The Taliban, I don't think care at all what the international community think of them. And as with every successful insurgency, the next six months, year, two years, is really about infighting among the group, where they're all angling for a position as opposed to each other. There's not a lot of space there for dealings with the international community. And they're going to care a lot less about whether they can bank in New York, then who is competing with who on any given day, I think that they have plenty of resources from the opium trade to raw, raw minerals and things. We've already seen China and Russia indicate they're perfectly willing to work with the Taliban.



Irv Chapman 03:22

Well, in fact, Afghanistan has mineral wealth, which takes investment to extract. Is China going to be the investor?



Emily Harding 03:29

I think so I think China is going to be a big winner out of this entire situation. Not only are they already buying their way into Afghan resources, they also have a very small border with Afghanistan and a big Muslim population. And I'm guessing there's going to be some kind of accommodation between China and the Taliban, so that the business of Afghanistan stays on the Afghan side of the border.



Irv Chapman 03:51

The Chinese have been tweeting all over Asia, that of Taiwan expects America to help in a crisis, look what happened to Afghanistan. And the President of Ukraine is getting his White House visited last. What is your take on all of this?



Emily Harding 04:04

The Chinese and the Russians are making hay out of this moment. They are crowing. China's using every opportunity to point out to Taiwan and other countries in Southeast Asia that maybe America is not a steadfast ally. The Russians are using this to attempt to drive wedges between us and the Europeans. The Biden State Department has a lot of work to do, to go around and reassure some of our allies. I think it's doable. I think that actions are going to speak louder than words and we're going to need to come up with some creative actions to reassure them.



Irv Chapman 04:35

In all of our recent overseas military efforts. Our presidents have said we're not nation building. But when you reorganize an economy to remote private enterprise and education system to promote science and get women involved, a free press, elections and so on, isn't that nation building? And haven't you created a whole new class of people intent on a whole new way of life?



Emily Harding 04:58

I think that was the goal. We were always seeking to create an Afghan government that

could stand on its own two feet. And I do think you know, there are a lot of people out there saying the last 20 years have accomplished nothing. But that new society that you're talking about is something of an accomplishment. I mean, there are women who have been working, there are girls who have gone to school, there is some elements of a functioning society and the Taliban would be wise to keep it.

I Irv Chapman 05:23

Does that mean that the promises that they're making to allow women to work, keep people who've been trained for jobs in those jobs, they're going to keep those promises and not turn the clock all the way back to where they were 20 years ago, let alone an earlier century?

E Emily Harding 05:39

I think it's very hard to say. I mean, this is the same group with a lot of the same leadership that was in existence in the late 90s, and just committing terrible atrocities against women. And while the outward facing elements of the Taliban have been saying that they are definitely going to allow women to continue to work, and they're definitely going to allow women to continue to go to school, I have little faith that number one, they're going to follow through on those promises. And number two, that the Taliban central control such as it is, has any command and control over what happens out in the more distant provinces. I can't imagine that there aren't some smaller Taliban leadership cadres that are saying, no, no, we're going to implement Sharia law, the way that we see it. And any kind of central authority in Kabul can, you know, take their views and shove them.

I Irv Chapman 06:27

Well, there have been some forecasts that civil war is in the offing? Or could be, is that likely to be the case?

E Emily Harding 06:32

I think it's possible. In my previous role, as an intelligence analyst, I would have said, something along the lines of with moderate confidence, there's going to be a lot of infighting in Afghanistan, or among the Taliban, and maybe some of the other tribal groups. I would say, with a low confidence that can proceed to a civil war. But that's exactly the kind of thing that you see happen, post insurgency, or when when a group that's been united against a common enemy suddenly loses that common enemy. And in

Afghanistan, in particular, these groups are going to be angling for resources, they're going to be angling for high ranking positions, they're going to be looking for any opportunity they can to grab some of the the wealth of the country.



Irv Chapman 07:11

Well, about your background and intelligence. Why was the consensus the White House chose to believe so far off base?



Emily Harding 07:18

There wasn't necessarily a consensus that was way off base, the intelligence reporting was saying there could be a rapid collapse, then that if the Americans withdrew support, then that would lead to a potential collapse of the the Kabul government. The timelines were a range. I mean, an intelligence work, you never say that this thing is going to happen on this day, because there's just too much uncertainty in the world. But the ranges were 18 months, if certain things happened, six months of other things happen maybe as little as a month, if other things happen. And part of the issue with intelligence is that it can be sort of a self fulfilling prophecy. So intelligence reporting, writes that there are indications that the central government in Kabul is weak, and that if the Americans pull back, then it's possible it collapses. Policymakers then say, OK, well, we're pulling out and that can do things like speed, the collapse. So I think that the intelligence reports were actually pretty good. No intelligence report is a crystal ball. But I do think that there was adequate warning to foresee something like this happening.



Irv Chapman 08:23

Well, does that mean that the decisions to delay the evacuation didn't have any basis and intelligence? But, in fact, what was their basis?



Emily Harding 08:33

I'm not sure. I don't understand the president's assertions that they weren't processing visas because people didn't want to leave. Just because you're processing a visa doesn't mean that you have to actually use it and leave right away, they could have had that underway. I think that the administration probably assumed that even if most of Afghanistan fell that Kabul would hold, at least for a while long enough to do an orderly withdrawal. They were making certain assumptions about the status of Kabul that turned out to just be way off base.



Irv Chapman 09:06

To what extent do you think the Taliban will want to keep foreign non government organizations going to help them feed their people and develop their economy?



Emily Harding 09:14

I suspect they'll want to keep the the foreign NGOs in there. I heard an interview with one of the UNICEF folks on the ground the other day, and she was saying, you know, we've been here for 60 years, we're gonna stay. It's our mission to try and feed and help the people of Afghanistan, no matter who's in charge at the top. And then frankly, the Taliban probably need them. One interesting development of the last week or so was the Taliban reaching out to the Turks to ask them to come and help do things like run the airport, provide technical support, even if they do fulfill every single one of their promises about keeping people in place, they're still going to need technical help to do some very basic things.



Irv Chapman 09:55

Could the Taliban have persevered if not for their Pakistan safe haven?



Emily Harding 09:59

No. One of the true tenets of insurgency analysis is that an insurgency is much more likely to succeed if they have help from an outside power. And then not only that, but help from an adjacent outside power. I think that Pakistan is largely to blame for this. And I it's going to be really interesting to see what happens with them now that they're the dog because the car.



Irv Chapman 10:25

U.S. troops didn't suffer casualties after President Trump set a date for their departure. President Biden insists if he delayed the departure further, the troops would again be targeted and would have to be augmented for force protection. What is your reading?



Emily Harding 10:40

I mean, that may very well be true, I can see the Taliban agreeing to the deal that we will leave on a certain date, and we will hold off on attacking you until that date. I do think that had we decided to stay longer, we would have had to have been ready for additional

Taliban attacks. But what I don't buy is Biden's assertion or his administration's assertion that it would have to be a massive surge in capability to combat those Taliban attacks. I think that we could have said to our Afghan allies, we're not leaving yet because we know that things need to be done before we leave, and we're gonna stay in Kabul, we're going to keep a smaller footprint on the ground. We're gonna keep Bagram. And I think that the Taliban, you know, they, one of their major advantages is that they're very patient. They've been patient for the last 20 years waiting for their moment, I think they probably would have been patient for a little while longer to not completely tank the deal.



Irv Chapman 11:35

You've indicated that it was kind of a hapless situation that we faced in Afghanistan, all this while, and the pull out was precipitated. But what do we do now?



Emily Harding 11:45

Biden has been talking a lot about an over the horizon intelligence capability. I think that's too rosy view of what's possible. We're going to need to be using standoff collection capabilities to try to keep an eye on any terrorist threats that might be emerging. We're going to have to turn to our allies around the world and say, we need to keep the pressure up on the Taliban to actually follow through on these promises to be kind to women and girls to let them continue to grow in their roles in Afghanistan. I think that, as we were talking about before, the levers that we have, are the Taliban are extremely limited. And we got to be looking hard at both Iran and Pakistan, just to be sure that they're not using these things as leverage against us.



Irv Chapman 12:27

The Taliban are only the latest bad guys who are writing high. President Biden keep stressing the competition between democracies and autocracies, but the bad guys are gaining and Belarus, Russia, China, Myanmar, Turkey, Thailand, and even in putative democracies like Hungary, Poland and India. Is there any reason for optimism do you think?



Emily Harding 12:49

I am an eternal optimist. I will always find reasons for optimism. I think that that is a trend line that has been building for quite a few years. I mean, one of the, one of the things that Biden has argued about our presence in Afghanistan is that we have been too focused on the counterterrorism fight. And we have been somewhat blind to things like China's rise

and this this rise of autocracies. It's something that we definitely need to show leadership on in the world. I am a firm believer in American leadership globally. Does that mean we need to be the world's policemen? No. But does it mean that we need strong alliances, that we need to reassure our NATO allies that we are going to be there for them? That we can look at Taiwan and say, "Yes, we are your ally." I think all those things need to happen. I choose to be an optimist, because America has been through all kinds of things. And it has come out the other side pretty well. I actually spent part of my morning this morning down at the Lincoln Memorial, with a group of military fellows who were spending a year at our think tank. And we went down there because we wanted to kick off their year in D.C. right. We wanted to talk about the founding of this country, the refounding of this country under Lincoln, and those democratic ideals that really inform who we are. And our speaker who was actually Tom Perico, one of the folks in my think tank, and he was talking about how every great step forward in American history has been about greater equality has been about resetting, who should have a say in the way that they are governed. And I believe that's not a purely American truth. I believe that's a truth for most people around the world, that they also want to say and, and how they get to live their life and how they are governed. So I see that that fundamental human truth is my main cause for optimism.



#### Irv Chapman 14:33

Emily Harding of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Thank you very much for joining us today. I'm Irv Chapman at the National Press Club in Washington.



#### Outro 14:53

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