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**John Torpey 00:04**

A month ago, the United States withdrew most of its forces from Afghanistan, a country we have semi-occupied and supported for the last two decades in an effort to keep it from being a staging ground for another attack like that of 9/11/2001. As we began to pull out, the Taliban, which once ran the country already, and has been fighting to come back for the past 20 years, quickly took over the reins of power. But now it faces international isolation and daunting economic prospects. Where does Afghanistan go from here?

**John Torpey 00:41**

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**John Torpey 01:02**

Today, we discuss developments in Afghanistan since the American withdrawal with Sarah Shah, a PhD candidate in political science here at the CUNY Graduate Center. Her dissertation examines the politics of post-counterinsurgency state building in northwestern Pakistan. More broadly, her research focuses on post-conflict reconstruction and state building, the question of state sovereignty and international intervention and conflicts in South Asia and the Middle East. She has an MA in politics from New York University, and she comes to us today from Lahore, Pakistan, where she is trying to do the research for her dissertation. Thanks so much for taking the time to be with us today, Sarah Shah.

**Sarah Shah 01:51**

Thank you, John, for inviting me. Glad to be here.

**John Torpey 01:53**

Well, thanks. Great to have you. So let's launch right in what is the situation in Afghanistan now that the Taliban has been in control of the country for a month? I mean, obviously, the early reports of the evacuation of American personnel and some of their Afghan fellow workers, colleagues, was not particularly a happy one. And, you know, much blame has been cast on the Biden Administration for its alleged lack of preparedness for what was going to happen when the forces withdrew. What's been going on for the last month from your perspective?

**Sarah Shah 02:35**

Right. So the first thing that was very notable about this one month period since the US withdrew and others were evacuated from Kabul is that there is a negative peace that is that seems to have sort of been put in place, minus Panjshir --but I'll get to Panjshir in one second. So it seems like the guns have fallen silent for the most part. And so, in the absence of violence or conflict --in the sense that the conflict is over-- is perhaps the silver lining amidst all the chaos that we saw last month, and the Taliban coming back to Kabul, President Ghani leaving in the way that he did.

**Sarah Shah 03:22**

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So for the most part, Afghans can at the moment enjoy an absence of war in the way that it had existed in the last 20 years. The only exception is Panjshir, the province up in the north, where the Taliban is fighting a bit of resistance coming from people who had fled the rest of the country and had gone up to Panjshir led by Amrullah Saleh, the former Vice President. But I think although there are conflicting views about who's winning Panjshir: is it the Taliban? is it the resistance? It seems that conflict has been contained in that region. And my guess is in time, that resistance is going to sort of end or will be defeated by the Taliban. So that's the first thing, the negative peace.

**Sarah Shah 04:14**

The second thing is the new caretaker government that the Taliban have announced recently, right? And so the world was looking at the Taliban, particularly because of the agreement that Taliban had made with the US in February 2020, that when they do come to power, it's going to be through an intra-Afghan dialogue, and it's going to be an inclusive government that will sort of take place, take shape. But we have seen that that has not been the case. And so many people from the old guard of the Taliban have actually now become cabinet members: from the Prime Minister, Hasan Akhund to the Deputy Prime Minister, Mullah Baradar. The most sort of controversial figure here is the interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who because the bounty placed on his head because of this specific threat of terror towards the US.

**Sarah Shah 05:15**

And so you have so far a cabinet that the Taliban say it's temporary, "we will sort of be more all inclusive as we go down the line," but so far, it seems like the Taliban is in power they're not really open to sharing. It doesn't seem to be that they're open to sharing. So those are the things on the political front.

**Sarah Shah 05:36**

On the economic front, as we know, things are a mess. Every day, the Taliban has to, or the new government is dealing with food crisis. Crisis of paying salaries to its own people, to people who were in power earlier, or who were sort of working for the government, to the competence that they had. And finally, very briefly, we'll also see that when the Taliban came to power their initial statements were about not taking back the rights women had and the freedoms women had enjoyed under Karzai's and Ghani's regime. And so initially, it was like "we won't cage them the way we had in 1996, back in their residences, and they will be allowed to get an education and take jobs and be employed." But in the last couple of weeks, we've seen that the actual work on the ground has been different: some women have been allowed to work, others haven't been allowed to work.

**Sarah Shah 06:42**

And the same thing with the freedom of media. The Taliban had said that the media would be free to report and they can cover protests, they can cover whatever is happening at Kabul, airport, etc. But in the last few days, they have actually stopped media from covering protests and had actually threatened some media personnel, some journalists, either even threatened them sort of taken them and intimidated them into trying to stay silent. So it's a mixed bag at the moment; great promises a month back, but now we're seeing a bit of the old complexion Taliban coming back.

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**John Torpey** 07:20

Right. So, you know, to the untrained observer, such as myself, you know, I have this image of Afghanistan is kind of divided between, in some ways, a highly modern, Western oriented kind of elite, Western educated often, and a large population that is not sort of privy, let's say, to the advantages of modernity and modern life. So, maybe you could tell us a little bit about the society that the Taliban is taking over. I mean, obviously, there is this clash between the modern and the unmodern --is one way to look at this-- and in the images or the reporting on the withdrawal, you sort of have this image that it's the modern folks who feel very much threatened and like, they just don't want to live in a society that's governed by the Taliban. So maybe you can talk a little bit about the nature of, of Afghan society.

**Sarah Shah** 08:32

So you're quite right that over the last 20 years because of the US efforts to sort of nation build and rebuild and have the government of Karzai and Ghani deliver certain public goods and services, with it also came a fair bit of modern education, infrastructure, the way the bureaucracy was working. We've seen images of Taliban in offices with really wonderful computers and all decked out as if it's a modern office, and some of them seem a bit bemused --not to say that they've never been in an office-- but the technology and sort of the wherewithal that the resources that are around them that have been and were in use before they took over Kabul and now have been abandoned in one sense or taken over. So there's that.

**Sarah Shah** 09:28

Socially, as well, Afghanistan of today --[the one] that the Taliban has returned-- is very different from what Taliban saw in 1996 when the first round of governance or government happened. So there definitely is a brush with modernity that many Afghans have faced. But I would argue that this is true for urban centers in Afghanistan; much of the rural areas in the countryside and the vast population that live there was not as in touch --I would say, as in touch with modernity-- I would say did not benefit from, or take advantage or was able to take advantage of the modernity of, let's say, Kabul.

**Sarah Shah** 10:19

So there is the fear of Taliban turning back the clock, is real. We've already seen that, they're sort of like, there's an impetus of the Taliban to say, "we will give media freedom," but then also take it back. So they're okay with cameras, but then they're not okay with cameras. And so there's a bit of suspicion of modernity that the Taliban do have as well.

**Sarah Shah** 10:46

But I think moving forward --and this is a dilemma as much for the Taliban if you want to stay in government, in Afghanistan and with the rest of the world, who has to decide how to engage with the Taliban, if at all, to engage-- is this question of modernity versus the deep conservatism that we see of the Taliban. And I think Taliban today also know, and they kind of realize that they also probably have to give a little because they need to get a little. And so that could be a place where the fears of going completely back in 1996, where things were really dark, that might not happen. At least, that's my hope.

**John Torpey** 11:33

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So I wonder to what extent would you say the Taliban actually has kind of support or legitimacy among the Afghan population? One sort of view of what happened, just now a month ago, is that an elite that was, in many ways propped up, as you say, by the United States and international aid, was not really very much loved, maybe outside of Kabul. And therefore, it lost; the government simply dissolved it seemed, in the face of pressure from the Taliban, which had largely to do with the circumstances, of course, but you know, there's some real popular support for the Taliban. So I wonder if you could talk about the extent to which you think it's the case that the Taliban actually has support in Afghan society, and in which sectors and that sort of thing.

**Sarah Shah 12:42**

So, I would take my answer with a pinch of salt, because I feel, looking at how the Taliban seem to have survived in the last 20 years and the manner in which, since Feb 2020, when the sort of agreement between the US and the Taliban was brokered and the Taliban began to actually move from province to province, and they were able to get people on their side or kind of push back against the Afghan National Army, with all its resources and training and everything, which is why we're all, or many of us are surprised at the speed at which they reached Kabul, took over provinces and reach Kabul. I would caution against saying that, or at least I feel the Taliban aren't popularly legitimate in the classical sense of the word, that if there was an election today people would vote them in perhaps. I feel it is a case of people at the village in the tribal level, deciding who is going to be able to give them security, peace, deliver certain basic needs that they need for survival and for living and perhaps prosperity.

**Sarah Shah 14:06**

And so many people have written about, in Civil War literature, we have the sort of cost benefit analysis that people do when they want to decide, "do I join the Taliban?" , "Do I join the Afghan national army?", "Or do I try to remain nonpartisan and sort of just keep away from from the conflict until push comes to shove?" So I feel that it's not so much the Taliban is supremely popular, but I think that the alternative to Taliban did not work. Beyond Kabul and beyond the urban centers, where both Karzai's and Ghani's administration and money were working, there did not seem to be the deliverance of public goods of justice.

**Sarah Shah 14:54**

And that is one of the strangely, as brutal as they have been, somehow a lot of people in Afghanistan and in my own research in Pakistan also and even, when the Pakistani Taliban were sort of taking over little towns and villages in the northwest, a lot of people ended up saying, "well, the justice system administered by the central government hardly reaches us. We don't get justice, criminals are going unpunished, And at least the Taliban are providing swift justice. And, you know, the crime in our area has gone down," and so on and so forth.

**Sarah Shah 15:34**

And so I feel that's just sort of the ability of the Taliban to provide certain key things, such as security or such as --I wouldn't say that they were giving roads and railways or jobs-- but the alternative was very weak. And that is part of why the Taliban were able to sort of sweep across.

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**Sarah Shah** 15:59

The other (and this is a very minor point, I'm going to insert a minor point, but I will not spend too much time on this) is that once the Taliban had garnered from the US this sort of promise of the withdrawal, ultimately, and the deadline had been set, it changed the sort of the equations on the ground of people who were fighting with the Taliban. Because we do have reports of people, of Taliban about actually saying to Afghan National Army people who are fighting in the army, "you know, I mean, the US is leaving, and you're not being paid." And they weren't being paid, actually Ashraf Ghani's government was, you know, abysmally dealing with its own army. So then, "what do you want to do?" And so there's a bit of that it's a bit of the question of survival. And it seems the Taliban seem to have offered a bit more to a lot more people than the alternative. So I'll stop there.

**John Torpey** 17:02

Interesting. Well, thank you for that. I mean, I wanted to... you talked about 1996. And, you know, when Afghanistan is discussed, there's always this kind of discussion about the graveyard of empires and the long kind of efforts of various outside powers to intervene there and to bend it to their desires. You know, the Soviets, obviously, were one of those. And in those days, we supported the Mujahideen, some of which ended up on the other side of their posture towards the United States. So, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the situation in Afghanistan from this more historical perspective. I mean, how does this history affect, influence what's going on now?

**Sarah Shah** 17:57

So the "graveyard of the empires" is a very temptingly delicious phrase, especially if someone wants to crow about, if someone's on the side of the Afghans, would say, "Well, you know, of course, no one's going to colonize them or invade them, and win and live to speak about it, etc." But I feel that it gives the impression that Afghanistan's history is one of a unified nation that has sort of propelled and repelled all these attacks coming in from all sides, whether it's the British in the 19th century, whether it's the Soviets, whether now it's the US.

**Sarah Shah** 18:39

So, Afghanistan's history is such that it has always been, apart from a short period on the king Zahir Shah in the in the 19th century, it has always been sort of disparate, like these provinces that largely were run by what we call warlords now, their own fiefdoms, etc. And there wasn't like this very strong central government that would send the army left, right and center wherever an external threat would emerge. So I feel that "the graveyard of empires" phrase evokes that impression, that there's this sort of very solid unified nation. But in reading history of Afghanistan you find that there has always been a lot of infighting amongst the Uzbeks and the Tajiks with each other. So not in fighting, but like, there has always been this power struggle in the sense of, "this is my territory, and so I have this control and I will not sort of maybe go over into your territory."

**Sarah Shah** 19:47

So the Pashtuns, the Uzbeks, the Tajiks, Hazaras, they have their own territories and as long as they can live in peace with each other -- it's sad that there's a lot fighting between them. It's only when the external force seems to get closer to Afghanistan, that somehow they coalesce. And then they're like,

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"okay, you know, the external enemy has to be taken out first." So, yeah, I wonder if that answers your question. Should I sort of go a little more detail?

**John Torpey 20:25**

Yeah, it certainly helps. I mean, the question really is the sort of thing that one sees over and over again, and I think to some extent, that is the case. But, I think it's important, as you note, to say that Afghanistan is perhaps not the most coherent place, when it comes to sort of territorial integrity and territorial sovereignty and that sort of thing. And for people to understand that this is a pretty, how shall we say, "squishy" kind of place in a way that it's hard to nail down who's in control of what. I mean, part of the "graveyard of empires" notion has to do with the remoteness of some of the areas of the country and how difficult it is to intervene in these mountainous regions that are very hard to get at.

**John Torpey 21:25**

So, you know, one wonders, sometimes what's exactly the appeal of all this? And this raises another question that I wanted to ask you, which is, of course who do you think exactly benefits the most from the American withdrawal and the Taliban takeover? There's some who say, China benefits from this, because it gives them more influence in the region. Others say the Chinese have no desire to get involved in this kind of messy situation and were perfectly happy for the United States to be kind of pinned down in this morass, and providing security for Chinese investment opportunities that were going on in the country. So I mean, how do you see that question, who benefits from this the changing of the guard, so to speak?

**Sarah Shah 22:21**

So my answer to that would be that it depends on what the US withdrawal brings to Afghanistan. So if the American withdrawal means that Afghanistan can see a period of peace and stability, and at the moment there is this fragile sort of negative peace. But if Afghanistan was able to sort of retain and improve on that sense of stability and security, and peace reigns, then I would answer, I would say that there can be multiple winners; it could be China, it could be also the regional, the neighborhood Pakistan, Iran, Russia, who seems to have initially at least made overtures to the Taliban as well.

**Sarah Shah 23:13**

And I would argue even the US could benefit from a different kind of engagement and non-military kind of engagement with Afghanistan. So who do I think benefits from American withdrawal? It really depends on if the American withdrawal means that there will be peace. Now, if it means that Afghanistan falls into another civil war, then I would say no one really benefits with another round of civil war and conflict in Afghanistan, with more disarray in Afghanistan. So that would be my impression.

**John Torpey 23:54**

Right, Well, one thing that we really need to talk about, I think a little bit more if we can, is the point that you made at the beginning about the economic difficulties that the Taliban now faces and that the country as a whole faces. I believe I've seen, sort of reporting to the effect that something like a million people are facing more or less immediate starvation and famine. And there's, of course, this whole larger problem of the international isolation of the Taliban regime. And so the question then arises of

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what's going to replace what has been propping things up for many years now, really, which is, as I said earlier, US and international aid. I think I saw something the other day to the effect that a billion dollars has now been promised by international donors, but you know, talk if you would about the economic situation, and more particularly the concerns about hunger and famine.

**Sarah Shah 25:04**

Right. So I'm going to deal with the economic question first, and then the humanitarian question about hunger, I'll do it that way. So economically, we know in fact, pretty much all the funds that the Afghan government had the foreign exchange reserves, that were with the US. I read the figure of \$7 billion remain frozen with the US. The US is not sort of giving that to the new government, the Taliban government, that money. And another billion or so is with the IMF; Afghanistan had gotten some special drawing rights from the IMF and that came around to, I think it was, \$450 million. And that, too, has been blocked by the IMF. So it's not being released to the Taliban government.

**Sarah Shah 25:57**

So there is that money that was earmarked for whatever transitional intra-Afghan dialogue, government would come, but it hasn't --because it's just the Taliban at this point-- so there are freezes there. Which means that, with each passing day, there are fewer dollars in the bank for Afghanistan, for the Taliban, to make use of, to buy food, to buy supplies, to pay bills for energy companies that were working there and providing energy. So although there are some trade routes that are open to Pakistan, I know there the trade and aid is flowing through Pakistan, possibly Iran as well, but by and large, the Taliban regime is like you said, have been kept an at an arm's distance.

**Sarah Shah 26:49**

So, economically, if things don't change, if money doesn't flow into the economy soon, then the Afghani, the currency, that is already going down is going to spiral further. Which means whatever money they do have, whatever money people have in the country is going to buy them less and less and inflation is going to go up. We already know that the World Food Program says that disaster is imminent at this point. At the end of the month, they estimate that a lot of Afghans will be near starvation, because they're already food insecure.

**Sarah Shah 27:28**

And I was seeing footage on some of the TV news channels about Afghans setting up sort of these garage sales outside their house, trying to sell their household items, in order to sort of raise money to be able to buy food, to be able to pay bills, essentially. And so at this point things are getting desperate if the money isn't released, or if international aid agencies and governments sort of don't step in. There's also a lot of internal displacement, there are around 3.5 million Afghans internally displaced. And a lot of them, apart from this number, are flowing outside of Afghanistan trying to leave. Pakistan has 1.5 million of Afghan refugees. I think Iran has around 800,000 refugees. So people are...

**John Torpey 28:23**

Excuse me, is that connected to the American withdrawal or were those populations already in Pakistan and Iran before this happened?

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**Sarah Shah** 28:31

So these are the total numbers at this point. I think after the withdrawal, particularly, Iran saw an influx of, I think, around 2 or 300,000 refugees, and Pakistan around 700,000 refugees --if my numbers are correct, this is UNHCR that I'm looking at. So a lot of them are from before, but now those numbers have swelled even more. But yes, you're right, there needs to be distinction between who were there before, and what's the additional number.

**Sarah Shah** 28:54

So I think the humanitarian crisis that is imminent and it's unfolding, I think should be addressed sooner rather than later. Now, I know that a lot of countries, Germany, France and the US are also thinking, "Do we really want to release the money? Do we want to really offer this kind of support to the Taliban government?" But I wonder if there's a way in which humanitarian aid or food aid can flow into Afghanistan via agencies without there being too many conditions on let's have an inclusive government first, then we'll give you aid, etc. I think there needs to be a weighing of what does it mean to provide this humanitarian aid whether or not certain political outcomes are being met in Kabul with the Taliban.

**John Torpey** 30:03

Thank you. So, you know, maybe one final question. And that is really that the agreement that was made really by the Trump administration was that the United States would depart in exchange for an agreement from the Taliban that they would not support or allow the use of the territory of Afghanistan to be a staging area for terrorist groups. I mean, this is obviously where this all started 20 years ago. What do you think are the prospects of that? And what about the Taliban's relations with various Islamist forces in the region and elsewhere?

**Sarah Shah** 30:42

So I feel that when the Taliban signed the agreement, they said, "yes, we are not going to allow our land to be used by any terror groups, foreign or local. And we will not be a part of any security threat to the US." Before reaching Kabul, and this is in July 2021, when the US withdrawal was happening, and Taliban were gaining momentum and speed, they were also sending delegations to Russia and China, for getting reassurances to these countries who also worry about Islamist terrorism coming from, or being housed in Afghanistan, spilling into Central Asia, spilling into China. And so those reassurances were being given by the Taliban to not just the US, but also to Russia and China, the other big players - -also, well to Pakistan, to some degree that they'll take care of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan [Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan], because they essentially want to be recognized as the government and they feel at this point that seeing it or giving these reassurances at least would be a step in the right direction.

**Sarah Shah** 31:58

Now, there has always been a question of how sincere the Taliban have been. Al Qaeda was there in the 90s. They didn't give up Osama bin Laden, as we know, which is why the whole war began. What will they do going forward? And that's a difficult question for me to answer because one cannot really say definitively that every single Taliban who has power, of the various factions within Taliban, would always sort of stay away from encouraging or housing or giving sanctuary to foreigners.

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**Sarah Shah 32:37**

But I feel that coming to power now, the Taliban realize that to be a part of the committee of nations and to be internationally recognized, they have to be seen to do what they have reassured all these big players that they will do. They have also seen 20 years of war. And they know that who's to say that another country is not going to make war on them if they go back on their word. So I feel that there is enough pressure, and there is a sense of, "yes, we won't allow our land to be used against these other countries." But a lot of people are saying at this point, since they're new to power, there are so many challenges that the Taliban are facing, that outfits like ISIS, for example, that already has carried out a couple of bomb attacks in and around Kabul Airport. If the Taliban regime falters or is too weak, then all these outfits that are there will again see Afghanistan as the sort of ungoverned or weakly governed territory, and be able to sort of house itself and find the opportunity to regroup and use Afghanistan as a base forward again.

**Sarah Shah 33:56**

So it is a bit of, even if the Taliban wants to come up to scratch, in practical terms, do they have the ability to oversee this at every point in time from here on? If their own government is faltering, if there are challenges like economic and humanitarian ones.

**Sarah Shah 34:15**

And we've seen, for example, John, that as I discussed earlier, at the local level, at the sub-national level, the villages, tribes, etc., people want want basic public service provision, security; the economy needs to improve for them to feel that the Taliban are delivering. So if they could switch away from Ghani and say, "okay, we rather, --although we've seen the horrors that the Taliban administrative regime brought in the 90s, but we're willing to give them another chance because the alternative hasn't worked." Who's to say that moving forward, as the Taliban again are facing this massive humanitarian economic crisis that we're talking about, they might lose at the kind of support that they do have right now; this cautious support that they do have in the hinterlands to other groups, like the TTP [Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan] like the ISIS. ISIS Khorasan seems to be rearing its head now. So there's that fear, in my opinion.

**John Torpey 35:18**

Now that sounds right to me. And maybe just one final word, I guess, on what you think are their prospects? Are they in a position to meet these challenges? It's hard to know, I don't know who that personnel are, how much experience they have with running a country in the world today. It's not an easy thing to do.

**Sarah Shah 35:41**

A massive challenge, and in fact that is why the Taliban are seeing that they don't want a lot of these trained officials, bureaucrats, economists who are leaving the country and evacuating. They're trying to encourage people to stay; they don't want the brain drain to happen as it were. Because they're there. They acknowledge that they don't have this, the ability to do statecraft and run the show, run the bureaucracy. They can fight a war, they've done it for a very long time, but running a government is an entirely different kettle of fish.

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**Sarah Shah** 36:20

So the challenges are great. But I feel, so here's where one can say because I think without engagement with the Taliban, if Afghanistan is completely isolated, then the Taliban will find it very difficult to govern. And you'll see possibly, like I said before, terrorist groups, or other kinds of groups filling in the space, and taking up people's loyalties, simply because the Taliban are not delivering. So, at one point, we do want to push the Taliban to show that they mean what they say, not be brutal and oppressive the way they were before. But on the other hand, how long can the international community really wait until it sort of steps in and says, "Alright, we're here to engage with you and help you run the show." And so I feel very strongly that Taliban would need help internationally and diplomatically to build ties, to bring enough stability back in a country so that perhaps the Afghans who have left, who know how to do this -- agronomists and doctors and educators and trade analysts, etc.-- that they would be able to come back and join the government, such as it is.

**John Torpey** 37:44

Got it. Well, as you say, I think it's a massive challenge. And we'll just have to see how things work out. There are many worrisome signs so far, both on the kind of gender equality front and on the economic front, but we're just gonna have to see what happens and hope for the best, I guess.

**John Torpey** 38:05

So that's it for today's episode. I want to thank Sarah Shah for sharing her insights about the unfolding situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban. Please remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance and Merrill Sovner for helping put this together and to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song International Horizons as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons. Thanks very much.