



# Trump's National Security Advisor Choice Is a "Step in the Right Direction"

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**JR:** Welcome to RiskHedge Radio. I'm your host, Jonathan Roth. Today, I'm joined by one of the few people to have ever been kidnapped... and ultimately released by a militant Islamic terrorist group. Scott Taylor is a war correspondent and the editor and publisher of *Esprit de Corps*, a military magazine published in Canada. Over his career, Scott has reported from war zones in Iraq, Afghanistan, the former Yugoslavia, Libya, the Western Sahara. You name it, he's been there. And there's probably no one better equipped to grade the Trump administration on terrorism and national security than he is. Welcome to the show, Scott.

**ST:** My pleasure.

**JR:** First Scott, before we jump into anything else... by way of background, why don't you give my listeners a brief overview of your experience being kidnapped and tortured by terrorists back during the Iraq war. I think it's really instructive to understand your own experience first before we jump into what's happening today.

**ST:** Okay. Well, the group that took me and my Turkish colleague in 2004 are actually still connected, very much so to this day, to the Daesh or ISIS movement. It was in the city of Tal Afar where we were taken. It's a Turkmen enclave in northwestern Iraq, and that has been the hotbed of producing leaders. What it morphed from, at the time, was called Ansar al-Islam (an extremist Sunni Muslim group of Salafists), and that has now then merged and morphed and become what is now known as Daesh or ISIS... and that city, Tal Afar, to this day remains held in the hands of Daesh from the Turkmen chapter.

So, it was something where I had a number of trips. It was my twentieth trip into Iraq, felt I knew the ground fairly well, knew certain individuals but did not ever think I'd ever be coming face to face with these Al-Qaeda linked at the time, Sunni Arab extremists. And the group that was there—I mean the really hardcore believers—were very much in the minority. And they had put under their spell a lot of the younger guys who were... like young men throughout history, I mean keen for the fight, keen for a cause. The American occupation had been, at that point, it was well over a year old. I mean it was starting to coagulate into a very much nationwide thing, and they felt they were a part of something bigger. And they... let's say... I mean a lot of them had been secular. They liked their drink and they liked cigarettes... that kind of thing, but they found in these new leaders, these Sunni extremists, some sort of cause. And, so there was a lukewarm support but keenness on the part of the young guys. And then of course, they're being directed, and being... I guess the word is, you know, "mind boggled" by these guys who were getting their interest. And that is what we saw in the five days that we were with them... it was that there was quite a discrepancy between the hardcore leaders and the actual foot soldiers.

**JR:** Interesting. So, just really briefly, you were ultimately released after what was it, three or four days?

**ST:** It was five days for me, four for my colleague, and we were moved from group to group, and eventually released in Mosul. And the reason for us being moved was a promise had been made by one of the leaders. The American forces were about to attack Tal Afar. We were being held inside Tal Afar, and this leader told my colleague, a Turkish female, that he was going to release us. He understood we were journalists, and he was going to first defeat the Americans and then release us. Well, they didn't defeat the Americans, of course, and he was killed in that battle.

And as we were moved, his brother happened to know of that promise to release us. So, this is now the promise of a martyr. The leader had been killed in battle; he was a martyr to them. And they didn't know how to act upon this because, of course, this Al Qaeda had never released a foreigner (that being me) up until that point. But they didn't want to go against the wishes of this now-dead martyr. So, the compromise solution was to turn us over to a different group inside Mosul, and it was that group. They, their name was akin to the students, which is similar to the Taliban, but that's from Afghanistan. These guys were again Salafists, but they were Arab not Turkoman. And they were the group that actually physically tortured both me and my Turkish colleague.

**JR:** We could spend the whole interview discussing what happened to you back doing that period of time, but what I want to do is use your own personal story as a reference point and discuss the Trump Administration's approach on terrorism and national security here so far. First, the travel ban on folks coming from seven countries. What's your take on the effectiveness of such an action at this point—where the US seems to be in this conflict between America and the Middle East?

**ST:** Well, if you look at the numbers... the statistics that are out there, I mean, there have been people from a couple of those countries that have attempted attacks on America citizens. But to date, from those seven countries, not a single attack has successfully killed or injured an American citizen. And two of the countries—I think Syria and there's one other—that have had nobody even attempt an attack. So, and if you look at Islamic terrorism in the States, the amount of the casualties it's responsible for since and even before 9/11, it's fairly miniscule. I mean, this is something which... yes, Islamic terror is killing people by the tens of thousands per year. The vast, exceeding majority of those are fellow Muslims... this is Sunni versus Shia, or faction versus faction. We think it's "them against us" because we overreport or over exaggerate the number of attacks and the severity of the threat that they pose to us. But, that of course is the beauty of terrorism. It's meant to instill a fear far greater than the actual threat that they pose.

So, I mean that's the thing, we need to put this in perspective. I don't think the Trump Administration is doing that by having this ban because people are saying, "We are going to be safer from these groups. They must be coming here in droves to attack us." That has not been the case. There is absolutely no evidence to support that.

**JR:** Interesting, so, so in your case...

**ST:** I mean, Iraqis have killed American soldiers in Iraq... I mean, that's for sure—roadside bombs and all these various things. But they see themselves there as being at war and being occupied. Whereas people actually that have fled to the States to avoid this violence would be far less likely to continue that or commit it.

**JR:** So some people obviously feel that America started this or at least unleashed what's become this huge... I don't know if there's a better way to describe it... a Civil War that's happening within Islam right now. What's your take on that prospective?

**ST:** Well certainly, they've destabilized, I mean, not just Iraq—but then of course, the continued destabilization of Iraq led to what happened in Syria. Basically, it led to the Arab Spring, which again people have commented on the Libyan overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi as one of the biggest possible mistakes they could have made because that has now spread regionwide across North Africa, which was relatively dormant. And we've never solved the problem in Afghanistan, which has forced people to flee from there. I mean, this is another failed intervention, which was probably, given the circumstances, completely unnecessary. It would have been, I'm sure, had negotiations been made to get Bin Laden turned over by the Taliban, had some concessions been made at the time by the Bush Administration, it might have been a different circumstance.

But, getting not only the US but NATO including Canada drawn into that quagmire brought us in there. And a lot of these cultures, a lot of these various groups, they have a revenge mentality of an eye for an eye. So, if we have gone in and greased a wedding party by mistake even though we are trying not to, all those members of those families then vow to extract revenge upon foreign soldiers if they're there in their country, which makes it very easy for them to access. But I mean if that's the case, we would only have been stirring up even more animosity, more anti-West.

Because during our travels, I mean I'll be honest... both in Iraq and Afghanistan, there's very little understanding of our culture... of the West. I mean, there's a sense of hatred or reminders of the Crusades, that kind of thing. And in fact, as a captive, that was how they referred to me whenever they were talking about me in the third person... was that I was "the franc." That was referring back to me—not by the name Frank but that during the Crusades, the majority of the fighters were in fact French, back hundreds of years ago. And, they still refer us as Crusaders. And of course they were sensing me to be an American spy and an American soldier. So, I was "the franc" and that was how they sort of deemed the American soldiers to be the modern crusaders.

**JR:** Wow. Very, very interesting. Ok, why don't we pivot now to the national security situation in the United States and ask that... the "former" now... the National Security Advisor, Mike Flynn, he's been fired. And the story just seems to get stranger and stranger by the day. What do you think was going on there?

**ST:** Well, this is like a seamless segue from what we were talking about. I mean the guy who has been appointed, H.R. McMaster, I knew him as a colonel. He was in charge of the forces that were surrounding the Tal Afar in 2005.

This was a year after I had been taken hostage. And on his own initiative, he contacted me—realized that I had written about the Turkomans, had been held inside the area he needed to get inside of—and he had me flown in with, I'm sure, zero permission from the Pentagon to brief his troops as to who these people were. And subsequent to that, there was a connection made with one of the moderate Turkman leaders who I had met with before prior to my captivity. And they were able to negotiate with H.R. McMaster and his troops the fact that they would no longer support the extremists in their midst, and there was a very successful follow on action in 2005 after that.

So I do have a connection to Mr. McMaster, and I think that his appointment certainly would add a lot of clout to that position. He does study this stuff. I mean, he's been involved since the first Gulf War and takes it upon himself to learn the culture and to understand the various dynamics at play, which I don't think President Trump does. I mean he oversimplifies a lot of this stuff and to know that you are going to have a national security advisor that is well versed in the complexity of those conflicts I think is actually a step in the right direction.

**JR:** So you would say McMaster is a good pick. At the same time, I mean he's probably going to have a bit of a difficult time just trying to tune out all of the noise that seems to be going on with this Flynn story. Going back to that, what do you think was going on with Mike Flynn? And it seems to be either... I mean, there's rumored investigations that Congress is going to jump into the situation between Flynn and Russia and trying to draw Trump into this. What do you think is going on there?

**ST:** Well, again I think it's this oversimplification of Russia/bad... you know, everything else is good, and that this idea that you have been talking to Russia and then not revealing the full extent of those discussions. I think he's a fall guy in this case. I mean, they're trying to make the noise go away. But, it doesn't. You know there are different groups here, very powerful groups that are still trying to impact and prevent the Trump Administration from gaining any kind of toe-hold or foot-hold. And there are people of course in Canada that are fearful of Trump actually going forward. I mean, this is... people are afraid. So, it's something... they want to find almost anything to pin on him or any of his main players. I think that's what we've seen here. Which, I don't know how they are going to not, you know, hold these guys. It's... they're already... at some point, the administration needs to move forward and function. It can't constantly be fighting with this... all these scandals.

**JR:** Yes. We certainly live in interesting times. Well, listen, your website for our listeners is [espritdecorps.ca](http://espritdecorps.ca). Thanks very much for joining us, Scott.

**ST:** My pleasure. Take care.

**JR:** Visit us on line at [riskhedge.com](http://riskhedge.com). For RiskHedge Radio, I'm Jonathan Roth.

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