

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## A Conversation with Sarah Chayes on Corruption and Global Security

Ethics Matter, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

**Sarah Chayes, Stephanie Sy**

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**STEPHANIE SY:** Good evening. I'm Stephanie Sy, this is Ethics Matter, and our guest tonight is Ms. Sarah Chayes. She is a journalist who arrived in Afghanistan in 2001. She was working for National Public Radio (NPR) at the time. She ended up living in Afghanistan for a decade. She started a cooperative with local Afghans. She later became an advisor for top commanders on the ground in Afghanistan and later for the [chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff](#).

She has written a couple of books, most recently a book called *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security*. Today she is a senior associate at the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#).

Sarah, thank you so much for talking to us.

#### Discussion

**STEPHANIE SY:** Why is the book called "Thieves of State" and not "State of Thieves"? [Laughter]

**SARAH CHAYES:** That's a good one, and it probably is sort of reversible. It's interesting. My first book is called *The Punishment of Virtue*, and that was flipping also the name of the religious police that the [Taliban](#) had and that other Islamic governments have had, which was the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Punishment of Vice; and the promotion of vice and the punishment of virtue was the government of Afghanistan. So in a funny way this flips pretty well too. So that's a great question.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Right. But I imagine the book really focuses on your experiences of corruption in Afghanistan.

I remember preparing as a journalist after 9/11 to go to places like Afghanistan, and they would talk about journalists carrying bundles of cash, because they would have to pay *baksheesh*—in other words bribes—at a certain point. But your book is about more than that. It's about more than that ground-level look at corruption.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Why I love that first question is I think that when we think about the word corruption, and even when we're making a big deal out of it and saying "God, what a terrible thing it is," what are some of the metaphors we use? It's like "cancer," right? You know, cancer is a tough thing. Corrosion.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Despotism.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Right. Well, very often with corruption you get these words that imply that the body is a body; and then it's being attacked by this corruption thing, by this illness or this epidemic or this corrosion or something. Whereas what your question brings out—and this is going to be a provocative way of putting it—I don't think in a lot of these countries we're looking at fragile or failing governments where corruption is seeping into the cracks and crevices. I don't think we're looking at fragile governments. We're looking at successful and very sophisticated criminal organizations that are masquerading as governments. So that gets to your first question: "State of Thieves." That really is the system.

**STEPHANIE SY:** A lot of the anecdotes that you describe in the book are really the government sort of exploiting its own people. The thesis then is that this serves as a sort of recruiting for the [insurgency](#) that's happening in Afghanistan.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Right.

**STEPHANIE SY:** How did you arrive at that?

**SARAH CHAYES:** The book starts with an anecdote: I'm running this [soap factory](#), I'm Sally the soap-maker, and we're literally hand-molding bars of soap. We're in downtown Kandahar and we've got no barbed wire and no sandbags, and it's 2008 or 2009, and it's [going off](#) every day basically.

One of the things that was interesting is we were about 20 people, and there were nine different tribes and ethnic groups in the 20 people, men and women, and one of my guys is a former police officer. So one of the things that you just lived through was something would happen, something would go off, and we'd have to go up onto the roof and see which way the smoke was rising from. We were metabolizing the war in a very personal way kind of every day.

So one day Nurallah—I mean he is incandescent. This is a young man, former police officer, very thoughtful, very intense, and he is incandescent. His brother, who had also been a police officer, has opened a little auto parts store, and he has come in from the Pakistani border, which was about an hour-and-a-half drive into Kandahar, and he has been shaken down six times—you know, whatever it is—along the road for what, a dollar or two dollars? But at some point he hits Kandahar, and the cop comes over to his window with his hand out. The guy says, "I've had it with you people. I've paid you six times already. I actually paid my customs dues this time. So done." They smack him in the face.

I thought we were going to have to bail the guy out of jail. He managed to control himself, but Nurallah, his brother who works for me, says, "By god, if tomorrow I see somebody laying an IED, an improvised explosive device, in the road, and I see a police vehicle driving down the road, I'm not saying anything."

**STEPHANIE SY:** In other words, there was sort of a sense of revenge that came. And that was directed at the Afghan government?

**SARAH CHAYES:** This is a guy who was such a proud former police officer himself that he used to keep his uniform hung up in his locker in our cooperative. And what he would say is "I know the police are supposed to be here to protect us and to defend the laws, and instead they're the very ones violating the law." So you have a young man who's that furious at the Taliban. I'm an American, and he's telling me, "I'm going to collude with the Taliban."

And this is 2008-2009. If you're a young man in Kandahar, Afghanistan in 2008-2009, you have to work pretty hard not to join the Taliban when you're that mad. I mean what does he want to do fundamentally? He wants to shoot the police officer who just did that to his brother. Well, you've got the Taliban all around who want nothing more than to help you shoot the police officer.

**STEPHANIE SY:** But that police officer, you've got to think he may not be paid a good wage. Is corruption at that level more about necessity?

**SARAH CHAYES:** It's not, and I'll tell you why. It's true he's not paid a good wage. But, first of all, why not? Who was paying the wages of the Afghan police? Who still is paying the wages of the Afghan police?

**STEPHANIE SY:** The Americans. [Laughter]

**SARAH CHAYES:** Thank you. So why? Who chose—given that we're floating this thing—who chose to have the Afghan police be paid less than it takes to live, and why? The answer to that is: If that police officer were only putting enough money in his pocket to make up his salary, okay; and if he went to Nurallah's brother and said, "God, I'm really sorry, but my salary just doesn't cut it. You know they pay us with a slingshot, man, and I've got four kids; could you help me?" That would be one thing. Afghans would be forking out immediately, right? But why does he have to hit the guy?

And then, as I said, why are they not paid enough? So that police officer, he doesn't keep everything he takes from Nurallah's brother. He then has to pay some of it up the line, and the guy up the line has to pay it up the line, and that totals—those extorted bribes in Afghanistan total between, according to two different bribery surveys that are done every two years, \$2 and \$5 billion a year; this in a country whose licit revenues are only \$1.7 billion a year.

So this is the environment in which we Americans continue to float the budget. And my answer is: Wait a second. Here's a lot of uncollected revenue that's going into the pockets, and that's just a piece of it.

So what I suggest—and as we start talking about other countries, because a lot of this applies to other countries—it's not always the case, but I think it's very often the case, that the underpaying of civil servants may in fact be deliberate in order to prime the pump of that revenue stream, which is a significant one, making its way up the line.

**STEPHANIE SY:** So besides that anecdote and that sense of revenge that he felt—let the IED go off, let police officers be killed—what other evidence is there that that leads to extremism?

**SARAH CHAYES:** So there you get the story of the opportunity. Just to kind of underline opportunity, let me give you another anecdote example.

Northern Nigeria—I think this was 2013 or 2014—I'm sitting around with a number of justice sector professionals, and I'm just asking about the mechanisms of corruption, like, "Where are the toll booths?" At some point a prosecutor, a guy, breaks in and says, "Sarah, you know we've only been talking about money. Uh, it's not just money."

I say, "Oh?"

And he tells me the story about the lady whose husband was diabetic and he was held in pre-trial detention, and she went to the judge to say, "Release my husband please on bail; it's aailable

offense. I guarantee I'll deliver him. You know, he's a sickly man. He's not going to run away." The judge took advantage of her.

As a female, I'm furious at myself for not having thought of that. It's called "sextortion," and it's widespread.

As a security professional, I then thought about her brother. What does her brother want to do? He's sort of like in the position of Nurallah, right; he wants to shoot the judge. This is Northern Nigeria; you've got [Boko Haram](#).

Now what's really interesting is I finally made it this past November to Maiduguri, which is the birthplace—it's sort of the Kandahar of Nigeria, because Boko Haram emerged in the city of Maiduguri—and I was able to talk to ordinary people about: "What were they saying, like what was the preaching?"

It was so explicit. It was the reason that judge is so corrupt, and corrupt in the broadest sense of the term, right—I mean the whole gamut of what corruption means: The misuse of public office for personal material gain, but also the violating of basic moral codes, particularly in a conservative Northern Muslim area. The reason that judge is so corrupt is because he doesn't obey God, and it's because of the secular [constitution](#) of Nigeria. Now that's cheating, because, of course, this guy is violating the constitution. But that was the argument. And frankly, the corruption of this sort is so pervasive in Nigeria that, if you hadn't read the constitution, that would be a really plausible argument.

And so what they're saying is: "It's because of the secular constitution of Nigeria, and if only our government were organized according to God's law"—here's how we get there, right?—"then this judge would not be able to be so corrupt."

And let me add just one little sort of coda onto this for Nigeria. The previous, this earlier visit, when I was talking to those justice sector professionals, they also said, "You know, we had a Sharia movement in around 2000 in Northern Nigeria, and we thought"—this is the chairman of the bar association of the state of Kano. The guy is dressed like you guys are. He is not dressed in [Salafi](#) robes. And the other guy—I mean they are in the regular formal Nigerian judicial system. They said, "You know, the feeling was that when we had Sharia law, it would be our Sharia, and the thieves would get their hands cut off."

Now they weren't speaking explicitly; that was kind of metaphorical. And they didn't mean the thief who pickpockets you on the street corner. They meant the thieves in Abuja who were stealing basically a billion dollars a month by 2013-2014: "We thought the thieves would get their hands cut off, but we woke up the next morning and the thieves still had their two hands."

And so some people say, "You can't reform this system"—some people, and that wasn't them. But they were explaining the rise of Boko Haram after the sort of failure of the Sharia movement to address this corruption problem. They too were explaining the [rise of Boko Haram](#) that way.

**STEPHANIE SY:** So let's just take a look at the [Arab Spring](#), specifically the case of [Egypt](#). What you're basically saying is corruption and sort of discontent and the general feeling that the government is not working for you, that the alternative has in some cases become political Islam—how do you explain that in Egypt? Eventually, after the revolution, you had the first democratically elected president, [Mohamed Morsi](#), who was a supporter of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#), and he started acting like a strongman. So how do you square that?

**SARAH CHAYES:** Let me just wind this back one second and make it a little bit more precise. It's not just the government isn't working for us. The government is violating our ethical code. The government is corrupt in all of the senses of the word. And I know it's really hard for us to imagine this, people seeing violent radical Islam as an ethical choice, that's really hard for Westerners to wrap our heads around, but that's where the thinking is. Just before I go to Egypt, what I want to say—unless you wanted to take us there—but in *Thieves of State* I go through a kind of historical riff where I point out: You know, guys, this isn't actually only Islam in the 21st century.

John Locke has a line where he says, "When there is a barefaced wresting of the law . . ." to serve the purposes of a man or a party of men—"serve the purposes," that's a paraphrase—"war is waged upon the sufferers, who having no appeal on earth to right them, are left to the only remedy in such cases, an appeal to heaven." So he's basically predicting radical religious violence. He's not necessarily saying it's a good alternative. He's just saying people will be driven in that direction. And just to finish the historical thing, that guy was what? He was a Puritan.

So there's a whole riff in *Thieves of State* where I look at the Protestant Reformation and the early very radical, violent experience of a kind of militant puritanical religion in the 16th century against what? I mean go back and read "The Ninety-Five Theses." It's really instructive. It's corruption. It's about the corruption in the church.

**STEPHANIE SY:** And it's not driven by ideology. It's driven by the perception of corruption in the Catholic Church, including in the Protestant movement.

**SARAH CHAYES:** But why would we separate ideology from that? Like the New Testament is an ideological book, and there's a lot of social justice and anti-corruption in the New Testament. So I would submit that this tendency we have to say, "There are social justice concerns over here and religious ideology over here" might not be an accurate picture. I think these may be very interwoven.

That brings us back to Egypt, where it's really fascinating. Those folks in Maiduguri, Nigeria that I talked to, I asked them, "Well how did you feel about it when you first heard this preaching?" It was like, "We were all for it." Then I said, "How do you feel about it now?" "Not so happy."

Iran is another great example of a theocracy that came to power with these arguments and then became just as corrupt as the previous regime had been.

But in Egypt what you had was essentially—it's really interesting—two kleptocratic networks. You had the military kleptocratic network, which was the whole military that owns a very significant proportion of the economy and serves itself in a variety of ways. And then you had the up-and-coming Gamal Mubarak, the son of Hosni Mubarak, crony capitalist thing; and he had basically privatized a lot—you know, in the whole sort of late 1990s, privatization thing, IMF-backed (International Monetary Fund)—and privatized a lot of these, albeit very underproductive, state-owned enterprises, but into the hands of himself and his cronies, throwing a bunch of Egyptians out of work. So it turns out that the revolution was not against the military, in fact; it was against the Gamal Mubarak crony capitalist network.

So then, as you say, Morsi gets elected. So there is this sort of moment of elective political Islam. A number of people decide that he has taken all the cake for himself.

I'm not convinced that even the events of 2013 may not have been significantly instrumentalized by the military, which then saw: "Oh great, our rivals have been wiped off the map. Now we can move back in." So I'm not sure how widespread the popular disaffection with Morsi actually was. But what

you got was a restoration.

Now, this happens all the time with revolutions. I mean, again looking at my little historical cases—the [Dutch Revolt](#) that I looked at; that took about 80 years to happen, to make its way from the beginning of the Dutch Revolt until there was a republic in the Netherlands; the [English Civil War](#), to get to a proper democracy in England, it took about 50; the [French Revolution](#) took about 100. And restorations happen all the time.

**STEPHANIE SY:** And by restoration, you mean the restoration of autocratic government? [Laughter]

**SARAH CHAYES:** That's right.

So now what you have in Egypt is precisely what I described in Nigeria. The Muslim Brotherhood has been completely decapitated. It's either in jail or—and you know better than I do—it's in exile. The younger people are like, "So much for politics, man. Look what that got us. We better take up arms."

And so Egypt right now, you don't hear about it, but it is suffering a more significant [insurgency](#) right now than it did in the 1990s when Egypt supposedly had a serious insurgency. It's off the charts the level of Islamist, much more extreme than the Muslim Brotherhood, violence that's happening.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Because they feel in some ways, I imagine, that their revolution has sort of been hijacked and gone on a course that they didn't want it to go on?

**SARAH CHAYES:** Well, I would say again there are sort of two strands. I think the people who really feel like the revolution got hijacked are the more secular people, are the people who were really in Tahrir Square, which had nothing to do with religion. That was just a straight-up democratic—that was a completely alternate path to reforming the corrupt Mubarak system. It was not a political religious path; it was a much more secular democratic path. That got hijacked by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Then the Muslim Brotherhood gets massacred. So basically what you have is, I think, the democratic crowd is completely cowed. The Muslim Brotherhood-type supporters have radicalized. So I think you've got a kind of polarization happening in Egypt.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Let's get back to the issue of kleptocracies and, specifically, the United States, whether it is complicit—I think that is a storyline that we're all aware of—in it, and whether U.S. policy can aim not to collude with kleptocracies.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Right. So let me just again riff just a tiny bit about what I mean by a sophisticated and successful criminal organization, which will then bring us into how we're interacting with this. I mean a couple of things by that.

I mentioned the kind of vertical integration—the cop at the bottom is actually paying money up the line, and in return he's getting protection. And quite like a mafia—a mafia is an organization that selects for criminality—that's what these governments do. I've watched these governments eject people who were sort of more constructive actors. And they provide you with an alternative, which is you either become a perpetrator or a victim. There's kind of no middle ground. So that's one thing it does.

It's horizontally integrated. By that I mean—you know, here we are. I came down here from Boston. I don't live in Boston, but I vote in Boston, so I had to go up to Boston and then come back down.

Here we are today, [Super Tuesday](#), and we all love as Americans to talk about the public sector and the private sector. We'll get into arguments about which one is more damaging to our health, which is worse for our health, the public sector or the private sector? Right? But even we Americans tend to say, "Okay, these are licit actors and they're over here; and then you have the real bad guys, and the bad guys are the criminals and the terrorists." So we divide up these sectors.

These kleptocratic networks are integrated across at least three, and often all four, sectors, meaning: I'm the minister of finance. I'm the minister of petroleum. My former number two, I've promoted her to be a governor of the central bank. And then we promote the head of, let's say, some of the poorest-behaving private banks to be in the central bank. And then I'm in the finance ministry and my sister-in-law runs a construction company, and so when the finance ministry needs a new headquarters—you know. So that's public and private sector.

And then you get the criminals wired in, especially in Afghanistan. I mean [Ahmed Wali Karzai](#), who I ate dinner with every day for a number of years, that guy wasn't running an opium business, but what he did was facilitate the traffic of opium. So he was deeply wired into—and all of these networks are wired into—the criminal sector. *[Editor's note: For more about Sarah Chayes' time in Afghanistan and her relationship with the Karzais, see this [Guardian interview](#).]*

And then, in some places—so I'm an American female who doesn't veil her face living in downtown Kandahar with no barbed wire. If I were to have died, who would have wondered who killed me? Nobody would have given a second thought that the Taliban had killed me.

So for Ahmed Wali Karzai, when this goddamn—excuse me—Sarah Chayes, who keeps saying bad things about him, if I just—it would be really helpful for him to have a couple of Taliban in tow with whom to get rid of the people. So it's very helpful to have instruments of force that are informal and are plausibly deniable as part of your network.

And these networks are not mapped. What I've discovered as I have been talking to government officials about this stuff is the U.S. government is really good at mapping terrorist networks. Law enforcement is great at mapping criminal networks. I've never seen a network diagram that's layered that shows me all four networks.

So then we get to the private-sector actors. Do you guys remember Mayor [Bloomberg](#) saying, "I want every billionaire in the world to invest in New York City"? So do you suppose all those billionaires, that none of those—what about the [daughter](#) of the [president](#) of Angola? How do you suppose she's a billionaire? Through this practice, right? That's a kleptocratic country. So to what extent is the real estate—and you all read [The New York Times series](#) on the Time-Warner towers; if you didn't, look it up; it's really brilliant. To what extent are the Time Warner towers not part of the kleptocratic network of Angola? Or, at the very least, they are the facilitators. I think there are probably some law firms in this town that play that role—not just this town. What about the [state of Delaware](#)? [Laughter]

Let's just play this out a little bit further. Are any of you folks lawyers? Is there a lawyer in the room? Has anybody done a [FCPA](#) case? You all know what FCPA is, right? The Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. Isn't it interesting that the government of the United States prosecutes businesses for bribing foreign officials when the government of the United States bribes foreign officials? Now, we do this in a variety of ways. We do it very openly.

So I was in Ahmed Wali Karzai's house when members of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) dressed in—they liked to look they were Special Forces guys, which they weren't—pulled out, it was

wrapped in tinfoil. And you all heard about the tens of millions of dollars a month that were in bags going to President [Karzai](#). So that's one way that we bribe foreign officials.

Another way, as I've been working on how do you analyze these networks—you want to look at: How are they horizontally integrated? What elements of state function have they bent to the purposes of enriching network members? And what revenue streams have they captured?

What has Afghanistan cost thus far? Do you happen to know where we're at? Like a trillion?

**STEPHANIE SY:** A trillion dollars total. I think it's \$4 billion a year now.

**SARAH CHAYES:** A lot of that money is spent on us, our soldiers. But there's a lot of that that's cash. That's civilian and military assistance that is a captured revenue stream.

Let's look at Iraq. We have all been pouring money into the Iraqi military. At the [first smell of gunpowder](#), it collapsed, in 2014. That's because that money, that military assistance, became a captured revenue stream.

So this is how we enable. And there's a whole gamut of ways that we enable—down to [Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala](#), who was the finance minister of Nigeria. Now, I don't know that she was involved in the billion dollars a month that was going missing from the oil revenues. What I do know is she was finance minister when that was happening. Yale University gave her an honorary degree this year. That's how we enable it.

**STEPHANIE SY:** There is a part in your book where you describe coming up with a list of people that you yourself have sort of mapped out and identified as some corrupt officials, and they are on the CIA payroll. So it's even more direct than that.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Very, very direct. It's very direct.

And so then you raise the really important question. At the end of *Thieves of State* I don't have recommendations. What I have is a toolbox that's broken out by actor—you know, if you're the president, here are all the things that you could do; if you're the Congress, here are all the things you can do; if you are a business that's interested in investing in an emerging market, here are all the things that you can do; if you're a civil society activist outside—you know. The reason I did it that way is because each of these cases, as you see, is slightly different. The network is going to map out slightly differently, the vulnerabilities of that network will be slightly different, and the tradeoffs will be different.

So when you're dealing with Bahrain, where we park our Fifth Fleet, there are real tradeoffs there. I'm not trying to say prioritize corruption ahead of everything else. That's where it sometimes becomes difficult to balance these things. But what I am saying is that when people say "Security first, governance later" or "Security first, ethics later," my answer is, "No, you're not going get security if you ignore ethics." That's really the heart of the message here: What you all are committed to is actually crucial to U.S. national security, and don't ever let anybody play you this game that it's the tradeoff game. It's actually in many, many cases not a tradeoff.

**STEPHANIE SY:** I think you make a really strong case on that point in the book.

I found an interesting statistic when I was researching corruption, and this is according to Transparency International; it says the top 40 sort of clean states—

**SARAH CHAYES:** This is great. [Laughter]

**STEPHANIE SY:** —the top 40 clean states govern only 13 percent of the world's population.

So what are we to take from that? Can a person that believes in realpolitik and just the reality of the world make corruption a priority when formulating state policy? I know you're directly involved in advising Washington on policy.

**SARAH CHAYES:** That's really great. I actually didn't think you were going to say that. I thought you were going to say that the top 40 clean countries are the providers of most of the corruption services— [Laughter]

**STEPHANIE SY:** That I did not know. That's great.

**SARAH CHAYES:** —to the bottom 40 dirty countries.

**STEPHANIE SY:** So they are the patrons of corruption.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Yes. So we like to say that we're not corrupt, but—and I just came back from a tour in Scandinavia, and that was really interesting too, because Sweden, I mean the cleanest —Google [TeliaSonera](#). It's their biggest telecom company, and they were deeply invested in [Gulnara Karimova](#). So that's one issue.

But I guess my answer to your question is: If we don't prioritize corruption more—and that means here as well as there—the world is going to become an increasingly dangerous place. I just think that—so we talked about violent extremism, but the revolutions of the Arab Spring and [Ukraine](#) were all about corruption. The situation in Central America that is sending thousands of people here is all about corruption.

That's why I'm so glad to be here tonight. You folks are animated by something where ethics matters. What I'm trying to say is ethics matters like it never has—well I think it always has—but it matters very critically in a very concrete security dimension. I actually think we are in an ethical crisis at the moment in this country—and not just in this country—and I think a lot of the just craziness that we're experiencing, including the security crisis, has a lot to do with that. I think it has something to do with money as increasingly the sole marker of social status—not that money hasn't always been an important marker of social status, but it hasn't, I think, in a number of decades been as exclusively the marker of social status so that other ideals and principles are being trumped—excuse me. [Laughter]

**STEPHANIE SY:** No pun intended.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** My name is Larry Bridwell, and I teach in the MBA (Master of Business Administration) program at Pace University.

**SARAH CHAYES:** And you're going to give me a card, because—

**QUESTIONER:** I'd be happy to.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Thank you, okay.

**QUESTIONER:** And in addition, my son served seven months in Afghanistan, and he said that once the United States leaves, the country will collapse. That's his opinion.

But based on what you're saying about the moral imperative of not encouraging corruption, I have a hypothesis or a question that I'd like you to answer: Maybe the United States should just get out of Afghanistan because it's the source of corruption for the society. You've been there.

And also, just as another thing, I read the book by the [president](#) of Afghanistan.

**SARAH CHAYES:** *Fixing Failed States?* [Editor's note: For more on President Ashraf Ghani and his book, check out his 2008 Carnegie talk.]

**QUESTIONER:** Yes. So there are these factors. So I put it to you, maybe the United States should just get out.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Yes.

Let me pivot to Iraq for just a second. The narrative on Iraq is: Iraq [fell apart](#) when we [pulled our troops out](#). Wrong. Iraq fell apart when the officials who were sitting on [al-Maliki's](#) head and preventing him from going into a paroxysm of sectarian kleptocracy—when they pulled out, all bets were off and he could do his thing. That's what sent Iraq down the tubes in 2014, in my own view.

I actually have not worked on Afghanistan since the end of 2011. The reason for that is because I believed, and still believe, that there are two underlying drivers of what's going wrong in Afghanistan. One is the corruption of the Afghan government and our real and perceived role enabling that corruption. And the other is Pakistan, which is basically ginning up the Taliban insurgency. So it's as though we had been subsidizing North Vietnam to the tune of a billion dollars a year. That's what's going on right now.

The U.S. government in 2011 made a pretty explicit decision not to address either of those issues, at which point I said, "Well, then there's nothing more I can do to help you. There's nothing more."

And so on some levels, so long as the U.S. government refuses to address these two non-military drivers—they are both basically diplomatic drivers of the conflict—if the U.S. government refuses to address either of those, then I don't see why your son should be laying his body across the railroad tracks to prevent the thing coming apart. Why should he be making up for, frankly, the fecklessness of people who sit around the table in the Oval Office? And I don't mean by that specifically the [president](#); I mean the dozen or so people—and I work for one of them—who make all the decisions on this stuff.

And to be fair, my guy, the [chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), was the one flogging the corruption horse. He is also the guy finally—it took him a long time, but finally—who said the Taliban are a virtual arm of the Pakistani government. He said that to the Senate Armed Services Committee. That got immediately rolled back after he said that, instead of that opening some space for a different relationship with Pakistan.

So it was a real education for me to be working for a military guy, who basically kept saying, "When we have a principles committee meeting everyone has an opinion about how many men and women in uniform ought to be doing what, everyone in the room. I'm the only guy wearing a uniform in the room, but everybody else in the room has something to say about that. But when I say 'Could we please talk about corruption in Afghanistan?', I cannot generate a conversation." So I think that's kind

of interesting.

On Ashraf Ghani, he forged a lot of his [votes](#). So did [Abdullah Abdullah](#). I have a real issue with somebody getting to have a position whose role is defending and protecting a [constitution](#) when he violated that constitution in order to get that position. So I've got a little bit of an issue with that.

I also have an issue with us, who have been saying for a long time that the Taliban have to basically swear an oath on the constitution if they want to be part of the government, and then we create a completely extra-constitutional office, which was called the CEO. So now Afghanistan has a bicephalous executive, which is nowhere in their constitution.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Which is the power-sharing deal with Abdullah Abdullah.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Exactly, exactly. And that's nowhere in the constitution. So how come they have to obey the constitution?

**STEPHANIE SY:** But Ghani has made being anti-corruption a key part—at least so he says. The opium trade is flourishing in Afghanistan, from what I've read recently; and there are still sort of ties. *The New York Times* did a [piece](#) about this a few weeks ago.

Do you see there being hope there for a difference to be made on the corruption?

**SARAH CHAYES:** As I say, I'm not close enough to it. All I know is that you have to look at what Afghan leaders are actually doing. You cannot look at what they're saying. And so my sense is that he has been a little bit selective in his anti-corruption efforts.

**QUESTION:** I'm Herb Leventer. I teach philosophy at Yeshiva University.

I have sort of a philosopher's question: How would you respond to the idea that to use the word "corruption" you are adding to the problem, because corruption is actually two things and when you say corruption as one thing you are distorting the picture?

Corruption has always existed as an everyday way of living and of smoothing social relations and getting things done. The problem isn't corruption itself. The problem is corruption that doesn't actually perform the function that historically for thousands of years it has performed, which is a separate issue. So it's gross corruption, corruption that doesn't take 10 percent of the contract for building the road but takes 100 percent of the contract for building the road.

In effect, you're in a situation of the best being the enemy of the good, and what you end up with is an easy way out for the really corrupt people that you should really be concerned with, which are the grossly corrupt ones persecuting and jailing the minor corrupt people who actually perform a function within society. So you are giving them a tool to justify themselves.

The question is there's two kinds of corruption.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Gotcha. Right.

I just want to go back for one second to the previous questioner from Pace. The reason I want your card is because I'm also trying to develop a business ethics curriculum for Kano, Nigeria, again thinking broadly about business ethics.

On this one, I usually do use the word "acutely"—I usually have an adjective ahead of corruption. It's

very clear when you look at the cases and the structures that I'm describing that I'm not talking about the corruption that may exist occasionally everywhere.

That being said, I actually challenge a little bit your notion. First of all, I often hear—and this isn't quite what you said—"Well, that's sort of part of their culture; it's how stuff gets done in this X country or Y country."

What's really interesting about that is I've only heard that comment from Westerners. I have never in any one of the countries that I've gone to look at—and I haven't gone to countries where there's a little bit of anecdotal corruption; I've gone to countries where it's a significant problem—but I have never had an Afghan, a Pakistani, a Nigerian, an Azerbaijani, a Kirgiz, an Uzbek say: "Sarah, would you get off your corruption jag? That's just your American sensibility. We really don't mind. It's part of the way we do things here." So I would be really careful.

Also, when I was getting that kind of an approach, often I actually went and asked all my pals in Afghanistan, anyone I talked to, "What does corruption mean?" It was really interesting. I got often narratives: "Corruption is when I have to pay the official to get my administrative form filled out and I don't have the money, but Sy does, and so I am trampled underfoot." The vocabulary they used was incredibly powerful. And there were various stories like this. There were some variations around the edges.

But the other point is I'm not looking at countries or at cases of minor corruption. I'm nowhere near the gray zone in the specifics that I'm talking about.

Finally, I would like to say that I actually think we are living in a slightly different period now. There is a difference between patronage and corruption. With patronage there is a significant downward redistribution of whatever goodies are being taken. Now, that downward redistribution is often unfair, and it's cronyistic and stuff like that, but it is happening.

Whereas what you are having now with the globalized economy is this money is being pulled up and out. Here we are at the other part of this, right? [Points to the word "Carnegie" on the backdrop behind her, next to the Carnegie Council's slogan "Ethics Matter"] The argument is "corruption is what built America." Well, it did, because [Andrew Carnegie](#) didn't have any other place to put his money; he had to plow it back into America.

When a billion dollars a month is leaving Afghanistan—it's maybe not a billion dollars a month—but the financial flows that are leaving these places and coming here, that makes for a slightly different setup.

**QUESTION:** Sondra Stein.

Going back to Afghanistan, you mentioned that Pakistan was ginning the system. We've known that. How much power does this country have to really change that?

The second part of that is: As far as the corruption, I know we've been giving the cash to Karzai, etc., but it's so pervasive on the local level, how much power do we have to really change it, and how effective, and what would our role be there?

**SARAH CHAYES:** [May 2, 2011](#): I wake up in Kabul and the word is going around—actually, we didn't have it because of the military flight—by the time I get to Kandahar, there's a picture of the house in Abbottabad. We didn't know that it was Abbottabad yet, but there is a picture of the house available

on *The Washington Post* site. I put my head in my hands. Anyone who has been to Pakistan, you just have to look at that house and know that was a safe house, without even knowing it was in Abbottabad. Then you find out that it is in the equivalent of West Point; that was a safe house.

Now, what's really fascinating is Pakistan scrambled jets. They scrambled jets because they—now, this is just my intimate conviction; I don't have any evidence of this—but my belief is they scrambled jets because they assumed that we were going to bomb them, that we were going to say, "Are you kidding? You harbored our—"

As negative as I have felt about Pakistan's role in the Afghan situation, I never thought they would harbor [bin Laden](#). I thought that was one line they wouldn't cross because they would be too afraid of what we would do about it.

So my answer is there's plenty we could have done. But we were more interested in conducting operations than we were in winning the war. We were so worried about they'd cut off our ground lines of communication—and then they did. When they're shooting over the border at us or we shoot back at Taliban and happen to kill a bunch of Pakistani soldiers who are co-located with the Taliban, the Pakistanis throw a fit, they cut off our ground lines of communication, and we bloody apologize. It's just unbelievable!

We were talking about this before we came in. We were talking about American politics. I said, "It's really interesting living in Washington where there's like a hologram. You've got this image, which is a completely fictitious image, which is Pakistan is our friend in the war against terror, or they don't understand. You have an entire city whose industry is to protect the sanctity of the hologram.

Frankly, I think that's also part of why our politics are so haywire, because you've got a [guy](#) who is [running](#) on a Republican ticket saying, "Like hell [George W. Bush](#) kept us safe." Everything else aside, some people are saying, "Thank god somebody is just like puncturing the hologram."

So I don't think the issue is what we could do or what we can't do. I think the issue is, how do you brief it? How do you tell Mr. and Mrs. Thompson that their daughter who got blown up in an improvised explosive device, or your son, that we paid for the material that killed their child? How do you brief that to the American public? At some point you're so wound up in this lie that you can't unwind it. I think it's just stunning.

On what could we do about corruption, it goes back to your question about enabling. One of the things we tried to do when we came up with a list of acutely/seriously corrupt officials, like as a baby step, we said: "Okay, what if we have a coalition-wide list of corrupt actors with a red flag, and anybody who has that red flag gets no invitations to high-level, stature-enhancing events, like a Fourth of July party, no accepting gifts from them, and no inviting them to fancy junkets overseas?" We couldn't even get that through. We couldn't get that to happen. [Laughter] What I'm saying is if we could just stop actively enabling it, that would have made a difference.

The Afghans? At some point, they said, when the news about Karzai came out, "We all knew or assumed that this was the case." But when it's in *The New York Times*—I sent it off to a friend of mine in Kandahar at the time and I said, "What do you think? What do people think?" He said, "People just assume you want the corruption."

So there's a whole historical riff. I told you one part of the historical riff. There's another historical riff in *Thieves of State*—not that I'm selling my book or anything like that. But if you don't want the book, you have to buy the soap. [Laughter]

**STEPHANIE SY:** The soap, by the way, seems like a perfect metaphor for the dirty corruption we're talking about. It just occurred to me.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Another friend of mine said, "You're still trying to clean up Afghanistan?"

There's a chapter on a body of literature called "[mirrors for princes](#)." The most famous one that we all know is [Machiavelli](#). It turns out Machiavelli comes in a long line of literature which was quite well-known. What I discovered as I read him in the context of these other ones is that he was being deliberately provocative. He was actually a democrat, and he was writing [this thing](#) to keep himself from being executed by the [Medicis](#). It's a pretty interesting story.

But what all of them talk about is what has come to be in humanitarian law known as command responsibility. That principle of law was actually established, at least in our world, by the [lawyer](#) who brought the case against [Charles I](#) of England during the English Civil War. The guy was a genius. There's another great book, called [The Tyrannicide Brief](#). He was eventually executed as a regicide. He was a brilliant and very public-spirited lawyer. He established the principle of command responsibility because Charles I was not accused of actually shooting people and killing people but it was by his command that these tyrannous acts had been committed.

It's by that principle that we are held responsible for the corrupt acts of the Afghan government, because the Afghans are saying: "You guys are running this government. Sovereignty—what sovereignty? This guy is on an IV drip and you guys are supplying the fluid here. So what he does you're responsible for it."

**STEPHANIE SY:** That certainly doesn't win hearts and minds. You know, you heard that term so often, but, after reading your book, you really get the impression that it feels, to the people at least, that the Americans are complicit in all of it. And actually the Americans did prop up Karzai.

**QUESTION:** My name is Youssef Bahammi.

In 1824, the [king of Denmark](#) passed a constitutional law to allow family members of the Danish royal family work within the Danish government only if they have a University of Copenhagen law degree in order to stop basically the discrimination proportionally in Denmark. But today there are contemporary ways to bring ethics. I was thinking about enlightened despots or true basically modern individualistic society that exists with enough demand. But the problem is that ethics and governments stay as broad factors. So how to deal with the pressure of civil society and the effects on the reform in order to get better results?

**SARAH CHAYES:** There are a lot of pieces in that question.

Just to pick up on the last one, one of the really interesting things about the Arab Spring, which was a big civil society movement, a reform-oriented civil society movement, that a lot of people are saying failed—again I would just caution that we're not there yet—but one of the interesting things was it was a demand for reform facilitated by social media. What social media did that's really interesting is that it allowed for a leaderless revolution. There are a couple of consequences to that.

One is elite bargains don't work against leaderless revolutions. So anyone who thinks that cutting up the pie is a great way to prevent revolutions—that's another argument that's in favor of corruption that's often given, is that if we chop it up and give all the different corrupt actors a piece of the pie, then that will keep things quiet—when you can have leaderless revolutions, that doesn't work. But the downside of it is you had a lot less thinking through: What does the structure of our government

need to look like in order to prevent this from happening again?

We haven't talked about [Tunisia](#) much. But I actually find that Tunisia, for all it's a much better outcome for the moment than Egypt, scratch the surface and it's not a lot different. It's a restoration also. It's the same interests that have come back into power. It's just that it didn't happen violently. So it's no accident that Tunisia is providing a lot of foreign fighters for [Syria](#), because the same radicalization—

**STEPHANIE SY:** I thought Tunisia was sort of the success story.

**SARAH CHAYES:** Of course. It's being billed as a success story because it hasn't descended into violent chaos. But if you look at the outcome, the outcome is very much the same old kleptocratic kind of system and people coming back into power.

I don't think Tunisia is very sustainable, unless it answers your question, which is: How then does civil society push this thing towards substantive reforms?

I would say the place to look at very carefully is Ukraine. Ukraine has a very sophisticated civil society. They have been through a [revolution](#) that ended up just exchanging one kleptocratic network for another, and then they had to have another revolution. I think the international community is more switched-on with respect to corruption in Ukraine than it has been in a lot of other situations.

So I think civil society has to get smart. There are three things I think local civil society really needs to focus on.

One is the type of structural analysis that I was talking about. I brought some civil society groups through the process of saying: "Is this a single or a multiple network? How vertically and horizontally integrated is it? What are the elements of state function that have particularly been captured by the keptocratic network to serve its purposes? Which are the elements of state function that have been deliberately hollowed out? What are the key revenue streams? What are the network vulnerabilities?" Make them map the enemy, if you will, so that they can then aim their necessarily limited resources at that vulnerable spot in the network that is most likely to make a difference.

They also need to really reach out to their partners overseas. So if you are from Azerbaijan and you want to work on your government, then you also want to be connecting back to let's figure out which are the most important enabling countries, reach out to civil society in those countries, so that you can get supporting fires, if you will.

But then, the next thing is you really have to think institutionally: What are the systematic changes needed? That's where our [Constitutional](#) process is a really interesting one, because that thing was basically a corruption-prevention mechanism. Now, it hasn't always succeeded. But they thought really, really, really carefully—

**STEPHANIE SY:** So you're talking about checks and balances and that type of structural reform?

**SARAH CHAYES:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** James Starkman.

What, if any, is the link between corruption and the burning of Christian churches in the north of Nigeria and the [kidnapping of 200 innocent girls](#)?

**SARAH CHAYES:** On Christian churches, in fact there is very little targeting of Christian sites. If you compare the targeting of Muslim sites to the targeting of Christian sites in Northern Nigeria, it's off the charts. Muslim sites are way more attacked. I'm not excusing anything here.

I also want to talk about a difference over time. If you look at the first three or four years of Boko Haram, it was all government targets—it was police, it was local administration things, it was stuff like that.

I'm not trying to say that these extremist movements are logical anti-corruption reform movements. That's not what I'm trying to say. I'm trying to say that when people are driven to extremes, then all bets are off. I mean go back and look at what [iconoclasm looked like in the 16th century](#). There isn't a direct link, obviously, with that.

However, with schools there is—not quite the kidnapping of girls; that's a separate thing. But—and I was really fascinated by this when I started to delve into it—I'm really glad you asked that question—when we think of attacks on schools, or even the name of the group, Boko Haram, the moniker, "Western education is kind of sinful," we think of they're against tolerance and critical thinking and scientific method and being educated.

In Nigeria, when I was interviewing people about corruption everywhere, North, South, almost everyone I talked to said, "Politicians are corrupt, but the really corrupt actors are the civil servants." Why? Because that's an oil economy and there is a pretty significant government budget at the federal and at the state level. So the big way that you are corrupt is by stealing government money through contract fraud. Who can dicker with the contracts? Only the civil servants. They said, "The politicians can't do it by themselves because they don't have the technical expertise to pad the contracts." So it's the civil service that's doing it.

How do you get into the civil service? What was the Nigerian education system set up for in the first place? It was set up by the British—who were, oh by the way, converting people to Christianity against their will—and it was set up to create a civil service.

So there you get how this whole thing interweaves. It was a proselytizing institution that was set up to create civil servants who would extract the wealth of the country and send it out to England. Now those same people are extracting the wealth of the country and putting it into the pockets of themselves and the political leadership.

So education is not seen—I mean by a lot of people it is still seen as how we understand education, and there is a lot of respect for education in Nigeria. But among some people it is seen as an acutely—or what was your word, the adjective you wanted me to use, severely or something?—a severely corrupt intake valve into a severely corrupt system.

When I started thinking about it that way, again that does not excuse torching schools or kidnapping girls, but it just puts it in a really interesting context that's a little bit different from our understanding.

**STEPHANIE SY:** Thank you, Sarah.

## Audio

Around the world from Afghanistan to Nigeria, systemic corruption is fueling instability, declares Sarah Chayes in this electrifying conversation. And the United States and other enablers are part of the problem. "If we don't prioritize corruption more—and that means here as well as there—the world is going to become an increasingly dangerous place."

**Video Clips**

Around the world from Afghanistan to Nigeria, systemic corruption is fueling instability, declares Sarah Chayes in this electrifying conversation. And the United States and other enablers are part of the problem. "If we don't prioritize corruption more—and that means here as well as there—the world is going to become an increasingly dangerous place."

**TV Show**

Around the world from Afghanistan to Nigeria, systemic corruption is fueling instability, declares Sarah Chayes in this electrifying conversation. And the United States and other enablers are part of the problem. "If we don't prioritize corruption more—and that means here as well as there—the world is going to become an increasingly dangerous place."

**Read More:** [Democracy](#), [Security](#), [Terrorism](#), [World Economy](#), [Afghanistan War](#), [Business](#), [Corruption](#), [Economics](#), [Ethics in Business](#), [Foreign Aid](#), [Global Economic Justice](#), [International Law](#), [International Relations](#), [Iraq War](#), [Private Sector Development/Corporate](#), [U.S. Foreign Policy](#), [Africa](#), [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), [Central Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#), [North America](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Egypt](#), [Iraq](#), [Nigeria](#), [Pakistan](#), [United States](#)

Copyright © 2016 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs