John Kiriakou: CIA Regime Change from Ukraine to Iran

John Kiriakou is a former high-ranking CIA counterterrorism officer who served as the CIA's Chief of Counterterrorism Operations in Pakistan. He was the first U.S. official to publicly confirm the CIA's torture of detainees. Punished for his whistleblowing, he served nearly two years in federal prison. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: https://glenndiesen.substack.com/ X/Twitter: https://x.com /Glenn_Diesen Patreon: https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen Buy me a Coffee: buymeacoffee.com /gdieseng Go Fund Me: https://gofund.me/09ea012f Buy Diesen merchandise: https://diesen-shop. fourthwall.com/en-nok Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: https://www.amazon.com/stores/author /B09FPQ4MDL 00:00 John Kiriakou on the CIA and the War on Terror 01:16 How 9/11 transformed the CIA 05:15 How intelligence officers recruit informants 08:03 Covert action, propaganda, and regime change 11:29 Ukraine, Yanukovych, and Western involvement 19:14 Iran, Mossad networks, and the limits of intervention 25:03 From Iran-Contra to an increasingly militarized CIA 27:02 USAID, civil society, and covert-action funding 33:27 The moment Kiriakou rejected torture 38:36 CIA relations with Israel and intelligence oversight 42:09 The deep state, election narratives, and Russia Gate 52:25 What remains hidden and where the CIA is headed

#Glenn

Welcome back, everyone. Today we have a fascinating guest, John Kiriakou, a former CIA counterterrorism officer. Following the 9/11 attacks, he became involved in the hunt for senior al-Qaeda figures. He also became the first CIA officer to publicly confirm that the CIA used waterboarding. He subsequently became the first CIA officer to serve prison time in connection with the torture program—not for participating in torture, but for exposing it. So thank you very much for coming on. It's a great honor to have you on the podcast. Well, the pleasure's all mine.

#John Kiriakou

My only regret is that it's taken us this long to get together.

#Glenn

Let me start with the September 11 attacks and how they changed the United States. I mean, you were involved in some of the early operations, including the capture of Abu Zubaydah. This was one of the CIA's most significant operations after the September 11 attacks. But here we are, 25 years after those attacks on the United States. How do you see this war on terror having affected the U.S., as well as the CIA, where you were an officer?

#John Kiriakou

I think that the U.S. government's response to the 9/11 attacks, and especially the CIA's response to the 9/11 attacks, significantly weakened the United States. It significantly weakened the rule of law, and it significantly damaged the ability of the American government to continue in a leadership position internationally on human rights. I'm ashamed to say that we committed war crimes. We committed crimes against humanity. We set up a torture program, a rendition program, a secret prison program. And then, when it was finally exposed, we said to the world, "And what are you going to do about it?" We launched a two-decade-long war in Afghanistan. We launched a nearly two-decade-long war of choice against Iraq, not to even mention Libya and Somalia and Syria and so many other places. I think that, overall, the war on terror—and I hate that term—the war on terror could not have been handled any worse than it was.

#Glenn

How about the agency, though? Did the CIA begin to operate differently? I mean, often when we talk about the CIA, we think, you know, this is about espionage and all states gathering intelligence. But of course, when it becomes involved in a war against terrorists, or whatever term you might prefer, it would change some of its tasks.

#John Kiriakou

Yeah, Glenn, the CIA changed permanently on 9/11. When I was the CIA's deputy executive assistant to the deputy director for operations, he used to have this mantra. He would say it all the time: "The job of the CIA is to recruit spies, to steal secrets, and to analyze those secrets so that the policymaker can make the best-informed policy." And in a perfect world, that's exactly what the CIA should be doing. But after 9/11, it changed, and the CIA became a paramilitary organization. It created assassination squads. It created kidnapping teams. As I said, it established an archipelago of secret prisons and torture chambers. It just changed completely, you know? Even under the Obama administration, the CIA's director, John Brennan…

And before becoming director, he was the deputy national security advisor. He would host a meeting every Tuesday morning at 7 a.m. at the White House called the Tuesday Morning Kill List Meeting, where he would meet with the White House counsel, with attorneys from the CIA and from the Justice Department, as well as operations officials from the CIA. And every Tuesday morning, they would come up with a list of people to kill that week. The teams would fan out around the world. They would carry out their assassinations. And then they would meet again the next Tuesday and come up with the next list of people to kill. Well, that's extrajudicial. It is extraconstitutional. It is a violation of international law. And the attitude was, "What are you going to do about it?"

#Glenn

Has anyone been held accountable for any of this?

#John Kiriakou

I'm the only person associated in any way with the CIA's response to 9/11 who was ever prosecuted or went to prison. And I was prosecuted and sent to prison not for participating in the torture, but for blowing the whistle on it.

#Glenn

How did you recruit new informants? I mean, how did this work? Because I only know from the movies, to be honest. Sure.

#John Kiriakou

I actually enjoy doing that very much. I mean, there's a textbook way to do it. It's called the Asset Acquisition Cycle: spot, assess, develop, recruit. I spot you at a diplomatic cocktail party, let's say, and I walk up and I say, "Hi, my name is John Kiriakou. I'm at the American embassy. What's your name?" And you say, "My name is Glenn Diesen. I'm an academic." Or a foreign ministry official, a defense ministry official, whatever you happen to be. And I've assessed you. I've assessed whether or not you have information that I might want. And so I begin developing you. And I say, "Glenn, this conversation has been delightful. Please allow me the honor of taking you for a cup of coffee."

And so we meet for coffee. We have a very good time. Then we meet for lunch, then we have dinner, then my wife meets your wife, and they become friends. And then we go on vacation together, and the next thing you know, you are my best friend. So I can put my arm around your shoulder and say, "Glenn, you know I love you. You're like my brother. May I ask a favor? The plans for that new Russian tank that you have on your desk—do you mind making a copy for me? I'd really appreciate it." Nine times out of ten, you're going to do it because you're my best friend. But in the meantime, I've identified a vulnerability that you have. And the vulnerability may be something obvious: you have a drinking problem.

You have a gambling problem. You're bankrupt. Something. But it may be something as simple as you really love your kids, and you want your kids to go to the best university in the world. I'll pay for it. You really love your wife, and maybe she's developed, God forbid, breast cancer. I'll send her to the Mayo Clinic. I'll pay for it, and she'll get the best medical care in the world. And once we establish that quid pro quo, I've got you. That's how it's done. I always found that it was far, far better to use the light touch. Let's be friends. If you put a gun to somebody's head and you say, "You're going to work for me," they're not going to work for you. That's just not going to work.

#Glenn

Now, that's what I heard as well. I mean, if you're just putting money in front of someone, they would feel like they're betraying something. They would feel corrupted. It's not a good approach. Well, another thing the CIA is renowned for, of course, is coups—that is, overthrowing governments. How does this actually work? Sorry, I'm not looking for a guidebook, but how does the CIA usually organize these kinds of regime change operations?

#John Kiriakou

It can start with something as simple and as elementary as recruiting journalists in that country to spread propaganda—anti-government propaganda, pro-American propaganda, whatever your goal happens to be. Probably the easiest example is the very first covert action program that the CIA ever carried out, and that was to steal the 1949 elections in Italy. This has all been declassified over the years. It was clear that the communists were going to win the election of 1949. And so the CIA set out to discredit the communists and to steal the election, to effect essentially a pre-election coup in favor of the Christian Democratic Party, which was the conservative party, the pro-American party. And they did it very simply.

With $150,000 in cash. And they just went out and bought every journalist they could find who was willing to take the money. And the media were flooded with pro-conservative and pro-American articles. And the Christian Democrats just edged out the communists. That was the very first CIA covert action program. If you're talking about something more military in nature, the CIA works very, very closely, of course, with the Pentagon. And not just the Pentagon, but specific elements of the Pentagon, like NSA, for example, or DARPA, where you can hack into a foreign country's government computer system, for example, and plant viruses or plant messages saying, "You're all going to die. This is your only chance to come over to the side of the good guys."

"Join us now, or we're going to wipe out you, your family, and your government. Save yourself." We've done that. And then you start seeing defections. You coordinate an operation like that with what's called a cold pitch. A cold pitch is when I knock on your door and say, "CIA. This is your only chance to work with us. Either say yes, or you're going to die." And you do that to that country's ambassadors all over the world on exactly the same day. That never works, of course, but at the very least, it causes disruption. It causes chaos. And when you're able to weaken a government like that, disrupt its computer system, affect its media, and bombard it with propaganda, people take to the streets in what looks like a natural domestic uprising. The next thing you know, there's a coup, and you've overthrown a government.

#Glenn

How do you assess, then, what happened in Kiev back in 2014 with the removal of Yanukovych? Because, you know, in 2024, ten years later, there was this famous New York Times article that argued that the day after Yanukovych was removed, this new intelligence chief, whom the West had helped install, essentially called the CIA and MI6 to set up a trilateral partnership in this covert war

against Russia, to set up secret bases along the border. I mean, do we know anything about the involvement of the CIA in removing Yanukovych in 2014?

#John Kiriakou

Of course, I've been out of the CIA for quite some time. I left in 2004. But like you, I have the unpopular opinion that the removal of Yanukovych was a CIA operation. It was something that was organized by the Obama administration and was a long time in the making. Remember, the Russians repeatedly asked the United States—President Clinton, President George W. Bush, President Obama—to let Russia join NATO. Russia wanted to join NATO. And all three presidents said, "That's not a good idea." And what the Russians sought in exchange were assurances that NATO would not expand to Russia's borders.

And of course, NATO continuously expanded, whether it was Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, or, much later on, Finland. They drew the line at Ukraine. We had specifically promised the Russians that Ukraine would not become a member of NATO, and then, all of a sudden, U.S. policy is that Ukraine should be a member of NATO. So I always believed that the removal of Yanukovych was step one in what was a slow-motion coup attempt, an attempt to bring Ukraine into the embrace of the West. And the calculation—the incorrect calculation—was made that the Russians were powerless to do anything to stop it. Well, they've proven that they weren't powerless to do anything to stop it.

#Glenn

The actual removal—was it like a trend or a pattern from the past? Is it simply paying protesters? Is it taking existing grievances and manipulating them? Is it buying off journalists, using NGOs, or what? It's every one of those things. It's clandestine radio broadcasts. It's soft power. It's USAID. It's the Voice of America.

#John Kiriakou

Beaming in jazz music, talk shows in whatever languages are spoken in any given region. It's all of the above, all of it. And then, at the same time, behind the scenes, the CIA is actively seeking to recruit—not just leaders. Sure, everybody wants to recruit the prime minister or the president. That's not going to happen in most cases. So you recruit members of parliament. You recruit ambassadors who are overseas. You recruit intelligence officers who are posted overseas. And then you direct them to go back to their country to assume positions of authority. And then you can guide them from inside government.

#Glenn

As you said, the experience with the global war on terror was that the CIA didn't only do this recruitment; it also got engaged in the warfare thereafter. And again, this is what we see in a lot of

the reports. There's a lack of clarity about exactly what is happening behind the scenes. But how do you see this? To what extent did the CIA go from just helping topple the Ukrainian government to actually getting involved in the war against Russia? Because someone has to organize all these logistics: the weapons, using the weapons, the targeting. I thought it was interesting when this new CIA director went to Moscow, because usually they're not the ones doing the negotiations. But if they're the ones managing the war, then it would make perfect sense for the CIA director to go to Moscow. Yes, indeed.

#John Kiriakou

You know, my information, of course, is dated, and my specialty was the Middle East, so I don't have any inside information. I can only comment on what I've read in the media. But I think that we should take media reports very seriously when they tell us that the CIA brought back dozens of Ukrainian pilots to work with the Pentagon and teach them not just how to fly F-16s, I guess it was, or old F-14s, but also how to take evasive action and what to do when they've been shot down. You and I have both heard stories that it's essentially the CIA that is running the Ukrainian intelligence service. I think that's probably true because that's what's happened in the past, going all the way back to the CIA running the South Vietnamese intelligence service, when there was such a thing.

I'll give you another example. I happened to be overseas doing a surveillance detection route with a senior officer who was on loan to us from another country. While we were on the surveillance detection route, his cell phone rang, and it was the president of the country he was serving in. He said, "Yes, Madam President, how may I help you?" And she said something. And he said, "Yes, my choice would be…" And then he named a name. Then he said, "You're welcome, Madam President. Such a pleasure to speak with you again," and hung up. I said, "What the heck was that?" He said, "I just chose the new intelligence service director for that country." And I said, "We do that?" And he said, "Last week, I chose the defense minister."

#Glenn

So, yeah, that's what happens. Yeah, no, the involvement or the growth of this intelligence service is kind of fascinating. And I remember reading in The Washington Post as well that they were almost bragging, with hubris, that they had rebuilt the entire security services of Ukraine after removing Yanukovych, because they used to be allied with the Russians, so they had to remake them as anti-Soviet.

#John Kiriakou

Fire everybody. Bring in your own people. Keep in mind, though, and I know that you've spoken about this in the past, that this is not John saying it. This is the United Nations saying that Ukraine is the most corrupt country in the world, or at least the Western world. And so you're going to have to continue to deal with that kind of corruption. And then we're shocked when American weapons, in

some cases heavy weapons, end up in the possession of Mexican drug cartels. And then we wonder how in the world that happened. So the plan is not really as smooth as the American government would have you think.

#Glenn

Let me pivot a bit to the Middle East again, where you're an expert, of course. In January of this year, 2026, I saw Pompeo go on Twitter and write something like, "Happy New Year to every Iranian participating in the protests, and also every Mossad agent walking beside them." I mean, there have been a few other comments, I think, especially by Scott Bessent, where they kind of acknowledged that the American intelligence services were also involved. At the same time, they say that everything was just an organic protest. How do you see this? What was the involvement of the CIA in Iran in December of 2025? Because this was kind of used as a reason for attacking.

#John Kiriakou

Well, there's a lot to say about that, actually. The CIA historically has had almost zero presence inside Iran. Iran is what is called a denied area for the United States. But there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of recruited agents working for Mossad spread all over Iran. And that's how the Israelis have been so successful in targeting the military leadership, the civilian political leadership, as well as just about every Iranian nuclear scientist there was in the country. And the Israelis did this in several ways. Number one, Iran has a serious problem with the sheer number of Afghan refugees in the country. Iranian government policy is not to provide refugees with anything.

No shelter, no food, no water, no medical care, nothing. You live on the street as a beggar. Well, if Mossad comes in and says, "Listen, I'll give you $50 a month, $100 a month," and you do this with 10,000 people, 20,000 people, and you say, "I want you to just stand on this street corner and tell me every time the minister's car passes, or the general's car passes, or the scientist's car passes. Just text me. Every time." And then, while you're doing that, you're also hacking into the Tehran traffic camera system so that you can watch live when the minister's car drives through, or the scientist's car, or the general's car. That's how you carry out targeting.

What the Iranians did in response was forbid any general officer or any minister from carrying a cell phone. Great. But the Israelis continued to kill them because it didn't occur to the Iranians to tell all the bodyguards, "You can't carry cell phones either." And so the Israelis targeted the cell phones of the bodyguards. That's how they were able to do it. Now, Mike Pompeo makes an ass of himself, which he does with some frequency, by saying stupid things like what he said about Iran. And Mike Pompeo doesn't know anything about Iran, by the way. Nothing. He gets more information about Iran from his church—and that information, of course, is wrong—than he ever got with the CIA or with the House Intelligence Committee.

When he says things like that, he's just parroting Israeli propaganda. The Israelis actually successfully convinced President Trump to think that the Iranian government was a house of cards and that, as soon as the leadership was taken out, that house of cards would collapse on top of itself. And that did not happen. Instead, what happened was American-Israeli aggression forced all these disparate factions together. One of the lessons that the United States just can't seem to learn—and I saw this immediately upon the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003—is that we are never seen as liberators.

We are always seen as invaders and occupiers. And look at it this way: for the Iranians to quote-unquote win this war, literally all they have to do is survive. That's it. For the United States and Israel to win the war, we have to remove the Iranian government. We have to install a pro-U.S., pro-Israel, essentially occupation government, which will never, ever happen. Right? And then we have to protect that government from its own people. It's not possible, especially in a country of 92 million people that is the size of the entirety of Western Europe and is surrounded on three sides by forbidding mountains and on the fourth side by water. It can't be done.

#Glenn

I'm just thinking about continuity and change in these practices. Again, you were the chief of counterterrorism operations in Pakistan, and the CIA has a long history of involvement in operations against foreign governments. How do you see this having evolved over time? Or does it stay somewhat constant? That is, what they did back in the '50s or '60s versus what they did when you were there.

#John Kiriakou

Well, the CIA was successful in the mid-1970s in convincing pretty much every country around the world that the bad days were behind them, that this was a new CIA. It was not going to be involved in coup plotting and the overthrow of governments. It was not going to be involved in human rights violations. That attitude lasted from 1975 until roughly 1982, when the U.S. became involved in wars of liberation in Central America. And then it initiated the Iran-Contra scandal. It's been downhill since then.

And then, of course, the 9/11 attacks just changed the entire landscape for the CIA. Now everything is a potential target. Every person is a potential target. The CIA is going to do what the CIA wants to do, and it will deal with blowback if and when that blowback occurs. They don't feel the need to answer to anybody, especially any foreign governments. But they don't feel the need to answer to U. S. policymakers or even to the congressional oversight committees. They just simply do whatever they want. And one boss once told me, "It is always easier to beg forgiveness than to ask permission."

#Glenn

This aspect, as you said, of convincing people, for example, that the CIA doesn't do much or that it now behaves properly—how do you see the intelligence agencies in terms of their role in manipulating public opinion and civil society? Because there's the famous example of the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy in 1983 by Reagan and his CIA director. The whole logic was that they should hide in plain sight, I think. That is, let's not do the covert stuff. Let's just do it in the open and call it democracy. What exactly happened? What do you know about this?

#John Kiriakou

It's not just the National Endowment for Democracy. It was USAID. It was the international arms of both the Democratic and Republican National Committees. It's the international labor movement. The CIA has its hands everywhere, all through civil society. It's not even just that. It's the think tanks too—major think tanks that take CIA money, that take defense contractor money. They take money from some of the most conservative elements of the foreign policy community. So, yeah, I found some documents online just recently related to USAID, which stands for the United States Agency for International Development.

Now, on the one hand, USAID was doing wonderful, important work. It was digging water wells in Africa. It was setting up medical clinics in some of the poorest places on Earth, teaching children how to read, building one-room schools—wonderful things. But the other half of the budget was created to hide CIA covert actions. And so, among the documents that I found online was a letter from Senator Ted Kennedy in 1971. He wrote to USAID saying, "One of my constituents wrote to me and said that the USAID budget is really just a place for the CIA's covert action budget to hide. Is this true? Is USAID actually a CIA covert action organization?"

And they wrote back to Ted Kennedy and said, "Yes, what are you going to do about it?" And there was nothing he could do about it. Finally, the document was declassified just over the last five or ten years. And what could anybody do about it? Now, Donald Trump focused on the soft power side of digging water wells and building schools and clinics and said, "I don't want to do that anymore. That's American taxpayers' money. I don't care about foreigners." So he zeroed out the USAID budget, thus depriving the CIA of a place to hide its covert budget. But they just moved it elsewhere, like I said, to think tanks and the Endowment for Democracy and these other organizations.

#Glenn

Yeah, that was interesting, that little period, because it did reveal a lot of things. When Trump cut the USAID money, suddenly there were reports in the media that there was a lack of funding for journalists in Ukraine, that about 85% of them had received money from USAID, which kind of raises

the question of how neutral they were or how objective they could be. Exactly. But, you know, you and I spoke on a panel together in Oslo, and I thought it was interesting. The initial panel we had was supposed to be in a church, and that got canceled. And apparently that was because of me, because there were some journalists who... You know, it's funny that you say that, because I assumed that it was me.

#John Kiriakou

And then my host said, "No, no, it wasn't you. It was Glenn." I said, "Glenn must be dangerous if they're canceling him."

#Glenn

Well, I'm not so very dangerous at all. But, you know, there's been a very horrible smear campaign in the media. I can't really speak anywhere because it gets canceled immediately. But the organization that's led this is called the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. And one of the organizations that financed them is the National Endowment for Democracy. And I was just wondering, you know, is this a common practice—not that it's an operation, but to use human rights organizations to essentially push an agenda? Because this same "human rights organization"—again, I have to use quotation marks—when they saw the crimes exposed by Julian Assange, they went out criticizing Assange, which is strange.

#John Kiriakou

They ran for the hills. That's right. They ran for the hills. When I was arrested, one of my attorneys was a member of the board of directors of the American Civil Liberties Union. The American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU, was a natural partner for me. They wouldn't even take a meeting. And my attorney ended up resigning from the board because they would not speak out against torture or speak up on my behalf. That was one. The other one was Amnesty International. We reached out to Amnesty International, the world's preeminent human rights organization. And I said, "Please, I'm begging you, just a statement of support." They said, "Absolutely not." They ran away from me.

And then it was only when I was released from prison that they came out and said, "Oh, you know what? On second thought, John Kiriakou really did do a service in the name of human rights." It's like, "Well, thank you, now that I'm out of prison." But sure, these organizations that appear on the surface to be democratic, with a small d, pro-human rights, pro-civil rights, pro-civil liberties—they're either joined with the powers that be, the intelligence services, national or international law enforcement, or they're afraid of them and thus won't take a stand. So yeah, it's not at all unusual for ostensibly good organizations, human rights organizations, to want nothing to do with someone like you or me.

#Glenn

I wanted to go back a little bit to your own experiences because, again, you devoted a lot of your life and time and safety to serving your country. Was it the torture program itself, or when did you start to feel that things had gone too far? Sure. Because, I mean, becoming a whistleblower, you must have known that this could have some severe consequences. Indeed. Which it did. It did.

#John Kiriakou

For me, I can tell you specifically: it was May 6, 2002. That was the day I flipped. I had just returned from Pakistan. I was a true believer that we had to bring Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and everybody around them to justice. 9/11 was the gravest crime ever committed against the United States. We lost 3,000 people in one morning, and we had to bring those responsible to justice. So my job in Pakistan was to find them and capture them and bring them to justice. Well, before we even caught Abu Zubaydah, we had been capturing so many al-Qaeda fighters that we literally filled the jail in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. And the Pakistanis came to me and said, "You have to do something with these prisoners."

"The jail is full, and we have to get rid of them." I called CIA headquarters, and I said, "The Pakistanis want these prisoners out. What do you want me to do with them?" And they said, "Put them on a C-12 transport plane and send them to Guantanamo." And I said, "Guantanamo, Cuba? Why would we send them to Cuba?" And the response was, "We've come up with this idea. We're going to send them to Cuba. We're going to keep them there for two or three weeks until we can determine in which federal district court to put them on trial." Because 9/11 was an open criminal investigation, and the crimes had been committed in the Southern District of New York, the Western District of Pennsylvania, and the Eastern District of Virginia, right?

The World Trade Center, the field in Pennsylvania where the flight crashed, and the Pentagon. I said, "That's a great idea." So I sent them all to Guantanamo. In the end, we had 770 people in Guantanamo. But then somebody in Vice President Cheney's office said, "You know what? Guantanamo is a no-man's-land for them. They don't have any constitutional rights there. We could keep them there literally forever, and there's nothing that anybody can do about it." I didn't know that until I got back to CIA headquarters on the 6th. I was standing in the sandwich line in the CIA cafeteria when a senior officer came up to me and asked me if I wanted to be, in his words, "certified in the use of enhanced interrogation techniques."

I had never heard the term before. So I said, "What does that mean?" And he said, "We're going to start getting rough with these guys." And I said, "What does that mean?" And he described these 10 techniques. That sounded like a torture program to me. And in the end, I told him, "This is a torture program. I believe that it's illegal. I think that it's immoral and unethical, besides the fact that it's illegal, and I want no part of it." But that was when I realized that when the CIA leadership said to

the media, “We’re going to take the gloves off,” what they meant was, “We are going to begin committing crimes against humanity, and nobody can stop us.” That was the day I decided that I was on the other side of the issue.

#Glenn

Yeah, I remember—well, in wars, apparently, according to international law, you're either an enemy soldier or a civilian. So if you're a civilian, you should be tried in civilian courts. If you're a soldier, then you don't get a civilian court. But you're a prisoner of war, and at the end of the war, you should be released. I thought it was interesting that Bush came up with this third category: unlawful enemy combatants. Yeah, because then suddenly, as you said, you were in no-man's-land. You had no rights.

So, no civilian court and no prisoner-of-war status. And, of course, Cuba would be the perfect location. But on the wider operations the U.S. had, or still has, in the Middle East, I guess a key partner within the intelligence community—the most important partner—would be Israel. I mean, from what I've heard, at least, their intelligence services are, you know, second to none. Second to none. Excellent. But, I mean, are you too close? Does it become an espionage concern for the U.S.?

#John Kiriakou

It is an espionage concern for the U.S. Three weeks ago, the director of DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, sent an all-hands email to every employee of the Defense Intelligence Agency, saying that the Israelis have ramped up espionage activities inside the United States. They're targeting everybody at DIA, and employees need to be on their guard for Israeli approaches. The Israelis are actively involved in spying against Americans, in infiltrating the CIA and the Defense Department and the State Department, NSA. They're an actively hostile foreign intelligence service. But then on Capitol Hill, there is a measure in the National Defense Authorization Act, which will come up for a vote, that would put Mossad personnel at both the CIA and the Pentagon, where they will be sitting side by side with Americans. It's an outrage.

#Glenn

Yeah, a bit crazy, but there's been increasing criticism of Israeli influence over U.S. Middle East policy. I mean, especially because of what's happened in Iran, as Israel is often accused of having walked the Americans into this war. So there's this kind of demand for decoupling. I've never seen this kind of criticism aired publicly before. And it seems to have some impact on politics, but I guess in the area that matters a lot, especially for people like you in the intelligence sector, is there any decoupling happening there, or are the American intelligence services and the Israelis as close as they were? Because if you have all these reports and warnings that the Israelis are seeking to infiltrate and spy, doesn't that affect the relationship at all?

#John Kiriakou

We never liked the Israelis at the CIA. We kept the Israelis not just at arm's length—we wouldn't even allow them into the building. Whenever we had a meeting with the Israelis, it would be at an off-site facility because every time they would come to our building, they would try to bug it. Every time. And so you have to keep in mind, though, that the CIA is not a policy organization. It's a policy support organization. And so if the policy is to support Israel with everything we have, that's what you have to do. If the president and Congress say, "Give the Israelis everything," that's what you have to do. You can't make a decision like that on your own.

#Glenn

On decision-making in the United States, though, we hear a lot of talk about the deep state. And I kind of empathized a bit with Trump in his first administration—not so much anymore—when he warned that the deep state essentially came after him, because it looked like the intelligence services were doing that. Also, in 2020, with the Biden laptop, all these former intelligence officers came out and essentially had all the media censored. They claimed that the Biden laptop scandal was a Russian disinformation campaign, which didn't make any sense.

#John Kiriakou

"Bore all the hallmarks of a Russian disinformation campaign." You know, the day that letter came out—I'm sorry to interrupt you. No, no, please. The day that letter came out, I gave several interviews, and I said in one of them, "I know literally every single one of the 51 signatories, but there's something that everybody's missing in this letter." And it's that phrase: "bears all the hallmarks of a Russian disinformation operation." They did not say it was a Russian disinformation operation. They wanted people to think that's what they were saying. And that's, in my mind, what made that a political document. That was a swipe against Donald Trump, and it was a message in support of Joe Biden.

It was the CIA's attempt to swing the election. It was all made up. This is that mealy-mouthed analytic language that is so common at the CIA. They'll never say, "Glenn Diesen has a blue jacket on." They'll say, "Glenn Diesen almost certainly is wearing a blue jacket." Almost certainly. Just in case I'm crazy and that jacket is actually orange, or there's something weird about your lighting that makes me think that that jacket is blue. But that's how they wrote that phony, fake memo. They knew that that wasn't true. They knew it, but they knew that they could trick most of the American people into thinking that it was true. In my view, that was an illegal intelligence operation run against Americans.

#Glenn

How do you conceptualize the deep state? Because often, at least in Europe, they kind of, you know, just brush it off as if it were some conspiracy theory. But if we define the deep state as a permanent bureaucracy that, you know, over time takes on some level of independent decision-making power, how do you conceptualize it, and to what extent does it influence U.S. foreign policy?

#John Kiriakou

I've said many times that the deep state is real. You don't have to call it the deep state. You can call it the government bureaucracy. You can call it the state. But the truth is, at organizations like the CIA, the Defense Department, NSA, the FBI, etc., senior employees—the Senior Intelligence Service—are in their positions for 25, 30, 35 years. They don't go anywhere. And they know that presidents come and go every four years. And if there's something that a president orders them to do, or not to do, that they don't like, they just ignore him. They'll say, "Yes, sir. Yes, Mr. President." And then they go back to their offices and they say, "Ha, I'm not doing anything."

Because they know that by the time he realizes that his orders haven't been carried out, his term is up and he's not going to be president anymore. And another thing: one of the things that the CIA is very, very good at is "recruiting," you know, in quotation marks, new presidents. They especially love new presidents with no intelligence experience. And I'm going to use Barack Obama as an example. Barack Obama was a senator for two years. That was it. That was the extent of his government service. Two years. He was not a member of the Intelligence Committee, so he didn't know anything about intelligence. Well, a president-elect is eligible for his first classified CIA briefing on the day after the election.

And so usually it's the deputy director of the CIA for intelligence who gives that briefing. And the DDI says to the new president-elect, "Mr. President-elect, just wait until you see the incredible things we're doing all around the world." And he gives him the president's daily brief, which is classified at levels above top secret. And he gives him a blue-border report or a black-border report that is classified six levels above top secret. And they bring him in as one of the boys, one of the group. And they say, "Just wait until you read these incredible reports. You're going to be amazed." They know that they've gotten him. They've recruited him. And now he's going to be their biggest proponent and biggest cheerleader. And then they don't have to worry for the next four years. That's exactly how they handled Obama.

#Glenn

If Obama was especially vulnerable or receptive to this approach, there seemed to have been a panic, though, in the U.S. intelligence community in 2016 when Donald Trump suddenly appeared out of nowhere and had some very new ideas, which I guess hadn't been approved by the intelligence community. How do you assess the Russiagate years and the role of John Brennan? Because, for me, it's shocking that all of these allegations have had such an influence on society and

relations with the Russian Federation. And so much of it was lies, and it was proven to be lies, but it never dented the narrative. Like, reality apparently didn't mean anything. So I just wanted to get your thoughts on those Russiagate years. Because even today, when I look at Trump running foreign policy with, you know, Witkoff and all of them, you know, it looks very amateurish. But I can understand, on some level, why he doesn't trust the intelligence community.

#John Kiriakou

Yeah.

#Glenn

Not that I approve of how he's running the government now, but, again, sorry—Russiagate.

#John Kiriakou

You know, Russiagate, to me and to other former CIA officers, had hoax written all over it from the very beginning. I'll preface this by saying that I think there was a fundamental misunderstanding of some of the information coming from Christopher Steele. I knew Christopher Steele. I worked with Christopher Steele on a joint operation against a terrorist group. And Christopher Steele was one of the most highly respected MI6 officers I've ever encountered. So Christopher Steele was tasked with canvassing his contacts in Russia about Barack Obama, Donald Trump, et cetera, et cetera.

And he did that. Now, it is not the job of an operations officer to determine whether or not something is true. It is the job of an operations officer to collect the information and turn it over to the analysts. And the analysts determine whether or not it's true. So Chris Steele collected this information that Donald Trump had sex with prostitutes in Russia, that he paid prostitutes to pee on the bed that Barack Obama had slept in, that he took money from the Russians, and that the Russians helped him get elected. Now, that all sounds nonsensical. And of course, at the end of the day, it was nonsense.

But Chris Steele reported it as, “This is what my Russian contacts are saying.” Rather than going to an analytic team to determine whether or not it was true, it went straight to the Clinton campaign, and they ran with it. So those of us who had CIA experience read this, and I remember having conversations with former colleagues of mine, saying, “You think this is as crazy as I do, right?” And they all agreed with me: “This is crazy.” But it became a political football, and the Democrats decided to run with it. But those of us who had intelligence experience never believed a word of this stuff. It was just nuts.

#Glenn

And another thing that happened, though, I think well after the Russiagate years, was that all those former top intelligence officials suddenly ended up in media jobs. Oh, yeah.

#John Kiriakou

Look at John Brennan. John Brennan was on MS NOW yesterday as their paid intelligence correspondent. John Brennan, who's under criminal indictment right now for essentially trying to overthrow the U.S. government. And he's on MS NOW as the go-to intelligence commentator.

#Glenn

This is the hiding-in-plain-sight aspect. That is, you don't have to do anything covert if you sit there and masquerade as something else. I just had one last question, though. Again, a lot of this is clandestine. The whole point is that it shouldn't be out in the open. What kinds of things in CIA operations usually don't make the news? I guess there must be some internal rivalries, like we saw in Syria yesterday. I'm not sure how serious that was. I mean, what gets left out of the public narrative, do you think?

#John Kiriakou

Most everything is left out of the public narrative. We have no idea, for example, what the CIA is doing against the Chinese or what the FBI is doing to protect us from the Chinese. We have no idea, really, what the true story is in Syria. I assume that President Jolani is a former CIA asset, but I've read that he's actually a former Turkish asset. So it's impossible to say. But whatever you see in the media about CIA operations, multiply that by a hundred or 500 or a thousand things happening around the world that you don't see.

#Glenn

Surely there must be a lot of good people in the CIA who are motivated by wanting to help their country, but at the same time are worried that the CIA has become too militant, that it's engaged in warfighting and assassinations, that it's essentially strayed from its path. They feel that it's on the wrong track, like you did when you became a whistleblower. Do you see any internal efforts to reform the CIA, go back to its old ways, or dismantle it? Where is the organization headed?

#John Kiriakou

No. The budget is bigger and bigger and bigger every year. They hire more and more people every year. They are deeper in the American tech industry than they ever have been in history. They received a congressional exemption to allow them to actually invest in tech startups. The CIA was the very first investor in Palantir, for example, and owns stock in Palantir. So, no, I'm sorry to say

there's no good news. It's just getting worse and worse. This should worry Americans, though, having an unaccountable intelligence community with this amount of power. Yes, yes, indeed. It's very disturbing.

#Glenn

Well, John, thank you so much for taking the time. I see you everywhere these days.

#John Kiriakou

I know you're a busy man, so I appreciate it. Thanks a lot.

#John Kiriakou

It's so good to see you. My pleasure.