

THE FLAT HAT

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John Quincy Adams Society sponsors Afghanistan, Iraq policy discussion

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Thursday, Sept. 2 the John Quincy Adams Society at the College of William and Mary co-hosted “Iraq & Afghanistan: A Policy Discussion” along with the Center for Concerned Veterans. The talk was held in Tucker Hall and approximately 75 people attended.

Emma Ashford, an international security expert and senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, was the keynote speaker. Ashford has also worked for the Cato Institute and has been published in the New York Times. Rosanne Rodriguez, a representative from the Center for Concerned Veterans Foundation, helped moderate the event.

The discussion mainly focused on recent policy decisions that the United States has made with regard to Iraq and Afghanistan, especially concerning the recent Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the withdrawal of American troops from the country. The talk was also live streamed on the Center for Concerned Veteran’s Twitter account.

To begin the discussion, Rodriguez addressed the current situation in Afghanistan.

“I know everyone has seen a lot of the scenes coming out of Afghanistan,” Rodriguez said. “As an organization, we work with a lot of veterans and there’s a lot of emotions in the veteran community, in the military community. These are very sad images, but the American people, a lot of the American people, forgot that we had been at war still.”

Ashford started her discussion talking about the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, and how it relates to the upcoming 20th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

“I think it’s a really important conversation, not just withdrawal from Afghanistan, but also the fact that we are rapidly coming up with the 20th anniversary of 9/11,” Ashford said. “And so it really is, I think, a watershed moment to start thinking about our involvement in these conflicts, how we sort of end that gracefully and what we learned through the process, you know, so I guess, in terms of broader lessons from you know, from Afghanistan from Iraq.”

During the discussion, Ashford described the three main points that contribute to why the war in Afghanistan lasted so long without any significant progress that can be assessed after almost 20 years of military occupation.

Ashford argued that military intervention in middle-eastern countries tends to be self-perpetuating and that the United States’ interventions will continue to remain present until we reach certain goals. Secondly, Ashford discussed how the United States’ military operations in the Middle East tend to have very broad goals, which allows troops to remain in these regions for extended periods of time. She also explained how throughout a conflict, the US will tend to expand their reasons for staying in that conflict, which will perpetuate how long troops remain on the ground.

Ashford continued by discussing the quick pace of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. She described the variety of opinions on the event and her belief on how the situation could’ve been handled better.

“It’s perhaps surprising that the government in Kabul collapsed so fast,” Ashford said. “And I think that puts the administration on the back foot in terms of what they can safely do to evacuate first American citizens, be cardholders, and then sort of Afghans on special visas. But I also think that a lot of the criticisms about the withdrawal have been perhaps arguing or positing that there is some perfect counterfactual for this one a lot better. You know, for myself, I can really only see one scenario in which this was substantially better. And it’s the Biden team 10 months ago, opened up visas much more widely.”

Ashford then shifted the conversation to focus on the policy decisions in Iraq. Ashford described the current state of US troops in Iraq, and the Iraqis' official stance on the presence of these troops.

“And so in Iraq, you know, this is the situation that Biden says that we are shifting to so there’s about 2500 troops in Iraq right now,” Ashford said. “That number is not really expected to change in the coming years. It’s just that those troops will be in advisory roles instead of combat roles. And the reason for this shift is actually commodity, one of the key domestic politics. Last year, the Iraqi parliament passed a bill calling for the expulsion of US troops, partly because the pro-US parties abstained, but you know, they still passed it. And the Iraqi prime minister has been under a lot of pressure to push back and to get us troops out of the country, Iraqi people mostly oppose for the most part, US troops remaining.”

At the conclusion of the discussion, the audience had a chance to share questions and comments. Charlotte Walters '24 enjoyed attending the talk and learning about new views on this timely issue.

“I just thought it was an interesting perspective,” Walters said. “This has been something I have been trying to follow in the news and we see a lot of different, varying things, and this was a very interesting and concrete way to get a perspective and I felt like she had a lot of good points about the topic. Overall, I feel like I learned a lot and it was really interesting.”