

Review – Conflict of Interest

Written by Jemima Ackah-Arthur

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JEMIMA ACKAH-ARTHUR, AUG 4 2022

Conflict of Interest

Produced by the Imperial War Museum Institute

Podcast, Series 1 from May 2021 to March 2022

The *Conflict of Interest* podcast reviews notable past conflicts around the world in countries like Libya and Northern Ireland, and examines ongoing conflicts such as Yemen and Syria, to better appreciate who or what was involved in the crisis, why it happened, its outcomes and challenges. It mainly explores the traditional security issue of war, which affects the survival of the state. The Imperial War Museum (IWM) Institute produces the podcast, and each of the 13 episodes in the first series runs up to an hour. The discussions often involve the actions of significant players within a conflict, including non-state groups and government actors, that led to the start and continuity of violence and disorder, as well as some of the global socio-political and economic implications. The discussions also highlight common themes across the episodes such as civil resistance, political violence, power and authority, radicalization, culture and social norms, governance, and social order.

A curator of the museum or an IWM associate serves as the host. The guests are usually distinguished persons in various fields of work including security services and academia, who may be able to offer expert knowledge on a particular crisis, and famous people including playwrights and comedians, who may ask questions to know more about that crisis, widening the reach of the podcast.

It all starts in the museum's café in London, where guests talk with the host and respond to several questions about a particular conflict, sharing important experiences and knowledge to examine the crisis. They take a walk through the museum, viewing significant objects to facilitate the discussion. New guests, including authors, may sometimes join to add a different perspective. James Taylor, the chief curator, intermittently provides further background on the conflict under review and signposts sources of information to help listeners visualize the ongoing conversations, as well as understand some events as they happened in the conflict location.

Several episodes – like Episodes 2, 3, 4 and 5 – focus on conflict within Islamic societies and countries to emphasize, for instance, the suffering and harms that people from Muslim religious backgrounds have faced in their countries of origin due to aggression from their own governments or external (mainly Western) states. In other words, these episodes aim to dispel certain imaginations, narratives and stereotypes associated with the culture, politics, religion, and populations of Islamic countries facing violence that have been widespread mainly from the West to the rest of the world.

In Episode 8, which focuses on the USA, this is further highlighted when the guests share their experiences and knowledge in the investigation of the events of 9/11, Al-Qaeda, the Twin Towers, and the War on Terror. One of these guests, Mohsin Hamid, the novelist living in Pakistan who wrote *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, worked in New York at the time of 9/11, and recalls that about a month after the attacks, security tightened at the airports. As a person from a Muslim background, he was asked more questions, making him feel like a suspect on his travels, and this remains a common trend. We learn that while the terror events represented a shift in Al-Qaeda's focus, location, and target of attacks, the USA invaded Afghanistan because it wanted the Taliban (then rulers of Afghanistan) to return Al-Qaeda's leader Osama Bin Laden to them. The USA had an enormous desire to give a "massive response"

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to the 9/11 attacks throughout the world leading to the Iraq War, which aimed to make Western people secure from a non-existent enemy. However, the counterinsurgency operations in Iraq led to the rise and re-emergence of various insurgent organizations, including the Islamic State which is an off-shoot of Al-Qaeda. Consequently, several groups have emerged globally to further the demands of religious fundamentalists who oppose the West, causing other security challenges like insurgencies which have increased globally, and the polarization of Western societies. Therefore, we should rather unite and address issues that impact human survival, such as the coronavirus pandemic and the climate.

This discussion demonstrates the challenges of militarised approaches to curb security threats. Such approaches have been recommended in failed states to regain territorial control from insurgents. They are often heavy-handed, involving acts that violate human rights including brutality and repression to end a crisis, but do not always cause the destruction of terror groups. To create better conflict outcomes, stakeholders of security thus need to strengthen their focus on the distinct socio-political, historical, and economic context of violence-affected states to mitigate the exclusion of Muslim peoples from society. This requires greater attention to the diverse population within affected states, in order to improve the management of people during internal military operations and counterinsurgency activities elsewhere as, for instance, recruits may join insurgent organizations as a result of coercion, and not necessarily to 'preserve' religious rule or to promote any political motives.

Within *Conflict of Interest*, the IWM also produces a special series named "Before the War" in which a curator, often Taylor, interviews other 'celebrity guests' from conflict-affected countries to understand their daily livelihoods before a particular crisis started. The interviews, though limited, help listeners to appreciate human security which pays attention to people's lives and survival instead of the state. They draw attention to themes like family relationships, tradition, and gender. In less than twenty minutes, these guests tell stories about how they navigated various challenging environments to pursue their passion and vocations. They share aspects of their upbringing and livelihoods that shaped their individual careers in art and music, which are not always welcome in some traditional societies.

In an episode with Jake Shuker, musician, guitarist and leader of death metal band Maysaloon, Shuker talks about his upbringing in Syria and the creation of his band despite the music ban in the country. He dropped out of school and turned to music. He found people with similar interests and formed the band which played at different venues even during the war. However, his work is frowned upon because his choice of music is "blasphemous" and could lead one to jail. He laughs while talking about important challenges such as his inability to move about freely with the band as the war began, and his father's inconsistent reactions toward the music that was played. As the war heightened, Shuker and the band attended a music festival in Beirut, Lebanon, and escaped the conflict.

In this interview, we learn mostly about resilience, which can be identified, among other themes, in some episodes in the podcast. This conversation demonstrates that conflict environments, though destructive, can birth this strength. Local people facing war do not always modify their choices and aspirations to ensure their protection from danger when a crisis emerges. Some inhabitants may cooperate with armed actors by sharing information, and others may choose not to collaborate with these actors, through actions including non-participation in violence to mitigate the violations to their civil liberties and rights during the evolving conflict. Other people may also reject subordination through behaviours like dissent, opposing armed actors altogether. However, some people may show resistance to both state actors and non-state actors by deviating from established rules, maintaining their own routines, and pursuing various agenda to cope with the uncertainty of danger. This ability to resist shapes the outcome of their individual desires and aspirations.

In sum, *Conflict of Interest* may be beneficial for individuals, students, policymakers, security experts and agencies, and civil society groups who desire to predict potential outcomes of ongoing conflicts, assess current policy or behaviour of states and the actions of non-state actors that can generate violence, and analyze important solutions or results of security problems. The podcast needs more focus on discussions of non-traditional security issues such as climate change, which can exacerbate the prospect of violence in some countries, as the knowledge of security and its definition have expanded to also include elements like environmental protection. Most importantly, new episodes should focus on significant wars in countries or regions that are not predominantly Muslim in Africa and elsewhere.

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This may increase the podcast's appeal to people from non-western, secular, or other religious backgrounds with experiences of war, and may promote diversity in knowledge-sharing and expertise.

About the author:

Jemima Ackah-Arthur is a PhD Candidate in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. She has broader interests in conflict and security, transitional justice, peacebuilding, and human security. Jemima studies how states maintain security by exploring government action towards political violence, conflict, terrorism, and insurgency in sub-Saharan Africa. Using qualitative methods, her dissertation pays attention to the variations in security sector responses toward acts of terrorism within a state. It examines whether government elite interests or political interests determine the responses to these acts within areas facing violence. Particularly, it investigates the divergent government and military responses to the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria.