

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SARAH BALDWIN:** In the year 2018, politicians journalists and academics continue to debate the reasons for the rise of Islamist groups in the Middle East. It's a question that's been at the center of US foreign policy. And the answer, how we choose to understand why groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda come to power, has huge consequences for the future of international politics. This week on *Trending Globally*, we're wading into this debate and emerging with some new perspectives.

Hello, hello, hello, OK. Thanks for being here today, both of you.

**JEFF COLGAN:** Thank you.

**AISHA AHMAD:** Thanks for having us.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** We sat down with Aisha Ahmad and Jeff Colgan, two scholars who argue that we should think differently about politics and violence in the Middle East. Aisha Ahmad is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Toronto. She's the author of the book *Jihad and Co.-- Black Markets and Islamist Power*.

Aisha, your book that just came out looks at the rise of jihadist militant groups across the modern Muslim world and how they've made huge territorial and political gains. They've even established their own, you know, quasi states, as you point out. And you tracked their economic activities. And you found that it's not so much ideology that's sort of explaining their success, but the pursuit of profit. Can you elaborate on that and tell us what's so surprising about your findings?

**AISHA AHMAD:** Absolutely, so what is really interesting is that these jihadist groups emerge in parts of the world that we often in the international community refer to as ungovernable spaces or, you know, parts of the world where building political order is really, really difficult. You know, frankly, we've spent hundreds of billions of dollars trying to create states in these parts of the world where, you know, we've got disorder or ethnic conflict, tribal and sectarian divisions.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Aisha has traveled around the Islamic world for research to places as diverse as Somalia, Pakistan, Mali--

**AISHA AHMAD:** --Afghanistan, Mali, you know, where I'm heading in 10 days actually.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And she's noticed that when Islamist groups take power, they establish, institutions infrastructure, and local government systems that didn't exist before.

**AISHA AHMAD:** And that's very surprising. And thus far, you're right. People have pointed to ideology or identity to explain their great success. But what I found is not necessarily that the jihadists are motivated by profit, but rather that they are ideologically motivated but establish an elite pact with a local group that is profit motivated, which is the business class. And so what we find in case after case around the world is that as these jihadists rise to power, they are doing so with resources not necessarily from the outside, but from the local community, that there is this business-Islamist alliance that is motivating their rise to power.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** What does the business community get out of the jihadist groups?

**AISHA AHMAD:** Well, you see, now that is a remarkable story. Because, once again, it is not a story about ideological passion or beliefs, but rather that the Islamists are doing something for the business community that they desperately need, which is reducing their costs. Because doing business in a civil war can get actually incredibly expensive.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Aisha walks us through a hypothetical example. Imagine she's a business person in one of those countries.

**AISHA AHMAD:** Say I have some cloth that your people in your community would really like to buy. But I'm from one tribal community. And you're from another.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** She says that civil unrest often makes this kind of business transaction incredibly complicated.

**AISHA AHMAD:** I can't just wander into your territory. You need to make an arrangement with your tribal warlord, you know, who my group is at war with. And then he's going to charge you tax as well. Next thing you know, we're paying twice the amount just to move from point A to point B.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** --and making less profit.

**AISHA AHMAD:** Those extra taxes go directly onto the price of goods, which cuts right into our profit margins. It undermines demand. And it stalls trade all the way back to the point of sale. Now, here's where the Islamists can come in and solve our problem.

What they do is instead of saying, "OK, you have to buy from your tribe. I have to buy from my tribe," they say, "Look, you know, we both share one common Islamic identity. We can both

buy into their Islamic protection racket." And by bringing us both into their protection racket, they can reduce the overall cost that they're charging each of us for security.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** It seems so simple.

**AISHA AHMAD:** Well, they win on economies of scale.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Islamist groups that can provide this kind of protection win the support of local business communities simply because it makes doing business cheaper.

**AISHA AHMAD:** And I've got to tell you, one of the heads of the biggest business associations in Mogadishu told me that, "Aisha, for every \$100 we were paying to warlords, we could give \$35 to the Islamic courts to remove them."

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Wow.

**AISHA AHMAD:** So a 65% discount.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Yeah, you can't compete. That's, yeah. And this is how Islamist groups initially gain funding and support, Aisha says.

**AISHA AHMAD:** And in each case, whether in Afghanistan or in Mali or in Iraq or in Somalia, what I found was that the business community established these relationships with Islamists before they came to power. And, in fact, many people have been pointing to external money, like, for example, Pakistan financing the Taliban, as being causal. And I even found that it's the local business community that invests in Islamists before the internationals even notice that they're on the radar.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Wow. Jeff, you are an expert in the geopolitics of oil and energy. Is this true-- have you seen this in oil smuggling?

**JEFF COLGAN:** This alliance between commercial interests--

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Right.

**JEFF COLGAN:** --and war has always been there. And what Aisha is doing is surfacing it in a modern day guise, right, in this new context that, you know, we might otherwise miss, but is actually very much, in some sense, it has a story of familiarity to it even though it rhymes rather than repeats what's happened in the past.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** This is Jeff Colgan. He's an associate professor of political science at the Watson Institute. His work studies the political economy of international security, especially as it relates to energy politics.

**JEFF COLGAN:** But you asked me about oil. So let me just say quickly about that. I mean, smuggled oil is very much a part of, unfortunately, a lot of rebel arenas from Nigeria-- the Niger Delta is probably the most famous one where we have bunkering going on. Bunkering, of course, is stealing oil right out of the pipelines, where rebels actually will drill into a steel pipeline and take the oil right out of it--

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Wow.

**JEFF COLGAN:** --to the tune of like a million barrels a day. Right, so a huge amount of oil.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And they get away with this how?

**JEFF COLGAN:** And so, you know, the violence in the Niger Delta kind of ebbs and flows. But when it's at its extreme end, it's sort of, as Aisha says, kind of an ungoverned space where there's just constant contestation. And so the rebels are funding themselves by doing this, by stealing the oil and selling it to black markets.

And often that means smuggling it to the borders of Nigeria and selling it into other countries where it then gets, you know, resold into the global oil market supply. And so the gas that you're buying at Shell probably has at least some components of this. It's just too large an amount of oil for it not to be part of the global mix.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** It's fascinating and distressing and sort of makes me a little sad that the drive for profit sort of supersedes other concerns. And I just wonder, is it an incredibly naive question to ask can the profit motive be used for peace?

**AISHA AHMAD:** I don't think that's naive at all. In fact, one of the things that I think is deeply hopeful about this story is that, you know, that this is a logic that's familiar. It's something that we understand. And it's something that is, you know, profoundly human, this sort of instinct to truck, barter, and trade. And that's a lot easier to deal with than an argument that says that this is all just crazy ideology, you know?

**SARAH BALDWIN:** That's true, yeah.

**AISHA AHMAD:** Well, this is something we can actually contend with. I mean, what are people doing when they are, you know, moving oil or, you know, even illicit antiquities or any number of smuggled goods across borders? You know, they're making ends meet and building livelihoods in spaces where, you know, the state has failed.

You know, the fact that there is informal and even illicit trade in these spaces is simply a natural feature of the fact that, you know, in a state of disorder, a state of political chaos, you know, a lot of this space of public life is filled up with this private sector. You know, people continue to make ends meet. But this creates huge opportunities for peace, I think, much more so than if this was an ideological story.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Later in the interview, Jeff posed a question that's on the mind of anyone who studies US policy in the Middle East.

**JEFF COLGAN:** Of course, here we are 2018. The United States still has troops in Afghanistan. We've been there for 17 years. Why are we still there?

**SARAH BALDWIN:** In their research, both Aisha and Jeff try to figure out this question. After so many years of military involvement in the Middle East, when and how does it end? The current strategies aren't working. So what can we do differently?

**JEFF COLGAN:** And this is kind of the question that I think people are starting to grapple with. In particular, a reporter at the New York Times recently wrote an article about, you know, what's the right strategy for us to take? And his answer to his editors was, there is no good strategy. All of these are various options of a lose. And so my reaction to that comes back to this question. Well, if that's true, if all of these options are, you know, various degrees of defeat, why are we still there? And I'd love your take on that.

**AISHA AHMAD:** You know, Jeff, I think that that question can only be answered when we ask the foundational question, which is, why did we go in the first place, you know, as an international community. And that brings us back to 9/11 and in the aftermath of 9/11 realizing that the threat that had been posed was a non-state threat, was a threat that was not bound by territorial boundaries. And yet, all of our collective security institutions in the world are designed around threats that come out of a state. And so, as a result, because al-Qaeda had found a haven in Afghanistan, we needed to use the instruments available our disposal.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** For Aisha, this story starts 24 hours after the attacks on September 11.

- AISHA AHMAD:** The United States invoked Article V in NATO, you know, calling for its collective defense.
- SUBJECT 1:** United Nations and the NATO military alliance.
- SUBJECT 2:** NATO.
- [INTERPOSING VOICES]
- SUBJECT 3:** America's NATO allies--
- SUBJECT 4:** --which for the first time in its history Wednesday invoked a clause in the NATO charter obligating all members to assist if one is attacked.
- SUBJECT 5:** The North Atlantic council meets tonight to express its solidarity with the United States of America at this moment of great tragedy and mourning.
- SUBJECT 6:** They have invoked Article V.
- SUBJECT 7:** Ratification of Article V of the Treaty of Washington.
- SUBJECT 8:** Article V has never been invoked before. And so this is something for historians to be watching.
- SUBJECT 9:** This action, this terrorist action against the United States has been taken as an attack against all members of NATO.
- SUBJECT 10:** An attack on one member was an attack on them all.
- SUBJECT 11:** And the response will be an appropriate one.
- SUBJECT 12:** NATO is not just about an expression of moral support. NATO is about providing tangible military support. That is the point. That is what Article V is about.
- SUBJECT 13:** But in practical terms, is it clear what NATO is being asked to do now, what it is prepared to do?
- SUBJECT 14:** No, it is not absolutely clear, Jonathan.
- SARAH BALDWIN:** Article V is considered the cornerstone of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. It states that an armed attack against one member nation is considered an attack on all of them. This meant that the other members of NATO were obligated to respond to the attack with military

force.

**AISHA AHMAD:** And that obligation was around a state, the state of Afghanistan.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** But because al-Qaeda and the Taliban aren't nation states, it made our response conflicted. On the one hand, the US and its allies were compelled to go into Afghanistan and attack these groups with military force. On the other hand, the US knew that over the long term, Afghanistan needed a stable government in order for groups like al-Qaeda and the Taliban to lose power. ISIS says these two projects, military response and state building, are at odds with one another.

**AISHA AHMAD:** The problems of building peace in Afghanistan all stem from the intervention was aimed at removing a threat. And in order to neutralize the possibility of that space ever becoming a threat again actually means that it led to this whole episode in building a functioning self-sustaining state that can prevent a future Taliban or al-Qaeda affiliated or Islamist affiliated takeover. Hence the massive and seemingly unwinnable war that we've been dealing with for the past 16 years. It's the legacy of the initial response.

**JEFF COLGAN:** It's a great answer because I think it really surfaces this sort of dilemma, right, that we can't live with two simultaneous things. We can't live with the idea that there is an Afghanistan that could serve as a haven for terrorists. And yet, also can't win this war. And we can't live with either of those outcomes. And yet, they are inherently in tension with each other.

**AISHA AHMAD:** There is a political crisis in Afghanistan not only between the government and the Taliban, but within the government itself. And so a political resolution to this conflict is absolutely essential. There's no way that this is just going to be resolved by guns and bombs.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** But a political solution might be hard to achieve. As Aisha explains, the different local and international actors in the war, the US, the Afghan army, and groups like the Taliban, simply aren't communicating with each other.

**AISHA AHMAD:** But it's also within every single one of these actors' best interests. And so even though everyone saying, "Well, we don't want to talk to our rivals right now," at the end of the day, all of them do know that at some point, they're going to have to come to the table.

**JEFF COLGAN:** Many people have drawn the parallel between Afghanistan and the Vietnam War, both longstanding wars became ultimately very unpopular. And it seems to me that one striking

difference between them is that there was conscription for Vietnam War. There was the draft. There was a much wider base of people involved.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** Oh, that's

**JEFF COLGAN:** So when we think about why we're still there, some piece of the answer might need to be about the segment of American society that is actually directly affected by the Afghanistan war, which is a fairly small segment, right? I mean, all of us are indirectly affected by it. But on a day to day level, I think, you know, most of the people in this room are probably not directly affected by it.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** That's a good point.

**JEFF COLGAN:** And that strikes me as part of why--

**SARAH BALDWIN:** It keeps it remote, in a way?

**JEFF COLGAN:** --yeah, the political impetus. And I completely agree with Aisha, [? I should say, ?] that this has to be-- I mean, wars end politically. It's a political story. It's not a military story necessarily, right? Politics are always involved.

And so the political impetus for ending a war can sometimes come from when there's this powerful constituency at home that really wants the war to end. And that was the case in the Vietnam War. I'm not sure we're there yet with Afghanistan.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** For Aisha, another major roadblock to resolution is the way in which the US government has chosen to intervene in Afghanistan and whom it chooses to fight on its behalf.

**AISHA AHMAD:** Because a lot of this war has been outsourced. It's been outsourced to local anti-Taliban warlord groups that, in fact, lost out to the Taliban during their rise to power in the 1990s. And so remember when I was telling you about that logic of, "I'm buying from my tribal warlord, you're buying from the other, and then we bought into the Islamist protection racket?"

Well, after 9/11, there was an immediate push to say, OK, well, we need to get the Taliban out of power. And what they did was they went back to those very same warlords of the 1990s era and said, "Here's some money and some guns. Go back and win that war that you lost in '96."

**SARAH BALDWIN:** This practice contributes to the lack of political interest in the war that Jeff and Aisha see in the US.

**AISHA AHMAD:** And so by outsourcing the war, it eliminated the need for conscription because you use these local actors. And yet, that prolongs the war by making it unwinnable.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And yet, we still have to be hopeful?

**AISHA AHMAD:** Yes, I mean, if I wasn't hopeful, I'd get out of this game. You know, I'm not doing this for futility's sake. Like, I really do think that it's possible and achievable to get a solution. And so we need to stay focused on that and continue to push towards it.

It is not that-- I mean, we call Afghanistan, you know, an ungovernable space or an unwinnable war. And yet, I feel like that cedes territory to the most extreme elements. And so there are opportunities for peace building in this space. The problem is that we're shutting the door to them.

**JEFF COLGAN:** Previous leaps in progress, they at one point looked intractable, right? So getting past that moment is very much the key. And I hope Aisha can be part of it.

**AISHA AHMAD:** And you too, Jeff.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** I'm sure you will be. Thank you both so much for this conversation today.

**JEFF COLGAN:** Thank you, Sarah.

**AISHA AHMAD:** Thanks for having us on.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** This has been *Trending Globally: Politics And Policy*. If you enjoyed today's conversation, you can subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, or Stitcher or download us on your favorite podcasting app. If you like us, rate us and help others who might enjoy the show find us. For more information, go to [watson.brown.edu](http://watson.brown.edu).