

Research Challenges involved in Field Research and Interviews Regarding the Militant Jihad, Extremism and Suicide Terrorism

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There has been considerable interest in recent years to study and attempt to understand the motivations, recruitment, psycho-social and cultural patterns of individuals who become terrorists, particularly those among the "militant jihadi"¹ movement who espouse and carry out suicide bombings. This interest understandably follows after 9-11, the Madrid train and London metro bombings along with a spate of other terror attacks occurring worldwide in the name of the militant jihad.

While a reading of open sources including the movement's own propaganda, generates considerable insights into militant jihadis there is nothing quite as informative as talking to the members of such groups themselves, or in the absence of that to talk with their close family members, associates and in some cases their hostages to learn about how they entered the terrorist trajectory, what motivated them along it and how they acted and spoke leading up to their last moments before attempting to enact or actually carried out an attack.

This essay discusses the author's challenges in attempting such research – the hurdles passed and successes involved in interviewing over three hundred such individuals. These interviews included "would be" or thwarted suicide terrorists, terrorist senders, terrorist supporters, family members, close associates or hostages of terrorists. These interviews were conducted in twelve countries: Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Morocco, Uzbekistan, Russia, Belarus, Belgium, UK, France, and the Netherlands. Most were conducted in homes and public settings, although some were conducted in prison settings with those who had been arrested (Israel and Iraq). This paper presents the challenges of attempting to gain access to terrorists and their associates for research interviews, the challenges inherent in such research, and the interview methods which have worked best for the author. It is written in the first person to highlight the highly personal nature of such work.

The first and probably most important challenge to consider when doing sensitive research on the subject of political violence is safety and ethics concerns – safety both for the subject and the researcher, and ethical concerns about asking a subject to open up about his or her commitment to violent and criminal political activities. This naturally is entangled with the subject of gaining access and building trust in order to make a useful research interview. I will attempt to disentangle these subjects and comment on each one.

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Human subjects concerns

Researchers in the western world are bound by a set of ethics and protocols that have as their aim the protection of human subjects, safeguarding them from any potential harm that participating in the study could bring, warning them of these dangers and ensuring that they give a fully informed consent to participate. When attempting to interview a “would be” or already committed terrorist or someone involved with him (or her) there are particular issues to consider. There is the concern that giving such an interview might jeopardize the legal status and safety of those who have been interviewed. The subject could admit things that if learned by law enforcement could lead to his arrest, the arrest of others, or violence to himself or others as retribution for speaking. Most terrorists and their associates are well aware of these dangers and do not need to be reminded of them in a human subjects protocol. Despite this it is the researcher’s responsibility to point out the potential harm that can come from taking part in an interview and to work in a manner that gives assurance that the subject’s words coupled with their identities will not end in the hands of law enforcement officials, nor be given to anyone outside the research team, causing harm to the individual giving an interview.

On other side of the human subjects’ protection equation there are equal concerns for the safety of the researcher and those who might be the victims of the extremist one is speaking to. First there is the concern that if one is interviewing a “would be” suicide bomber, sender of bombers, plotters of terrorism or so forth and learns operational details of an imminent attack there is an ethical duty to warn the victims and to do everything possible to thwart the attack. This would require informing law enforcement officials of the individual’s whereabouts, identities and their intentions to do harm to society. Likewise learning of such details creates dangers for both sides. If the researcher can become an informer, the subject may be arrested or killed. Thus the researcher can be seen as a threat once and an interview containing operational details has been given, and can in turn be harmed or killed by the subject or his cadres to prevent information from being given to law enforcement.

For these reasons, to keep everyone involved in less danger, I have made it my practice to do interviews as anonymously as possible. I never record the real names or addresses or any identifying information about those I interview so that their words cannot be linked back to them. This works well for “cold contacts”, that is those who are approached directly for an interview out on the street or in discrete settings where extremists or terrorists hang out. The majority of my interviews however are not gained through cold contacts but through a snowball technique in which I am introduced to potential subjects through those I’ve met and interviewed in “cold calls” and also by guides with whom I have developed a trusting relationship. This level of access opens the possibility of identities of subject being tracked backwards through the same path through which they were found. If the guide or the person who put me in touch with the interviewee is somehow tracked and is compelled or willingly gives identifying information about the subject, he can be identified. In these cases the interviews cannot be said to be truly anonymous. I don’t know the identities of my subjects but they are known to those who led me to them and therefore can theoretically be tracked. However as this risk was already present before the interview and I never reveal the identities of my guides I have to work on the basis of the trust that already existed among my contacts and hope by doing so to minimize this risk as well.

Likewise to risk becoming a danger to my subjects and to minimize risks to my own safety as well as to avoid an ethical bind in which I have a duty to protect both my subject and the individuals and groups he may be intending to harm I make clear to all my subjects that discussion of operational details is strictly off limits. I make clear that I am not a supporter of violence and would feel a duty to protect innocent lives if I learned of operational details that could harm innocent persons. I tell them from the start of the interview that I am an academic and a psychologist interested in how people think rather than details about operations. I also clearly state that I am not working for any security agency or police nor do I report my findings to any such group. I make it clear that if they are involved in actual violent activities or plotting terrorist activities I don't want them to share that information with me – for their own protection and for mine as well. I emphasize to my subject that for his own protection, and my own that I will insist that we do not speak about anything operational as I don't want to be placed in the position of choosing between loyalty to him and my own values of protecting society from violence. If the subject admits to me that there is an imminent attack I will feel obliged to try to stop it.

I also make clear that I also want to be sure that no harm can come to my subjects from having participated in an interview with me. Most subjects are reassured that I am not interested in operational details and by my claim to not work with security agencies although I often find that this is a predominant fantasy that often returns during the interview which will be discussed further on in more detail.

All of my interviews thus begin with the human subjects protocol which entails an explanation of the research I am doing and an introduction of myself as well. I state that I am an academic researcher who is trying to understand the psycho-social and cultural dynamics involved in political violence (i.e. suicide terrorism, militant jihadi extremist violence, etc.) as well as the larger societal dynamics about occupation, discrimination, Muslim societal matters and group and individual violence in general. I make clear that my approach is contextual and that I am interested in the societal concerns among the population I am approaching; about their frustrations, anger, and the issues that are fueling political violence.

After I explain my purposes, who I am, etc. I go on to explain that it is very important to me that the subject feels he can speak openly to me with no fear of later problems as a result of the interview. I explain that for his protection I make it a practice to not know the name of my subject or where he lives. If we are in his home I say with honesty that our guide (who he usually knows personally) has brought me here but I myself have no idea how to return to it and I have not recorded the address. If we are in a less revealing setting but I have been brought by a guide, I explain that the guide is a trusted person for the subject, as far as I know, and has brought me with his permission. The only way to trace back the interview to the subject is through the guide as I do not record identities or identifying information. I explain that the interview is confidential and the write-up will include an aggregate of non-identifying quotes from the sum of the interviews I take. I also point out that in regard to matters of confidentiality between the subject and the guide or anyone else that the subject has invited or allowed to be present (his friends, family, cadres, etc.), that is a matter between them over which I have no control.

I then go on to ask my subject to come up with a fictional name that he would like me to use to refer to him. I record it and immediately show him the notes that I am taking – with his fictional name written at the top and the fact that there is no address, telephone number or other identifying information being recorded. This practice actually often opens the interview quite well as there is some discussion of possible fictional names and Muslim subjects often discuss the meaning of the name they have chosen in a warm and friendly way.

I also explain that the interview should not cause the subject any psychological harm, although talking about distressing subjects may be stressful. I explain that the subject should feel free to decline to answer any questions or quit the interview at anytime. I also state that I am a trauma psychologist and willing to discuss anything difficult but that I will also respect emotionally sensitive issues they may wish not to discuss. I often find that in some portion of most interviews where life history and motivations for political violence are discussed sensitive issues do arise and subjects often do want to discuss them but need sensitive support to do so. If the subject ventures into emotionally sensitive material I generally follow respectfully always aware that the subject may need psychological support to discuss these issues meaningfully and that I may need to pull the conversation back if the emotions get too upsetting. Overwhelmingly in all of my research interviews I find that this psychologically supportive stance is welcomed and that it is something for which I am thanked profusely for at the end of the interview.

Most subjects have never had the luxury of discussing their lives with a psychologist, nor to receive the opportunity to consider insightfully their own motivations or relationships between engaging in or supporting political violence as it relates to their psycho-social and cultural milieu and personal history. When their sensitivities are both respected and probed in a kind manner they appreciate the insights and emotional relief that they gain from the interview. Thus I can honestly tell my subjects that I don't expect any psychological risk to occur from the interview and that it is likely to be a rewarding experience. I also make it a practice to also know the psychological resources in the area and make a list available to the subject for follow on care if the interview touches on anything they wish to speak about later and also to give my contact details and in many cases I have continued in contact with individuals I have interviewed or stayed long after the interview discussing with them psycho-social issues of concern to them.

As for recording the interview, my practice is to take simultaneous hand written notes in English. In many of the regions I travel I have little trust in mechanical devices and I find that they often interfere with trust building and create suspicions with subjects. Thus it is more useful to take handwritten notes. I explain that I will be taking notes and begin the interview by showing them my empty pad with their fictional name on it assuring them that even if they make references to personally identifying information I will not record it. I also make clear that they can at anytime ask me to see what I have written or ask me to stop taking notes for something sensitive. This in fact often happens – the subject asks me please not to record a certain segment of our conversation which is sensitive or shaming. Some will later say I can record it after more trust has been won, but others do not want certain things recorded. These often have to do less with criminal actions than with sensitive personal traumas and deeply painful emotional events.

This introduction basically provides the informed consent procedure in stages, explaining the research at the beginning of the interview and makes clear to the subject the risks involved, the measures taken to reduce those risks, sharing information about psychological resources for follow-up as well as my own contact details, and finally gaining an oral informed consent. I also make clear that he can decline to answer anything he does not wish to answer and also may end the interview at any time. At no time is an informed consent protocol simply read out to the interviewee or handed to him for signature because to do so would likely completely destroy the rapport necessary for such a sensitive interview to take place and would likely not be well understood. Instead the human subjects' safeguards for the interview are explained gently in the midst of a gentle and general introduction of myself and my research project. Because I am not recording names I do not ask for a signed consent, but take instead an oral informed consent.

If the subject is in prison there are additional human subjects concerns to address. There is very likely clandestine video or audio recording carried out by prison authorities. I make clear that even if we are alone, the subject should not assume we are in a confidential setting because there may be cameras or microphones and that there is nothing I can do to protect the subject from anything he may admit to me in the interview that is overheard by others. I remind him to be very careful about avoiding discussion of anything operational, implicating others not present, or admitting to any guilt he has not already admitted to in interrogation or court proceedings as this may be a serious matter for himself and others involved in his case. I also take pains to make sure that the subject does not feel compelled in any way by prison authorities to take part in the interview, has a clear understanding of my role vis a vis prison authorities (i.e. that I am an independent researcher admitted access to the prison and can do nothing to assist in obtaining his freedom). When possible and relatively safe to do so, I dismiss the guards and use my own translators.

In my experiences in prison, in Israel this was possible, in Iraq it was only sometimes possible. In both cases it was apparent that the subjects were afraid at first and uncertain about the relative safety of the interview and were anxious about my role until it was explained to them. They calmed once they understood the nature of the interviews and they sensed the genuine care of the interviewer. When it became apparent in the interviews (by glances at the cameras, guards, etc.) that the subjects were afraid to discuss certain areas of sensitivity, I quickly acknowledged their concerns, in some cases openly by acknowledging the camera or guard and moving on from that subject area, or in other cases simply with a facial gesture of acknowledging what I saw on their faces, and moving on without further questioning.

Gaining Access

Gaining access to a population that is actively involved in or knowledgeable about extremist violence and terrorism is not a simple matter. Fears abound among those carrying out these activities; fears of being arbitrarily or rightly arrested, interrogated, killed and tortured. These are serious matters. Likewise while some terrorists and extremists are eager to speak to journalists and researchers, others are not. Some harbor aggressive feelings toward anyone who dares to investigate them. Deaths, beheadings, kidnappings and other acts of aggression having befallen those who dared try. Likewise,

police, military and security organs of the country one is operating in can also be hostile and dangerous to the researcher. Thus it is not only a matter of gaining access but doing so while retaining one's own personal security, a matter discussed further on.

Gaining access to subjects for this type of research is a challenge that varies according to the country one is operating in. Perhaps the easiest place to interview terrorists and terrorist supporters is Palestine. Certain areas of Iraq, Pakistan, Kashmir and Indonesia also afford ample opportunities to speak to terrorists and extremists espousing violence who are either operating openly or if not are still willing to speak to researchers. As one moves into societies where the populace is less openly supportive of terrorism and where counter-terrorism measures are active it becomes more difficult to identify and gain access to those who might be willing to speak from firsthand experience about violent extremism and terrorism. Terrorists and extremists become wary and more reticent to grant interviews.

Victims of terrorism can be informative on some aspects of witnessed terrorism. Hostages in particular who have often spent considerable time conversing with and observing terrorists, including suicide terrorists with belts strapped on may be able to give a secondary "interview" of sorts (Speckhard, 2004; Speckhard & Ahkmedova, 2006). Yet attempting to interview victims contains risks of retraumatizing them by returning to traumatic experiences, and they require special care. Victims are also often loathe to reopen painful wounds and have already been hounded by the press so much that they do not wish to grant interviews (Speckhard, Tarabrina, Krasnov, & Mufel, 2005a, 2005b).

Family members and close associates of suicide bombers can provide aspects useful to constructing a psychological history or "psychological autopsy" in the case of a suicide bomber or other dead terrorist (Speckhard, 2005, 2008; Speckhard & Ahkmedova, 2005). They too can be aggressive or wish for legal or emotional reasons to avoid granting interviews. If they have family members awaiting trial or in prison there may be legal ramifications to giving an interview.

Gaining access to subjects in any country is a matter of finding the right links to lead one to those closest to the phenomena one wishes to study. It requires taking the time and care to cultivate trust with those links. When one has won over time the trust of a "gatekeeper" or guide to subjects often that trust is transferred quite easily to the subjects one is led to. Likewise subjects who have a positive interview experience often will lead the researcher to other subjects creating a "snowball" sample that grows as one's links grow inside the community of interest. Often the first contacts or "guides" can come through cold contacts on the street, talking to teachers, university students, social workers, lawyers, journalists, and even law enforcement professionals. The important thing is that one comes across as sincere and a worthy person to talk to. I am generally a very enthusiastic and sensitive researcher, have a good sense of humor and am profoundly interested in my subjects and their social milieu and this comes across to those with whom I speak. As they sense my genuine care they often open up and lead me to the subjects I am interested to meet. As I meet extremists, terrorists, their family members, close associates or hostages and they grant me interviews I find that my technique and caring often lead me to many other interviews.

I have never paid for an interview, although I have often times been asked to pay. I generally explain that I feel paying for an interview would compromise it and that I cannot ethically do so. However in a few cases I was so moved by abject poverty that I sent money or gifts with the guide to take to the family or individual after the interview and in one case I sent a self hypnosis guide I wrote for a woman unprepared to give birth to her first child. Likewise I never appear empty handed. I generally bring chocolates (I lived in Belgium for a long time where good chocolate is readily available) or some other gift signifying kindness.

Gaining Trust – Building Rapport

It is not simply a matter of gaining access but also of building trust and rapport to get a good interview. I take my time with subjects and try to find out what they would like to discuss at first, and what is important to them before moving into the areas I am most interested in. I let them talk freely and do not follow a structured format. I know all of the questions I want to ask and ask them as they come up naturally and I back off whenever I see that I am getting a negative reaction, although I generally circle back to the same topic once I have gained enough trust to touch on it again. If it is clear that the subject does not want to speak about that topic, even when we have a good rapport, I leave it alone – even if it is the main subject I am interested in asking about.

Extremists, terrorists and their supporters use ideology to justify their violent actions and will often spout propaganda and ideological statements ad nauseam trying to convince the researcher that their point of view is justified. I call this their “canned story” and find that if one wants to build good rapport it is generally necessary to sit patiently and non critically listening to it until the speaker has exhausted himself of trying to convince the researcher of his ideological point of view. If one tries to cut ahead of the “canned story” or seriously argue ideological points it may cut the rapport and the interview ends prematurely. That is not to say that one cannot put forward other points of view and ask for clarification or tease the subject a bit to consider the contradictions in his world view. Yoram Schweitzer, for example who made many repeated and long interviews with imprisoned Palestinian militants argues passionately with his subjects but in a good humored way, often getting them to engage with him deeply trying to justify their points of view.

On the aspect of truth, it is impossible to tell if a subject is lying or misleading the researcher in order to present a certain ideological stance or to keep certain facts from the researcher’s knowledge. The only real safeguard against lies is to make many interviews and gather as much open source material on the same subject as well (the group’s propaganda statements, legal reports, other research reports, opposing viewpoints, etc.) so that the researcher gains a good feel for the topic under study and the local community and can get a sense of when things sound false. If one is able to gain many points of view then it is possible to triangulate onto the material getting a better sense of what is true and what likely is not. Likewise when one has the luxury to make repeated visits to a subject one may notice that the subject’s story changes as is the case in prisons when the prisoners often become more highly indoctrinated to the group ideology as my colleague Yoram Schweitzer has noticed (Schweitzer, 2006). Over time it is also likely that a subject may open up more and better clarify contradictions.

When a researcher has done their homework, either making many interviews or taking the time to become quite knowledgeable on the topic under study it is often then possible to respectfully and good naturedly challenge the subject asking for further clarification. There are many ways to do this. One is asking, "Could you explain that for me please because that doesn't fit with other things I've been told," or stating, "Excuse me, but could you explain how this researcher could have gotten it wrong, because I have this report I've read that says otherwise," and get the subject's response. I once carried a book written about Palestinian female suicide terrorists (Victor, 2003) with me to the (deceased) Palestinian female bomber subject's homes where I was making interviews. At some point in the interview read passages out of it that completely contradicted what they were telling me. They became so furious that in one home I was sure they were about to throw me out. I saved myself by explaining gently, "I am reading this to you because I want you to know what it says, and if it's incorrect please explain to me how the author could have gotten it so wrong, so that when I write my findings I won't make the same mistakes." In this case I found that they appreciated my care to get things right and it seemed they got so emotionally involved in correcting the author of the book that they told me far more than I would have ever otherwise learned. They also may have been lying. It is impossible to know without having hard facts versus contradictory oral reports from various sources. One simply has to try to make the best sense possible by collecting many view points and making as many attempts possible to get to the truth.

In regard to building trust, I know that I am often suspected of working for law enforcement or intelligence, so I usually put this concern out on the table immediately in the beginning of the interview stating upfront that I do not work for either group and that I am pure and simply an academic. At the same time I explain that I am often asked to consult with politicians and security groups and when that occurs I try to do so in a fair and unbiased way presenting the results of my research. I make clear that I am paid for these consultations but that the present research is not a part of any such funding. The concern that I may be working for security or law enforcement often comes up throughout the interview and I find I have to address it repeatedly. Once I left an interview in Belgium in which some extremists had admitted quite a bit of themselves to me. Although I hadn't let them venture into operational details I suspected they were active militants. I told the guide, "I am sure they will call you tomorrow and ask you again if I am CIA. Please tell them that I am not working with anyone in law enforcement and that they don't have to worry, but that even if they are not convinced please remind them that I do not know where they live, nor do I have their names. You are the only one who knows their names and where they live, so the trust is between you and them." The guide assured me that would not be the case, although he was proven wrong. As predicted, they did call and he was glad to be prepared to put their fears at ease once again.

For these reasons I find that I do not chose to make repeat interviews with those who are in the field. In prisons it's possible to return again and again to talk with a subject and one may gain a lot more information doing so, but returning repeatedly to interview potential or active criminals is likely to raise their fears that they are being spied upon and put the researcher in danger. It is human nature that once a person is gone many fantasies and projections can arise about that person and there is no way to counter them without being present. Thus one may return to greatly aroused suspicions that were not

present during one's first visit. For instance I found that every time I returned to the same guides in Palestine I was told that there were many rumors after I left that perhaps I was working for the Israelis as a spy. I had to work hard to put those rumors to rest and hope that I was not endangered by them.

I am also careful about my choice of words as terms such as terrorism, suicide terrorism, militant jihad etc can communicate a belligerent or already close minded attitude of the researcher to the subject other than what I wish to communicate. I generally adopt the use of the most neutral words I can find or use the words used in the community I am studying – “martyrdom operations” for instance instead of suicide terrorism in some communities. I also am careful not to limit my focus narrowly only on terrorism or extremism. To do otherwise is counterproductive and can spark negative responses that can shut the interview down in its first moments.

Most subjects are concerned with who the researcher is and who he or she represents and to what use the data will be put. Many do not want to give interviews to journalists or to have their words used in sensationalist articles or for their words to be used negatively against their group. On the other hand they do want their words and concerns put in front of policy makers and those they might never be able to otherwise influence – except by acts of terrorism. They want their voices to be heard and their unique points of view to be presented to those who have the power to possibly address them fairly. Often they are willing to speak honestly if they believe they will be dealt with honestly. I explain that I publish for the most part in academic journals, that I have a website with many of my articles already published contained on itⁱⁱ and that they are free to check my publications and that so far, to my knowledge, all of my subjects feel they have been treated honestly and with respect.

Subjects also are concerned about who is financing the research and are often suspicious about clandestine law enforcement and intelligence activities. As much of my terrorism related interviewing research has been self- financed I have been in the unique position being able to quite honestly say I am present on my own funds and am a psychologist and university professor who has come to learn by listening. In cases where I have had funding I am very open about it and make clear that my policy is to give a general report to the funder and that I never turn over actual interviews to anyone else.

As for gaining access to speaking to extremists and terrorists, I have been told by many guides and subjects that it is impossible to gain such access because no one will trust me – I am after all a white, American, Christian woman. I have found however that these things are certainly obstacles but not impossible barriers. The Christianity in fact works in my favor with Muslim subjects when I am open about that I take my beliefs seriously. At times I have received offers to convert which I politely and interestingly listen to, but refuse since I am content with my own faith. Although I enjoy very much discussing issues of faith and often question them quite a bit about why they believe as they do and where they find support for their beliefs in the Koran. Actually my subjects are often impressed when they find I have a strong knowledge of their faith as well as my own and know the Koran quite well. Similarly being American is hard in most cases at first and creates hostility and refusals for interviews but if I win the trust of guides they usually present me as an unusual American, who lives in Europe and has been making interviews of this type around the world. I find the fact that I have worked with

Chechens, traveled in the West Bank and Gaza and talked to extremists worldwide makes me interesting to extremists who are curious to hear how others in the world think about these same issues.

Being a woman has not been a serious obstacle for me. Being a woman has several advantages in fact. On the one hand, I am a very maternal person and I find that most Muslim subjects have very strong positive feelings toward their mothers and I benefit from that. Likewise Muslim men in conservative societies often do not get to talk to women in any depth outside their families and when I come with a male escort they often find they enjoy the freedom to talk with me. Likewise being a woman actually opens the door for interviewing other women who might refuse to be interviewed by a male. In terms of the limitations of being a woman, I find that when I travel in Muslim areas, I must do so with a male guide as an escort and dress conservatively and I have to be cautious about entering all male areas, although I often find I am allowed to do so with a guide once I have won some trust. There are also dangers to being alone. Once I took a crowded bus unescorted from Jerusalem to Ramallah sitting next to a man who tried to molest me by groping at my leg and arm surreptitiously. At the time I could not decide whether to create a scene, knowing the other men on the bus would likely punish him, although it was not guaranteed, or ignore his pathetic groping. I decided to stare him down silently and move as far as I could from him so that it was impossible for him to touch me again.

In Gaza my guide asked me to put on a headscarf as I was the only woman not wearing one in all of Gaza, as far as we could see, and I complied finding that it was actually quite interesting to experience life from that point of view – covered. Likewise inside the prisons in Iraq I wore a burka and headscarf – something I found made the prisoners immediately resonate to me as a mother or sister figure. When I took it off outside the prison I found an ex-prisoner who had agreed to work with us upset by that and claiming I had misrepresented myself. I told him, “No I was honest with you and told you I wore it in the prison for respect and that I am a Christian. We do not cover.” He accepted that explanation gracefully. In Gaza I was asked by HAMAs militants why I wore a headscarf, if doing so signified that I was Muslim. I answered, “No I am a Christian, but I wore it for respect for all of you.” This was greeted favorably and I was told I made a good decision. In the slums of Casa Blanca, Morocco I wore Moroccan clothes but no scarf, and when offered a meal of chicken I ate with my hands according to the local custom. There I was asked if my husband is Moroccan and therefore I know their customs, and I answered, “No I simply know from traveling here.” I was told then, “It’s good you wore our clothes, otherwise we would have had to (sexually) harass you,” making clear the clothes provided a protection for me as I appeared as one of their women. Indeed in another interview a day earlier one subject had asked me if I would cover my legs with a blanket because he found it upsetting to see them, which I did for his benefit. I generally dress in most interviews in a turtle neck top, a scarf wrapped around my neck (in case I need to cover), with a long suit coat that covers my backside, and long pants and shoes that cover my feet completely (versus open sandals) and find that is adequate. In Birmingham and Leeds I was told by the guide who met me at the train, “I knew you would be wearing a scarf because they told me you always wear a scarf.” I thought that was an interesting observation given that I don’t cover in the UK, yet the scarf around my neck was noticed. Clearly dressing appropriately for a woman is very important to create comfort for those one wishes to interview.

I have been very interested to understand what exactly gains trust and builds rapport in interviews with terrorists, extremists and their networks. Certainly the person who contacted my subject and guided me to him will have introduced me and said positive things about me in order to have made the contact. After that, I am not sure I have all the answers but I do know that the first level of trust occurs in milliseconds of meeting and then new levels of trust are accessed and built throughout the meeting. Lapses of trust also occur, especially if suspicions arise that I am working for law enforcement (which I am not) and must be rebuilt throughout the interview. I find that in the first seconds of an interview, my subjects judge me by my posture, my facial musculature – if it is relaxed and open or tense and so on. They can see immediately that I am a warm and smiling person and am also genuinely interested in the well being of my subjects. I think they see also that I am not afraid of them and that too paradoxically puts them at ease. The relationships I have with the guide and any others along with me are also evident to the subject and are likely evaluated as well. They can see how I interact with those I am traveling with and if those relationships have a lot of genuine trust and warmth it can serve to create more trust as well. In some cases I have traveled with male students as well and I think this was very positive as I am maternal and protective with them and it's clear they feel reciprocal protective warmth toward me. This likely creates a “mother” projection that many feel comfortable with immediately.

Likewise, I have learned that while what I say is very important so too is my posture, body stance, where and how I sit, if I accept food, how I eat it and how I use my eyes and talk, and even the micro muscular structure of my face. I have never been seriously afraid in an interview. Usually I have thought long and hard and prayed before I go on a research trip and I am completely calm about what I am going to face once I am in the interview. I know I could be attacked and die, but I am not afraid. This calm I am sure shows in my body posture and on my face. Likewise I never lie. I don't volunteer personal information that is not relevant to the interview but if I am asked about my family, my beliefs, my husband's career, etc. I am honest and answer the questions straight forwardly with no defensiveness. I always take a seat near my subject and sit in a relational way, avoiding being directly across a desk or table, rather choosing a seat nearby the subject. I also avoid taking defensive postures and am conscious not to cross my arms or legs during the interview. I look my subjects in the eyes and only look away or lower my eyes if modesty dictates doing so.

If I am offered food or drink I always accept it and eat and drink with gratitude and joy. I am not afraid of what is offered and enjoy it with my hosts. If I need the rest room I use the one in the home of my hosts as well. Offerings of food can present its own challenges, especially in Muslim households. Once I took part in an interview with three Muslim extremists in Belgium. The interview took a few hours and crossed over their time for an evening meal. The men asked me to leave the room, leaving my translator/guide, male student and themselves to eat as men together and for me to eat with the wife who had prepared the food. I did protest or take offense. In fact I enjoyed very much the conversation I had with the very pregnant wife who was expecting a child soon but had not received any childbirth preparation. She was nervous about birth so I wrote and sent to her a birthing guide the next day – a gift I later learned was received with much gratitude.

Another time I was in Egypt in a home interviewing an imam who had been imprisoned and tortured for teaching nonviolent ideas from Salafi Islam. He was in his cousin's house for the interview and they

were obviously extremely poor, yet tea and a cake were brought to us which I knew would be a great insult to leave untouched. As we were at a moment when he was telling a very interesting part of his life and I didn't want to stop taking notes, I took the cake in my left hand in order to continue writing with my right hand while I listened to him speak. The man stopped and asked me with some shock, "Why do you eat with the devil's hand (left)?" reminding me suddenly that I had just broken a strong cultural norm of eating only with the right hand.

Refusing food is also a serious issue. Once I was on an interview with a colleague, another professor, in Beslan and the bereaved family of a deceased girl set a full table for us during the interview. The family was not well off and it was clear this was an extremely kind offering. I knew my colleague was extremely picky and fearful about food away from home and I was sure he was going to push his untouched plate away insulting the family. Since the family was speaking to me directly in Russian and did not understand English I turned to my colleague pretending with a smile to point out what the foods were but saying in actuality, "This is a poor family who has offered us their very best. You cannot refuse so you must eat with gusto what they put in front of you. Drink your vodka if you are worried. It will kill all the germs." My colleague took my warning to heart and ate his meal heartily. The interview ended with some very tear filled moments while they discussed losing their daughter in the hostage taking and made toasts to their loved ones. My anxious colleague took many toasts and thankfully suffered no food poisoning. Often people who drink, especially those in the former Soviet Union want to end painful discussions with toasts of strong alcohol, which I generally accept (in moderation). I find that drinking with them creates a gentle and culturally acceptable way of transitioning away from the painful material before leaving the subjects who have opened their hearts to share with us.

Interviewing during Ramadan has its challenges as well. Those who will agree to an interview are often lethargic or will only agree after or beginning with the Iftar (fast breaking) meal. If the interview is done during the fast, food is often offered to those who are not Muslim. I generally refuse all food offered when someone present is fasting, unless nearly all the Muslims present are also eating. As I cannot fast due to a blood sugar issue (I've tried during Ramadan and failed) I take my meals along with me in my briefcase and eat them in private between interviews so as not to disturb those who are fasting. There are also issues with guides, students and others may also wish to smoke when others are refraining from doing so for the fast. In these cases it's important to be sensitive to the needs of those who are struggling to keep their fast.

Translation is also an important issue in the interview, as well as how the guide/translator is psychologically supported during and following the interview. When I use a translator I make sure I have a very good rapport with that person before we go out interviewing. I know the person well and am aware of their vulnerabilities and reactive spots and of course I learn more as we work together. When there is translation I make sure to sit in a position where I can look directly at my subject and I focus on the subject while he talks observing his face, his body language and interacting with him, in order to make my body language match what I am hearing and to respond directly to the subject. I also face the subject directly when I am talking and let the translator pick it up without facing the translator, so I can stay in direct body and facial communication with the subject the entire time we are making the interview. Often subjects will tell me, "It seems you can speak my language and you understand me

even before the translator translates or that I understand you while you are speaking.” This is because I am reading the body language of my subject and trying to respond in my vocal tones and body language as well even as I listen and while I speak in a language they don’t understand.

Of course from time to time I face my translator and have side conversations with him as well, making sure he is okay and getting explanations for cultural issues I might mistake or fail to understand. Sometimes translators become uncomfortable with a subject and try to lead me away from it by telling me I am upsetting the subject. I am always observing the body language and emotional responses of my subjects so I reply that the subject looks like he is handling it well, but of course I back off if indeed the subject does become distressed or shows signs that he would like to back off of that topic. Many times the translators become more upset than the subjects because I am being very careful to “hold” the traumatic emotions of the subject but I cannot at the same time take care of the translator emotionally. I may also fail to notice how agitated the translator is becoming unless he gives some signs. I usually leave emotional processing with the translator to after we have completed an interview, but sometimes it is necessary to address his distress right in an interview. I found this once in Belgium when a guide got very upset while a subject was talking about Moroccan immigrants children’s experiences with discrimination and negative tracking in schools. He became so upset I asked him if he wanted to speak about his own experiences which lead to a heated discussion for a few minutes between the three of us and then a return back to the interview itself.

When it comes to guides and translators, I have to remember always that I am a trained trauma psychologist and used to hearing and taking on board emotionally traumatic material, but my guide is not. Often guides are surprised to learn things about the person we are interviewing, even when they know each other well. Sometimes I have heard gasps of shock and even sat by while side conversations occur in which the guide and the subject discuss that yes indeed this did happen this way, that the subject did take part in terrorist training, or was active in this group or that, etc.

I make a practice of debriefing with my guides after each interview and at the end of each day. I usually spend an evening meal with the guide and talk over all the traumatic material we have covered in order to give them a chance to process emotions. If the guides drink alcohol I usually offer them to drink as well as eat as we talk things over to calm their nerves. In Beslan, I noticed our guide was having a very hard time with a particularly painful interview but she was not available to process her emotions with us afterwards because of other commitments. I told my colleague the next day that I was sure she would not agree to another day of interviews. The colleague who had known this guide for a few years said, “No she’s fine, I’m sure.” Indeed that morning she came and explained that she had never before quit in the middle of a translation job, but that she had found us a replacement and could not carry on as it made her too distraught.

A similar event occurred in Palestine during an interview with a mother of a suicide bomber who we happened to visit on the anniversary of his birthday. As the Israelis refused to return her son’s fragmented body for burial, she refused to acknowledge his death until he was buried properly. Thus she had baked a birthday cake for him that day. The interview was extremely emotional covering many traumas the family had suffered and including details of prison torture of one person present. Luckily I

had more than one guide that day as the first translator fell apart near the end of the interview, breaking down in tears and said he could no longer translate. The second guide whose English was not so good stepped in and continued the interview to its end, an end in which all of us were in tears.

On the issue of showing emotions in the interview I am of the mindset that to be completely neutral in the face of terrible tragedies is cold hearted. I change my voice to tender tones when asking about painful subjects and from time to time tear up when tragic losses are discussed. I laugh freely when contradictions are made and I point them out light heartedly asking for clarification on the opinion of my subject, who is also often also moved to laughter at his contradictory statements. I share disgust or anger at clear wrong doings, but I keep my own feelings of anger or disgust hidden for things in which I am the only one who thinks what is being described is clearly wrong. I don't argue with my subjects but if they challenge me, which they frequently do. Often subjects try to place me in the position of the American who must defend my country's actions, but I respond by stepping out of that role making clear that these are government actions, not my own and then take a third party stance to discuss the points of view of those who carry them out. A frequent challenge concerns American justifications for "collateral damage" in the face of calling attacks on civilians terrorism. I point out carefully that those who cause collateral damage may have calculated how many civilians will be killed, but they claim at least have tried to target militants only and to avoid civilian targets. Whereas terrorists are usually pretty clear on the fact that they have targeted civilians for the sake of causing terror among them.

I take a very clinical stance in my interviews and generally become intensely interested in the subject I am interviewing. Subjects often become quite interested as well as they begin to consider their actions in light of their own history and motivations. Most people take a real interest in themselves once the interview gets going and invest quite a bit in the conversation. Given that there are very few psychologists in many under-developed areas of the world, that there are many taboos for seeking psychological help in many cultures and subcultures, and that it is rare to sit with a noncritical and supportive psychologist to explore one's life – many subjects find doing so a rare delight. However I do find that I must always respect emotional sensitivities and I must guard against the subject opening up to much and speaking about operational activities – that if shared might place us both in danger.

When emotionally painful and traumatic material is discussed that is relevant to the research my stance is to go as far into it as the subject is willing, always be very careful to support the subject with his emotional responses to the material and often taking the time to help the subject with any parts of the trauma that are still very emotionally reactive. This can involve responses to a tragic death, grief, guilt, etc. I generally act as a witness to whatever the subject is able to tell me and do not turn away from the material unless the subject wishes to do so. That stance is of course emotionally painful for me as well, and requires self care later when I have to process my own emotional responses to the material as will be discussed further on.

Interestingly many subjects end their interviews by asking me for feedback about their psychological health or they take the opportunity to ask for some help in their lives. Some will ask for help with family and marriage problems, in regard to a bedwetting child perhaps who is responding to trauma, about marriage difficulties or about their parents or children. Others ask philosophical or psychological

questions about life and violence in particular and about how to regulate their own emotional responses to it. In these cases I always take the time to listen carefully and give the best guidance I can in the brief time we have together and to point out community resources that may offer additional help. Trauma survivors often ask for help with aspects of posttraumatic stress. Sometimes during the interview I can see clearly they need help and are struggling with painful posttraumatic issues. At such moments I offer freely any advice that I can see helps them to immediately and also later address hyper arousal states, survivor guilt, grief responses, nightmares or flashbacks. This is always met with gratitude. In some cases I have followed up an interview by sending an individual written psychological birthing guide for a pregnant woman who had no childbirth preparation, or actually followed up with repeat visits to check on traumatized children. In all cases I don't see my role as treatment but I also am well aware that I can be an agent for improvement in their lives and that an in-depth psychological interview has the potential to be both destabilizing or in the best instances a catalyst for growth. I take seriously my duty to protect and to do no harm, and I also don't like simply taking from an interview. I prefer to give as much as I receive and when the interviewee is interested in something psychological it provides a way to give back after they have shared so much with me. I am pleased to say I have never ended an interview without the subject thanking me profusely for the experience.

Given that I am talking to individuals who endorse violence I also often take the opportunity to ask them if they have ever considered alternate nonviolent ways of addressing their grievances. I point out to them nonviolent role models and ask if they have ever thought that maybe taking another course would be useful to them. This often generates a lot of discussion as well and some introspection.

Lastly I should state that in the third world and among close knit family groups it is inevitable that many interviews are not given in isolation. I have become very comfortable with that and allow my subjects to have present anyone they wish to have. Many take place in homes where parts or the entire family join in sitting with us. Some take place in restaurants or meeting places where groups of "cadres" give me an interview one by one, with the others listening and chiming in. Often children are present in homes and running around, playing, screaming, misbehaving and interrupting. I take a light hearted view of children present and often interact with them when they come near me. I also welcome interruptions and side discussions to occur as I find that often when the families or "cadres" disagree, or interact with strong emotions it opens up whole other areas to explore freely and at times gives the subject a brief reprieve to collect himself. When there are more present than the subject I keep in mind that my questions must respect whether or not they can answer such questions in front of others and I am careful to watch their responses to be careful not to tread into areas that might cause problems inside the family or among friends. At times I have had the subject follow me away from the interview to add or to explain things further that could not be explained in front of the other others present.

The issue of becoming involved is also a thorny one. Often there are grave injustices that one witnesses and upsetting events that one wishes to address. When I traveled in Palestine in minibuses and taxis I was often mistaken by Israeli soldiers for a Palestinian and I found rifles pointed in my face and that I was screamed at and threatened by soldiers who were afraid of what might be inside the travel bag I was carrying. In Beslan many of the mothers whom I had interviewed joined a larger group who decided to lock themselves in the courtroom protesting what they saw as a lack of justice. This move reenacted

the hostage taking as they were locked again without food and water. I found that so disturbing that I went and bought enough food and water and delivered it to them, which required confronting the courtroom guards. This gesture, made for no other reason that I could not be inactive in the face of my own pain of witnessing their voluntary retraumatization, was received with gratitude and did inadvertently win me increased trust and more interviews after they came out of the courtroom.

A final issue when working with guides and translators is that as one expands ones sample through subject's referrals the guide may become for issues of gender, loyalties, religion, ethnicity or any other difference an outsider who is greeted with suspicion. This was particularly evident when I was in Jordan using a female Shia Iraqi guide to talk to diaspora Iraqis about their experiences with insurgent and terrorist activities in Iraq. One subject, who was said to be close to Sunni extremists agreed to give me an interview but required that I drop my translator and agree to be picked up alone at my hotel by his person. I found that intimidating but agreed as he was not willing for a Shia to be present as we talked. Similarly, when a Sunni sheik who had been imprisoned in Abu Ghraib and told about his shame and fury over being stripped, mocked and photographed as many had been in that prison the translator later pointed out to me that during his recounting of this episode his adult son got up and left the room to preserve his father's dignity, and that the sheik must have really wanted me to know his story to be able to share it through a female Iraqi translator as he would never have normally shared that story with a female from his own culture.

Safety and Self Care

Interviews with terrorists, extremists, and their networks involve asking about and listening to upsetting and often emotionally painful information. Likewise it requires venturing into conflict zones, bad neighborhoods, and dangerous areas and sometimes into prisons. When traumatic events are discussed a trained trauma psychologist will suspend temporarily their own emotional responses to the material and stay closely with the emotions of the subject discussing that material, carefully "holding" their emotions and helping them to be able to discuss painful subjects without becoming emotionally overwhelmed by them. One's own emotions are only temporarily suspended however, as are the emotions about entering a poor, desolate and dangerous area and perhaps risking health, limbs and life. At some point the emotions of going into dangerous areas, speaking with dangerous persons and listening to traumatic and upsetting material will arise for the researcher as well.

I find that I rarely let my emotions upset me while on a research trip. I may eat heartily and have a glass of wine, if appropriate, after a long day of interviews to let the tension flow out of me, but I rarely let my emotional guard down. I feel all my emotions only when I return to the safety of home and then I often have a flood of feelings, flashbacks of terrifying events, as well as emotions expressed in terrifying nightmares. If I was not an expert in posttraumatic stress disorder I might fear for my sanity at these times as I sometimes find myself experiencing an intense hyper-aroused state, having flashbacks of where I have just been and what I have heard. This is of course highly upsetting and disorienting to say the least. Likewise I find myself upset and shaking at times when I read my own notes, even months after taking a research trip.

To recover, I find that it's helpful for me to talk a lot to those who were with me and process my feelings, to write about the events and create a narrative to "hold" my own emotions and to try to make sense of all I have taken on board. I also take care by getting a massage when I can and being close by loved ones who comfort me. I often find my family cannot listen to the stories I carry inside, as they are too traumatic for them as well, and I have to process them alone or with other colleagues who do similar work. Likewise many emotions get processed in nightmares which can last for a few weeks after a research trip. I sometimes give my handwritten notes to a research assistant (also sworn to confidentiality) to transcribe and often find that this person is also traumatized as well by the material contained in the notes. I find that not being alone in my responses to the material is comforting and reassures me that I am normal. Sometimes we process it together, although usually I end up supporting the research assistant. There is nothing more to do for trauma responses but to face them and to slowly work through assimilating the material and experiences of gathering it. I find that my stance in life is to force myself to face painful things and not run from them and to be a witness to traumas rather than try to deny them, so slowly I let the emotions and the realities of lives much harder than my own work through my mind, body and soul.

My most painful emotional experiences with research interviews have been entering prisons, listening to Beslan hostages and interviewing victims of the Holocaust. One night while I was in Beslan I sat alone at dinner, emotionally dazed, listening to familiar Russian music being played, dancing occasionally, and returning finally to my room to collapse in hysterical tears at all the stories of dead children heard from their bereaved mothers and fathers. I felt deep shame that I had three living healthy children and could do nothing to restore their losses. Another time I spent the evening in tears after visiting a young woman in her Israeli prison cell and seeing that when two male guards tried to open the cell door they could not do so for some time. Her cell had only a small window, impossible to exit through. I realized immediately had there been a fire she might have been burned alive inside. While I kept my emotions to myself during the interviews that day over many troubling things, the thought of the door that would not open caught up to me in a flood of tears that evening. Likewise I found myself shaking and wanting some stiff drinks after exiting Iraq in 2006. After spending time in Camp Bucca and witnessing the sight of over twenty thousand men housed in barbed wire in a prison in the desert, dealing with the US contractors I had to work alongside who were insulting our Islamic staff (who were risking their own lives and their family's lives to help us) and surviving being shot at in our plane and receiving mortar fire into the compounds where we stayed and hearing about a mortar attack that nearly missed killing my husband and did kill others, I felt ashamed but I wanted to drink more than a moderate amount of alcohol to calm my nerves.

Generally I allow myself a few weeks to recover from a research trip. I watch myself carefully and allow myself to shake, cry, have flashbacks and nightmares without becoming overly concerned. I know if this goes on too long I have to seek help, but if it passes through me I will be okay.

As far as physical safety goes there are no good measures to advise other than one must always be vigilant, alert and "trust one's gut" in making decisions regarding who to talk with, and deciding what homes, communities and areas to enter. If religious, I advise adding prayers for wisdom and safety to that list. It is possible to end up dead, a hostage, or physically attacked as a result of entering certain

areas and communities and one simply has to scope out the situation and make the most informed decision possible and also build the strongest ties of trust possible when going in. Many subcultures of terrorists, especially Muslims follow a cultural practice of hospitality which includes protecting one's guest against harm. This has not protected everyone including journalists who have been beheaded or held hostage for long periods of time (al-Mughrabi, 2007).

In my own experience I have been led into danger once by a guide in Palestine who wanted me to run back to a Palestinian town across a field in darkness that was being patrolled and guarded by Israeli soldiers. I refused stating that I preferred not to be shot, although I had been led by him across the same field earlier in the daylight not realizing until it was too late to turn back that that we were in grave danger as we had been led into an illegal crossing guarded by armed soldiers. I have sat across from prisoners who could attack and kill me easily if they so chose and I saw on the wall of the same prison many self improvised weapons they had fashioned out of aluminum and other metals broken off from the prison walls. I understood that I might have my throat suddenly slit, or my body stabbed, or otherwise be attacked but I chose to do it, knowing that it was only good chances, but not guaranteed that the guard who was usually present might be able to save me in time. I have been in Palestinian homes surrounded by militants in both Nablus (PFLP) and Gaza city (HAMAs) who discussed taking me hostage and asked if I was afraid. I told them, no, I was not and that I thought it was a bad idea that would end badly for all of us. Of course afterwards I thought a lot about how serious they might have been, especially when a journalist in Gaza was held for twelve weeks in very bad conditions. In Lebanon I was told the only way I could get an interview with a high level Hezbollah leader was to have their people pick me up at the home I was staying in and take me to an undisclosed location. I was terrified that they would put a bag over my head but agreed after discussing with my host that his relationship with the group was strong enough to guarantee my safe and timely return. I was also glad to read that their spiritual leader is against kidnapping and knowing I could quote him to them if they did hold me. Luckily I was saved by a snowstorm and the cadres called to ask if I would kindly drive to them instead. In Morocco I went deep inside the slums and was surrounded by young men who agreed to give me an interview but who at some point during the interview turned suspiciously to ask the guide who I was and where I was from. I could see their sudden fearful and suspicious turn so instead of wasting time answering the guide who was also afraid, I turned to the group who had me completely surrounded and answered with laughter, "from the Mossad and CIA of course!" The shock on their faces to these internationally recognized words made me laugh more and then they quickly relaxed, although my guide was not amused.

While I have been present for many dangers, including having my plane shot at, mortar falling in the area I am working in and discussions of my hostage taking, nothing really awful has happened to me in any of my research trip. In actuality some of my worst threats have come actually from security officials, Russian and Israeli. In Beslan I had a visit in my hotel room from the FSB who had arrested another researcher during the same time period and who may be involved in "disappearances". In Israel my student threatened by Israeli security agents and was given a threat to pass to me and was himself threatened with violence if we returned again to the West Bank. Likewise I find myself regularly detained and searched for lengthy periods of time at the airport in Israel, although I take that in stride

given their many security issues and the fact that I had spent considerable time talking with people who wished to attack their country. In Palestine I have been aware that I can be shot by Israelis who are jumpy and armed and that I am easily confused with those I am interviewing. Likewise I have been in two interviews in safe houses; one with a sender of bombers who I know is targeted for assassination and that I can easily become “collateral damage”. Obviously there are real dangers and no guarantees in this line of work.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is possible to conduct research interviews with terrorists, suicide bombers, senders, hostages of terrorists, extremists, and their close associates and family members, although there are considerable risks. One has to cultivate trust within the community to do so and most importantly win the trust of a good guide/translator in the community or move from subject to subject by method of the snowball sampling technique where each contact leads to further contacts. There is considerable danger in interviewing such persons including going to their territory to do so. Likewise the material discussed is often troubling and emotionally traumatic to both parties. The ethics involved in conducting such research require that one does no harm to one’s subjects and makes sure not to create circumstances in which the interview ends in the arrest or attack of the subject who has taken part in the research. Clearly there are many dangers to consider in this type of work and one must decide carefully which risks to take and which to avoid. The safest thing of course is to avoid such work altogether, but if done carefully and in good faith, the rewards of good interviews when the danger has been surmounted are well worth it. However those researchers who have been harmed in the field would likely not say so.

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ⁱ The author makes use of the term “militant jihad” as a reference to terrorists groups (who are often also militants) who claim that they are carrying out a “jihad” and acting in the name of Islam by attacking both civilian and military targets. These groups rely heavily upon and promote “martyrdom” (suicide) operations claiming the rewards of martyrdom referred to in Islamic scriptures will be accorded to the person(s) who carries out such an act. When referring to militant jihad the author is fully aware of and respectful of the religious and completely non-terrorist related references to the greater jihad in the Koran, which refers to the constant and ever vigilant need for an inner struggle to master oneself and attain a moral lifestyle, and assures her readers that in writing about those who believe in a call to militant jihadi terrorism she has tried to find the best term that describes both their ideology and actions and by doing so means no disrespect to the Islamic faith nor to the millions of Muslims worldwide that follow Islam peacefully.

ⁱⁱ www.AnneSpeckhard.com