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Research as an Outsider: POSITIONALITY, ETHICS, AND RISK

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Researching Violent Extremism

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ABSTRACT

Almost a decade ago I was in Afghanistan to observe the first round of a presidential election. Election observation involves careful recording of information about the different polling centers and stations visited. In preparation for the task, I had bought a sleeveless “journalist’s jacket” with plenty of pockets for storing notes, a mobile phone, and other observation process paraphernalia. I was in the company of three other observers, one of whom was an Afghan friend of more than thirty years’ standing. When he saw me in the jacket, he came up and, with no sense of irony, said, “Bill, you should take off that jacket—people will think you’re a foreigner.” I chuckled at the time, but since then, I have reflected often on the implications of my friend’s observation.

Outsiders—or “foreigners”—who study violent extremism in affected countries can have multiple identities as students of violent extremism, as students of the countries in question, and as “foreigners” to the contexts they study. They often have long-standing personal relationships with local community members and in some cases they have spent more time living in the countries they study than in their countries of nationality. Yet they inhabit an ambiguous space, being “insiders” in the eyes of some, and “outsiders” in the eyes of others. This ambiguity gives rise to both practical and ethical challenges in undertaking fieldwork. The following reflections draw on my own experiences to illustrate some of the complexities associated with positionality, ethics, and risk as well as important considerations that all researchers should take into account when undertaking fieldwork in a country other than their own.

The nature of fieldwork: some personal reflections

The idea of “fieldwork” can entail many different sorts of activity. An environment that is challenging for one type of research may not be challenging for all. This creates a certain space for researchers, particularly those “foreign” to the contexts they study, to structure their activities to minimize risk, political as well as physical, both for themselves and for those with whom they interact or work. This chapter gives a brief introduction to different approaches and methodologies of field research before offering some considerations related to researcher positionality, fieldwork ethics, and personal risk. The author’s personal experiences in undertaking research in Afghanistan provide some illustrative anecdotes. The aim of this chapter is to provide researchers with useful considerations for conducting fieldwork in foreign countries beyond the baseline standards.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Often the most straightforward research approach is the analysis of documents, as is the case with a number of important recent studies of groups such as the Taliban, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, and ISIS.¹ Increasingly, documents of value are available online. However, it may still be necessary to go into the field in

1 See Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017); Samina Yasmeen, *Jihad and Dawah: Evolving Narratives of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jamat ud Dawah* (London: Hurst & Co., 2017); C. Christine

order to access some of the more interesting texts. In countries with strong oral traditions, it is easy to overlook the extent to which documentary material of quality may be available. Just how much material is available and of value will depend on the research topic, the language ability of the researcher, or the scientific discipline of the project. It will also depend on previous efforts to gather and catalogue material that researchers might use.

For instance, in Afghanistan, at least until the Taliban occupation of Kabul in August 2021, valuable archives were accessible at the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU). The core of this collection consisted of a remarkably diverse collection of books and papers of the late Professor Louis Dupree, who died in March 1989. His widow, Nancy Hatch Dupree, had initially made some of these papers available to researchers in the ACBAR Resource and Information Centre in Peshawar. After 2001, she pursued the task of having a dedicated building established in Kabul to which the collection was eventually moved, with space for its further expansion. Over time, it grew to include over 100,000 items. In addition, researchers in Kabul could also access a substantial library at the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), the core of which was the library of the old British Institute of Afghan Studies.

INTERVIEWS

Much fieldwork, of course, involves interviewing. This method can be implemented differently and for various purposes. I spent a great deal of time talking to people in Afghanistan about a wide range of issues, but very rarely with a view to quoting them directly in a book or research article where I would need to be able to establish that I had interviewed them pursuant to formal procedures set out in ethics protocols. Such “background” discussion can be of enormous value in contextualizing information found in documents or in “triangulating,” that is, cross-checking what other informants observed about particular episodes or activities. A more common form of interviewing, however, involves the collection of testimony that can be cited as evidence about particular matters. Without getting involved in the complex issues related to the nature of testimony,² recent discussions of interviewing have highlighted that it has its own complexities. The late Lee Ann Fujii drew attention to the relational dimensions of interviewing: it is not simply a process by which information is extracted from a subject—interviewing involves the development of complicated relationships, with ethical as well as empirical dimensions.³

SURVEYS AND STATISTICS

Another form of fieldwork is driven by the desire to gather data that can then be analyzed using various statistical techniques. This approach is widely used in the social sciences, ranging from opinion studies, to the analysis of public policy interventions, to epidemiology. Field research of this kind can be illuminating; it can also go horribly wrong for reasons ranging from design problems to the frailty of the

Fair, *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (London: Hurst & Co., 2018); Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (London: Hurst & Co., 2020).

2 See C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

3 Lee Ann Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

researchers.⁴ It is not a form of field research that can be rushed, and those who embark upon it require both an understanding of sampling techniques and statistical analysis and a grasp of the complexities of the specific environment in which they are operating. A weakness in either of these spheres can blind researchers to the implications of their “findings.” In a war-torn country, parts of the population may be inaccessible to researchers, complicating survey research. Furthermore, potential biases in responses always need to be borne in mind.

Afghanistan has never been a particularly friendly environment for lone researchers to conduct credible studies of opinion, but quite a lot of surveys have been conducted on which one might be tempted to draw. I would advise extreme caution in doing so unless those conducting the surveys are highly transparent and supply considerable detail about the methods that they employed. I have found the most useful source to be the annual survey of opinion conducted in Afghanistan until 2019 by the Asia Foundation. The staff overseeing the surveys were highly professional; the reports summarizing the data gave detail about the research methodology; the complete data sets are available in accessible form; and the researchers took into account critical comments by users. In analyzing mass opinion in Afghanistan, I would rather rely on Asia Foundation data than on the kind of “qualitative” research that begins with something like “my cook was talking to his cousin’s uncle in Helmand, who said that his grandson’s friend thought that no one there really trusts the government ...”

OFFICIAL DATA SOURCES

Hovering somewhere between desk research and fieldwork is the gathering of official statistics. The same warnings should apply here as to survey research: transparency about the data collection method is crucial to assess whether to make use of official statistics or not. Some official statistics may be derived from activities where the government itself has a strong interest in obtaining accurate information, for example statistics on the movement of vehicles carrying goods subject to customs duty. In other areas, however, for example the size and distribution of the population, the relevant data may be difficult to gather, even if the government for the purposes of baseline analysis has a strong interest in gathering accurate information. In societies emerging from severe conflict, sample surveys may remain better sources of information than aggregate data.

OBSERVATIONAL STUDIES

My former PhD supervisor, the eminent Sovietologist T.H. Rigby, once advised me never to underestimate the value of simply wandering around and picking up what he called the “smell and feel” of a situation. Conceptually, this is what Michael Polanyi called “tacit knowledge,”⁵ and it can be of inestimable value.

4 Dean Karlan and Jacob Appel, *Failing in the Field: What We Can Learn When Field Research Goes Wrong* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

5 Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).

In a more formal sense, a quest for contextual understanding also underpins many qualitative studies based on in-depth observation of power, community life, and culture.⁶

One interesting form of “fieldwork,” usually overlooked, is election observation. This is a subject with a rich literature⁷ and it is an activity that can be either extremely instructive or a complete waste of time. It is not a particularly effective device for confidence-building or prevention of fraud, but carried out by well-prepared observers it can identify weaknesses in electoral processes or defects in the performance of tasks even in well-designed processes. What the fieldworker can learn from election observation is essentially incidental to the electoral process itself. But it is a great opportunity for researchers to witness processes of significance in a society they are studying and to develop an understanding of a society that can complement more formalized forms of fieldwork. It is also a good tool for meeting with a wide range of people and gauging their mood.

Considerations for researchers in the field

Fieldwork in war-torn societies involves the navigation of many obstacles. These obstacles are likely to confront the researcher well before they reach the field, as well as during the research process itself. Three in particular deserve some further attention: positionality, ethics, and personal risk. Researchers need to be alert to how their very existence or presence can affect the worlds they are studying. They need to reflect carefully on the moral responsibilities that can flow from their presence. And they need to understand the implications of their presence in the field for their own safety and the safety of others. The following paragraphs set out some personal reflections on how these influences play out for researchers conducting studies of violent extremism and conflict in spaces foreign to their own.

UNDERSTANDING POSITIONALITY

Those who study the politics and society of a country foreign to their own operate simultaneously in different social worlds. They can be academic analysts and at the same time key actors in a country’s politics—sometimes unavoidably so. For example, their published analyses may affect the reputations of players in the country they study, or the willingness of foreign donors to contribute funding for important activities such as reconstruction or development. Metaphorically, they may provide ammunition for weapons over which they have no control. Over time, they may also develop complex and diverse relationships with people in different strata of the societies they study. These relationships shape the ways in which they conduct analysis, and it is important to be cognizant of them when doing so. Just as Afghan

6 Afghanistan has been richly supplied with high-quality studies of this kind in recent years. See, for example, Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Andrea Chioyenda, *Crafting Masculine Selves: Culture, War, and Psychodynamics in Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

7 See Eric C. Bjornlund, *Beyond Free and Fair: Monitoring Elections and Building Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Susan D. Hyde, *The Pseudo-Democrat’s Dilemma: Why Election Observation Became an International Norm* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Judith G. Kelley, *Monitoring Democracy: When International Election Observation Works, and Why It Often Fails* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

languages have different terms for various categories of friendship,⁸ so can researchers develop different types of friendship as well, varying in intimacy and scale of reciprocal commitment. On occasion, one can come to know individuals as “friends” well before one engages with them as social or political actors. While this may be a source of valuable insight, it can also blur one’s understanding of how far they may be prepared to go to achieve their objectives.

Researchers should never forget that they can be targets for manipulation by actors with agendas of their own. In Afghanistan, Afghans on occasion have proven adept at such manipulation;⁹ but so have foreign actors with a line that they are trying to “spin,” seeing academics as credible figures to channel that “spin.” Spin is a ubiquitous problem: a Western ambassador in Kabul once described to me how the defense minister of his own country had raised his eyebrows in disbelief at the content of a briefing from his own defense force deployed in Afghanistan. Academics and researchers need to be wary about putting themselves in “embedded” positions with interested parties, dependent on their hosts for protection, accommodation, transport and sustenance; the likely result is that they will see only what their hosts want them to see.

The prospect of becoming a “player” can be alluring but carries real dangers, mostly an abandonment of critical judgment and perspective: one risks losing a sense of moral compass. An interesting example of this came in February 2020, with the controversial publication in the *New York Times* of an op-ed article allegedly written by a leading Taliban figure and listed terrorist, Sirajuddin Haqqani.¹⁰ The word “allegedly” is important here, because no one even remotely familiar with the rhetoric and vocabulary characteristically used by the likes of Haqqani would believe that he was the author of the piece: it read much more like a case for the Taliban drafted by a Western think-tanker. Exactly who the real author was we may never know, but whoever it was showed a lamentable lack of judgment in amplifying the voice of a notorious and duplicitous killer who was on the FBI “Most Wanted” list as a “specially-designated global terrorist.”

Researchers need to be wary of getting too close to power. Prominent researchers from the United States are in perpetual danger of being perceived to be weighty figures inside the Beltway, and actors with interests to advance can prove adept in crafting messages which they hope will be swallowed whole. One of the advantages of being an Australian is that Australia is not a particularly powerful country, and there is little risk of being seduced by an offer of proximity to the world of major decision-making. Lord Acton’s famous warning that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely¹¹ is normally read as a caution to office-holders, but it applies equally to people on the fringes of power. And here lies further danger. Proximity to power runs the risk of inducing a form of self-censorship in which

8 Zach Warren and Basir Bitar, “Friends and Enemies in Afghanistan,” in *The Psychology of Friendship and Enmity: Relationships in Love, Work, Politics, and War Vol. II*, eds. Rom Harré and Fathali M. Moghaddam (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013): 113.

9 See Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978–2012* (London: Hurst & Co., 2014): 234.

10 Sirajuddin Haqqani, “What We, the Taliban, Want,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2020.

11 John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, *Historical Essays and Studies* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1907), 504.

people tailor their views to suit the expectations of those with whom they wish to interact. The long-run consequences of such tendencies may end up advantaging no one.

Understanding fieldwork ethics

THE POLITICS OF ETHICS

It is now standard for scholars studying human subjects to be required to secure an “ethics clearance” before embarking upon research. In the university context, this is supplied by an ethics committee that in turn may be seeking to give effect to a code of research conduct developed to cover a particular discipline area, or promulgated by a government funding agency. In principle, it is important that scholarly research be conducted with the highest degree of integrity and ethical sensitivity. This should not, however, be confused with the much more contentious idea of political sensitivity, which can be a euphemism for encouraging researchers to avoid questions that political figures would prefer not to have them raise or to tone down their findings if they seem likely to prove controversial.

The philosopher Philip Pettit has warned of the tendency of ethics committees to be “not only self-assertive, but also self-righteous.”¹² An additional danger when ethics committees turn their attention to proposed research on war-torn or conflict-ridden societies is that their focus may prove to be more on political or reputational risk-management than on the ethics of research. Violent extremism is highly political, and some institutions may be frightened of becoming too much involved in studying it dispassionately out of a fear of offending powerful forces with their own barrows to push. For example, an Afghan researcher in Australia whose work I was supervising had proposed to study, among other groups, the political party in Afghanistan known as Hizb Al-Tahrir. He was asked by an ethics committee to respond to criticism of the group by a right-wing Australian politician reported in a tabloid newspaper. This prompted me to write to the chair of the committee that “serious political analysis requires a willingness to study groups that some observers may find unappetizing. If analysts in Western universities were limited to studying forces in developing countries that were fully committed to Western-style democracy, a dangerously skewed image of the politics of such countries would most likely result.” In light of my comments, and a detailed and careful response by the researcher, the research project was approved; but the questioning on such flimsy grounds was unsettling and seemed to have more to do with protecting an institution from political criticism than with meaningful research ethics.

THE ETHICS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

For foreign scholars undertaking fieldwork, there is great insight to be found in a study by Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay of what they call the “tribal politics” of fieldwork. Their focus is research in conflict environments, and they argue that

¹² Philip Pettit, *Rules, Reasons, and Norms: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 392.

“long-held methodological principles about positionality do not hold in today’s conflicts. Research of this kind can still be pursued, but only if the scholar’s place in the political economy of today’s wars is reconceived as one of limited power and unavoidable partiality ... We argue that those still able to do fieldwork amidst increasing violence do so by virtue of building their own “tribes,” forming and joining different social micro-systems to collect data and, in some cases, survive. We conclude that field research must be recognised as a form of intervention, with analogues to other types of intervention—from humanitarian aid delivery to counterinsurgency—and a corresponding set of challenges and opportunities.”¹³

Researchers always need to be alert to power relations and power imbalances when they are in the field, since in multifarious ways, asymmetries of power can affect the nature of the material that researchers gather and indirectly the interpretations of situations and circumstances that researchers then offer. One particular point worth bearing in mind is that one’s local counterparts will likely themselves be building their own “tribes.” This should not be seen as a cynical exercise; on the contrary, my experience has often been that in a country such as Afghanistan, certain locals will feel a genuine sense of relief at being able to unburden themselves to researchers about issues that they could not possibly canvass in the company of most other Afghans because they would be seen as transgressing established social norms or expectations. For this reason, the relationships that develop between researchers and some of their local interlocutors or counterparts can over time become much deeper and warmer than one might have anticipated. This need not be a problem, but as a researcher one needs to be alert to the risk of becoming subtly biased in favor of the perspectives advanced by those who one likes and respects.

This ties in with a further point concerning the “real” ethics of fieldwork. In Afghanistan, there is a strong tradition of hospitality, which, allied with the genuine affection that Afghan researchers can develop for their Western partners, can lead Afghans to put their own lives and well-being at risk in order to ensure the safety of foreign visitors. One of my Australian friends, although an aid worker rather than a researcher, experienced this when he was targeted by a suicide bomber. When the blast occurred, most people in the vicinity scattered. The main exception was my friend’s Afghan interpreter, who ran to his aid even though there was a very real risk that a second bomber might have been on the scene waiting for this to happen. In this situation, the presence of the Afghan interpreter was an often-unavoidable feature of an environment in which Australians had to work to deliver aid projects that could benefit the Afghan community more broadly. But in the case of researchers, the link between their research and concrete benefits for the local community may be less obvious. It pays to think carefully about whether the desire to complete one’s research project maybe putting others at risk. To me, this is the central ethical issue of fieldwork.¹⁴

13 Romain Malejacq and Dipali Mukhopadhyay, “The ‘Tribal Politics’ of Field Research: A Reflection on Power and Partiality in 21st-Century Warzones,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1012.

14 For instructive recent discussions, see Geoffrey Swenson and Kate Roll, “Theorizing Risk and Research: Methodological Constraints and Their Consequences,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 53, no. 2 (2020): 286–291; Sarah Kenyon Lischer, “Hypotheses on Agony: Field Research in a Genocidal Context,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 54, no. 2 (2021): 276–280.

THE ETHICS OF ENGAGEMENT: RECOGNIZING RISKS TO “LOCAL” PARTNERS

When one speaks of fieldwork in Afghanistan, it is tempting to assume that it involves “foreigners” making their way to Afghanistan to study the politics and society of the country. This is of course part of the story, but only a part. Just as significant, particularly in more recent times, has been the phenomenon of Afghans studying Afghanistan and undertaking fieldwork to do so. The Taliban takeover is likely to put an end to this for the moment, but in all probability not forever. Some of these Afghan researchers have been based more-or-less permanently in Afghanistan, others have been Afghans studying abroad with scholarships offered to do doctoral research at foreign universities, and yet others have been researchers of Afghan background who have grown up or have lived in foreign countries for varying periods of time. Depending upon exactly into which category they fall, such researchers may face a diverse range of challenges. Those based in Afghanistan more-or-less permanently may be vulnerable to threats from power holders who for whatever reason feel threatened by the substance of the investigator’s research. The family and friends of the investigator may also be at some risk. Afghan doctoral researchers in foreign countries may be required by their universities to take security measures that are wholly inappropriate for natives of the country and simply serve to attract unwanted attention. On the other hand, Afghans who have long been abroad may be framed by their local interlocutors as *gharbzadeh* (“westernized”), and may speak local languages in a somewhat archaic fashion, employing vocabulary that was common when they were young in Afghanistan, but which is now no longer widely used, whilst at the same time they lack a command of more recent idiom.

Afghan researchers can also be involved in fieldwork as co-authors with non-Afghan counterparts. Depending on how well the co-authors know each other, this can be a fruitful relationship, at best bringing together diverse strands of tacit and explicit knowledge to produce an illuminating product. Western researchers who embark on such activities nonetheless need to understand that their Afghan co-authors may face vulnerabilities that they do not share, and that Afghan researchers are also obliged to live simultaneously in a range of social worlds. It is therefore important, at the outset, to be very clear that if Afghan co-authors have reason to feel uncomfortable about the trajectory of a project, they will be free to exit with no hard feelings. Gifted Afghan co-authors can add so much value to a project that it is crucial to ensure that their goodwill is not exploited. The contributions made by Afghan co-authors should be fully and explicitly recognized in all publications that flow from a particular project of research. Afghanistan-based co-authors will often have fewer opportunities to explore the various reaches of the academic world than their non-Afghan counterparts, not least because Western countries have often proved to be mean-spirited in issuing visas to Afghan researchers or in issuing them promptly. One way to try to circumvent this is to ensure that Afghanistan-based researchers receive proper recognition for their contributions to a greater understanding of their country.

THE ETHICS OF VERIFICATION: REPORTING ON RUMORS

There are a range of miscellaneous issues, a grab-bag of sorts, that can arise when one works on Afghanistan and that relate to the ubiquity in Afghanistan of conspiracy theories and rumors. While documentary material and high-quality scholarship is increasingly available, communication by word-of-mouth is still a pervasive way of sharing information about political and social matters. Perhaps unsurprisingly,

conspiracy theories of diverse variety¹⁵ are frequently encountered in Afghanistan, very often involving the United States, which, as one of the largest international players in Afghanistan in recent decades, is easily depicted as having had a finger in every pie. In some cases, the provenance of such theories is difficult to trace; in other cases, they have clearly been generated by political figures seeking to advance their own interests.

Sorting fact from fiction can be quite a challenge but is worth the effort if there are grounds for suspicion that key actors may be acting in a conspiratorial fashion. In Afghanistan rumor is ubiquitous in the form of unverified and sometimes unverifiable factual claims that may be entirely false.¹⁶ These can be exceedingly dangerous, as the brutal murder of Farkhunda Malikzada by a violent mob on March 19, 2015, in the center of Kabul made clear; the killers were motivated by a rumor that she had burnt a copy of the Quran, a rumor subsequently proven to have been completely baseless.¹⁷ However, not all rumors are baseless and sometimes they can supply useful leads for researchers to follow. It is important to cross-check such claims as rigorously as possible, but in many cases one will be able to go only so far before the trail goes cold. In my experience, the best thing to do when this happens is to make no use of the claim in writings but instead to file it away at the back of one's mind in case some further information surfaces in the future that may make it worthwhile to revisit the old claim and explore it further.

Understanding personal risk

No academic article is worth the loss of a life or serious injury to life and limb. Researchers must be very cautious and careful when working in a war-torn society. Yet ultimately, researchers should develop the habit of making their own informed assessments of security rather than simply relying on the assessments of other people or agencies. Those assessments may prove to be ill-grounded. I was in Mazar-e Sharif in May 1997 when Abdul Malik Pahlavan attempted a “coup” against the local strongman, Abdul Rashid Dostam. The broad consensus as stories spread on May 19 about what was happening was that this simply reflected a certain jockeying for power. I did not share this belief and arranged to fly from Mazar-e Sharif to Islamabad on May 22. On May 24, heavy fighting flared in the district of Mazar where I had been staying. Ever since, I have been extremely glad that I trusted my own judgment instead of relying on the judgment of others.

GOVERNMENT TRAVEL WARNINGS: IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS

An additional complication for researchers flows from the growing disposition of states to try to discourage their nationals from traveling to war-torn countries by issuing online travel warnings. This is a rela-

15 See Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Nancy L. Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead, *A Lot of People are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

16 Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, and What Can Be Done* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

17 See Niamatullah Ibrahim, “Rumor and Collective Action Frames: An Assessment of How Competing Conceptions of Gender, Culture and Rule of Law Shaped Responses to Rumor and Violence in Afghanistan,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2019.

tively recent development, but one that has the potential to affect researchers in complex and unforeseen ways.¹⁸ For example, for some years with respect to Afghanistan, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has offered the advice “do not travel.” This is sensible advice where tourists are concerned, but until recently was less obviously relevant to researchers with extensive field experience of their own, and some of whom were citizens of Afghanistan as well as Australia. Do-not-travel advice typically has the effect of invalidating insurance cover that researchers might otherwise have enjoyed under blanket policies negotiated by their institutions and thus can increase the cost of doing fieldwork. Travel warnings also tend to be somewhat homogenized and less attuned than one might wish to the regional variations that can be found in a complex environment. That said, researchers do need to understand the severe limitations on the capacity of embassies in Afghanistan to offer “consular assistance.”

WORKING WITH SECURITY FIRMS: PRESSURES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Some government agencies, including Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, advise that travelers should consider “hiring dedicated armed personal security protection, though even these precautions cannot guarantee personal safety.” In war-torn countries, there has been a proliferation in recent years of private security companies.¹⁹ It is important, however, to recognize that security firms have services to sell and are working actively to promote them. A researcher needs to balance the value of the protection private security firms provide against the danger that they would simply mark the person being “protected” as a target worth hitting. This is dangerous when such firms have developed routines. When one is in a country for any length of time, it is easy to fall into routine patterns of behavior, but it is these very routines that expose one to danger, since they can make one a more predictable target. Unless one can afford very high levels of security protection, it may well be that avoiding routine and maintaining a low profile is the best that one can do. At a certain point, avoidance of routine can almost become a matter of second nature. No matter how splendid the food in a particular restaurant, it pays not to become a regular patron; and restaurants with a predominantly local clientele may be safer than those known to be frequently patronized by foreigners.

It is also worth noting that security personnel can vary in their knowledge and experience in a given country. A decade ago, in Afghanistan, I was traveling in a convoy with security personnel who had only just arrived in the country after working for years in Iraq. The convoy was stopped by the Afghan National Security Forces at a checkpoint, and weapons were found in the security personnel’s vehicle, weapons for which they had no registration papers. This gave rise to a tense and awkward stand-off, with some potential to escalate. I felt in greater danger at that moment than at virtually any other time I had been in Afghanistan. More recently, a similar convoy drove me into a dead-end street from which it extracted

18 William Maley, “Risk, Populism, and the Evolution of Consular Responsibilities,” in *Consular Affairs and Diplomacy*, eds. Jan Melissen and Ana Mar Fernández (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2011).

19 See P.W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Deborah D. Avant, *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Simon Chesterman and Chia Lehnhardt, eds., *From Mercenaries to Market: The Rise and Regulation of Private Military Companies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

itself with considerable difficulty; a somewhat similar traffic foul-up to that which left Archduke Franz Ferdinand vulnerable to an assassin's bullet in Sarajevo in June 1914.

Conclusion

These reflections do not take us in the direction of any single model for fieldwork but point to a range of considerations useful to bear in mind. One such consideration relates to the complexity of the environment that a conflict-affected country such as Afghanistan offers.²⁰ A preoccupation with the purely logistical difficulties of working in a war-torn place can distract attention from the equally significant challenges that arise from the complexity of local politics and social structure. Persons contemplating fieldwork need to keep their eyes wide open and avoid the temptation to over-generalize or rely on a small number of informants.²¹ Another relates to the need routinely to interrogate the research. Self-awareness is almost always a virtue but it is a particularly important virtue in the field where the excitement of day-to-day life, the “thrill of the chase” as it were, can dull awareness of the problematic position of a researcher, neither “inside” nor “outside” the realms of study. But perhaps most important of all is the need to be perpetually sensitive to the vulnerabilities of those locals with whom one is working, whether they be fellow researchers or citizens of the country. They may face dangers that a visiting researcher does not; their kindness, goodwill, and generosity should never be taken for granted.

20 William Maley, “Studying Host-Nationals in Operational Areas: The Challenge of Afghanistan,” in *Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Military Studies*, eds. Joseph Soeters, Patricia M. Shields and Sebastiaan Rietjens (London: Routledge, 2014).

21 See Kevin Sieff, “Nebraska Kebab-Maker Has Advised Seven U.S. Commanders in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, March 29, 2013.

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