



Red T

Protecting Translators and Interpreters Worldwide

Specialized Harm:

Civilian Translators and Interpreters
in High-Risk Settings

Red T is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization advocating for the protection of translators and interpreters worldwide.

Our **vision** is a world in which translators and interpreters can work free from fear of persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, abduction, torture and assassination.

Our **mission** is to protect translators and interpreters in high-risk settings.

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Introduction

From ancient to modern times, in war and in peace, translators and interpreters (T/Is)¹ have served as linguistic bridge and socio-cultural negotiator among speakers of different languages. However, historically, the role of T/Is has suffered from multiple misconceptions. Particularly in theaters of war, linguists are frequently viewed as traitors and kidnapped, tortured, and/or killed; if they operate in the terrorism arena, they may be prosecuted and convicted as terrorist agents. And post-9/11, as evidenced by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and incidents in detention camps, the suspicion cast upon them and resulting persecution have reached new heights.

This suspicion has a name — translator-traitor mentality (TTM)², a concept that captures the historic spectrum of distrust, discrimination, and threats that T/Is have been experiencing throughout time. Manifestations of TTM, defined as specialized harm, run the gamut. At one end is apprehension about linguists, born out of unfamiliarity with another speech community and its associated culture; at the other end are severe human rights abuses such as abduction, torture, and assassination. The middle of the spectrum holds T/I persecutions, prosecutions, and imprisonments. The extent of TTM depends, inter alia, on the era, the political climate, the power differential between the parties, and the nature and setting of the communicative event. For instance, a conference interpreter who works in a booth at the United Nations has little or no exposure to TTM, whereas a host nation linguist working for an occupying power in a conflict zone must cope with an enormous degree of TTM. While the T/I may arouse distrust even under peaceful conditions, this distrust intensifies during more tension-filled periods so that linguists are occupying “an increasingly dangerous interstitial space” (Apter, 2007, p. 69; see also Apter, 2005 and 2006) in which the simple act of practicing their profession makes them vulnerable to loss of life, limb, and liberty.

The surge in recent scholarship on the role and positioning of T/Is in such dangerous spaces and conflict-ridden settings is an indication of the topic’s urgency and complexity. For instance, Inghilleri (2010) examines the dual interpreter-combatant role that emerged in the Iraq war; Stahuljak (2010) explores interpreter activism and agency in the 1991–92 war in Croatia; Baker (2010) demonstrates how conflict zone linguists are

narrated by other parties and how they themselves influence the emerging public narratives of a conflict; and Rafael (2009) investigates issues of interpreter loyalty and identity in Iraq, revealing how linguists are subjected to verbal attacks by the very parties that contracted them. One common strand running through all this research on the role of T/Is in conflict, post-conflict, and conflict-related scenarios is that TTM has seen a pronounced rise in recent years, which is further compounded by social anxieties about Islam and Muslim cultures. The phenomenon itself, though, reaches far back in history.³

Particularly in conflict zones, TTM incidents have multiplied exponentially. For instance, in the Iraq and Afghan wars, local civilian linguists contracted by military forces were, and continue to be, denounced as traitors by insurgent groups and singled out for kidnapping and slaughter in retaliation for their collaboration. They wore face masks during assignments in an effort to hide their identities, often to no avail (Hawksley, 2008).



Interpreter pulling on mask | Photo: James Lee / Red T

¹ The emphasis here is more on interpreters and interpreting, which specifically refers to the spoken language; however, translator and interpreter roles are often fluid, and the media and public at large frequently do not distinguish between them.

² The term translator-traitor mentality (TTM) was conceived by M. Hess in her dissertation: *Translator-Traitor: A critical ethnography of a U.S. terrorism trial* (Hess, 2014, p. 148).

³ For a comprehensive history of the roots and development of translation and interpreting, see the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (Baker, 2001).

In Iraq, interpreters were “dying by the dozens” (“Translators dying,” 2005), and as per the Index of Abandonment of The List Project to Resettle Iraqi Allies (2013), by spring 2013 roughly 1,000 host nation linguists had been killed since the first tanks rolled into Baghdad (The List, 2013). In fact, Kelly and Zetzsche (2012) write that interpreters in Iraq were “ten times more likely to be killed than were U.S. troops” (p. 39). To adduce one powerful example, in 21 days 21 interpreters working for the British military in Basra were kidnapped and shot by insurgents, 17 of them in a “single mass killing” (Sands, 2006). Commenting on this particular case, an Iraqi police officer confirmed the systematic targeting: “This is not a general threat against Iraqi security forces; interpreters are specifically being killed” (as cited in Sands, 2006). And a young linguist corroborated the extent of TTM, noting that he and his colleagues are now openly called traitors and spies (ibid). A defense-contractor chart tallying T/I casualties graphically brings this reality home with entries such as “Beheading,” “Kidnapping,” or “Death caused by multiple injuries sustained during torture” (Miller, 2009).

In Afghanistan, linguists contracted by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Resolute Support Mission were similarly marked; as one conflict zone linguist put it, “I’m a dead man walking” (as cited in Zavis & Baktash, 2013, p. 1). Prior to the withdrawal, aside from braving the usual dangers associated with war such as roadside bombs, ambushes, and sniper fire, T/Is were (and continue to be) high-priority targets for the Taliban. The threats against them were delivered in a variety of ways and often carried out quickly and with utter brutality. Some T/Is were terrorized over the phone; others received ominous “night letters” slipped beneath their doors under the cover of darkness, warning them and their next of kin of their impending fate; and some suffered both (Foxley, 2008).⁴

Post-withdrawal, the situation remains extremely dangerous for T/Is and their families as a “wave of revenge killings and beatings [...] has left dozens dead or injured” (Williams, 2022). Although the Taliban promised the international community they would not target T/Is and other civilians who assisted the coalition and Afghan security forces (“Taliban promise,” 2021), their pledge proved hollow. T/Is still live in constant fear; they are forced into hiding and frequently must change their location to avoid detection during Taliban search missions and house raids (Afghanische Ex-Ortskräfte, 2023). In the words of a former interpreter who is awaiting his visa to the UK: “It has never been more dangerous for those accused of working for the infidel because we know that if we are caught we will all be punished” (Williams, 2022).

Interpreters who work for journalists have not fared better. Overall, the red thread is that foreign journalists in situations of armed conflict tend to leave unharmed, while the local T/I or “fixer” is imprisoned or killed.⁵ George Packer from *The New Yorker* magazine expressed this sentiment in response to an interpreter’s killing (see the Munadi incident write-up below). Packer wrote that “[s]omehow, it’s always the fixer who dies.” He also said that “[i]n Iraq and Afghanistan and a growing number of other places, the foreign correspondent would be a target with or without a fixer, but the fixer is the target because he or she is with the foreign correspondent. Both are considered spies, but one is only an infidel, while the other is something worse — an apostate, a traitor” (Packer, 2009).

Date	Death?	Injury description	Nationality
9/21/2004	Yes	Beheading and death	Local National
9/11/2005	Yes	Kidnapping and death	Local National
9/8/2006	Yes	Kidnapped and later killed by gunshot to the head	Local National
11/4/2006	No	Assault and battery	Local National
11/17/2006	No	Kidnapping	Local National
12/3/2006	Yes	Assassination	Local National
6/20/2007	Yes	Assassination	
7/17/2007	Yes	Kidnapping and death	Local National
4/26/2008	Yes	Death caused by multiple injuries sustained during torture	Local National

Excerpt from defense-contractor L-3’s T/I casualty chart
Source: T. Christian Miller, *ProPublica*, 12-8-2009

⁴ In Afghan culture, night letters or *shabnamah* (Persian) have been a traditional instrument used by religious figures and insurgents to exert social control. In the case of interpreters, the demand was that they stop working for foreign troops, or else.

⁵ Certain terms are problematic for the T/I professional image and may engender distrust due to their inherent associations. For instance, calling an interpreter a “fixer” implies that extra-linguistic tasks, whatever their nature, are part of the role. And the farther interpreters venture beyond the traditional boundaries of the profession, the more exposed they become to being scapegoated when things go awry. While “fixers” will always be hired in conflict zones, in the interest of changing prevailing perceptions, a less loaded label such as “liaison interpreter” is preferable. The latter term emphasizes cultural and linguistic bridging as opposed to outright agency.

Emblematic Civilian T/I Incidents

The challenges in gathering open-source data on a subgroup of a profession that, by default, is largely invisible are manifold.⁶ Prime among them is the nature of the settings and incidents, which for obvious reasons are not conducive to transparency. These include war zones in which civilian T/Is are targeted by insurgents due to their collaboration with foreign militaries,⁷ foreign correspondents, and other foreign entities; the terrorism arena, for instance, detention centers such as Guantánamo Bay; and armed-gang sites of warfare.⁸ Another difficulty arises from casualty statistics released by governments that subsume the T/I category under the catch-all heading of locally employed civilians, as well as governments and private defense contractors that are tight-lipped when approached for T/I figures. Additionally, names often pose a problem, whether because of misspellings, inconsistencies in transliteration, naming conventions, name variants, or the popularity of certain names — all of which create the likelihood of confusion — not to mention the failure to name T/Is at all (Hess & Robbins, 2019). As a result, only partial lists of T/I casualty figures are available.

Following is a sampling of anecdotal evidence of emblematic T/I incidents. The majority of these cases originated in the most recent hot spots, Afghanistan and Iraq. As far as the other countries listed, the absence of a particular country does not imply that there were no incidents/human rights violations.

Afghanistan

POST-WITHDRAWAL

- The battered body of a former T/I was found in the streets of Kandahar in December 2022 (Williams, 2022a).
- Former T/I Wahid was accused by the Taliban of “spying for the infidel” and brutalized with electric shocks. He now lives in hiding with his wife and four children (ibid).

- The brother of Mohammed Mirza, a T/I who had worked for the British embassy in Kabul, was arrested at his home when the Taliban came looking for Mirza. He was detained for 40 days, during which time he was subjected to beatings. After the fall of Kabul, the Taliban have been conducting such house searches for those who assisted the coalition forces. In the case of capture, the T/Is and/or their family members are “killed, arrested, beaten and tortured” (Williams, 2022b).
- The Taliban imposed a death sentence on the brother of a former U.S. army-allied T/I, accusing him of assisting the U.S. and “providing security” to his interpreter brother. The accusations were delivered in multiple letters, one of which highlighted that the sentence cannot be appealed (Keilar & Stracqualursi, 2021).



Afghan burial site | Photo: James Lee / Red T

⁶Accurate figures are hard to come by and will always be incomplete. Reporting of interpreter deaths by the U.S. coalition in Iraq and ISAF forces in Afghanistan varied greatly, and these figures were generally subsumed under private contractor deaths. Moreover, in the United States, for instance, private employers are not mandated to publicly report employee/subcontractor fatalities, although they must notify the U.S. Department of Labor (Nordland, 2012). In 2014, the International Refugee Assistance Project, a U.S.-based non-profit organization, estimated that an Afghan interpreter was killed every 36 hours (Frail, 2016). Also, interpreters who were killed after their assignments ended and/or after troop withdrawal likely remain uncounted.

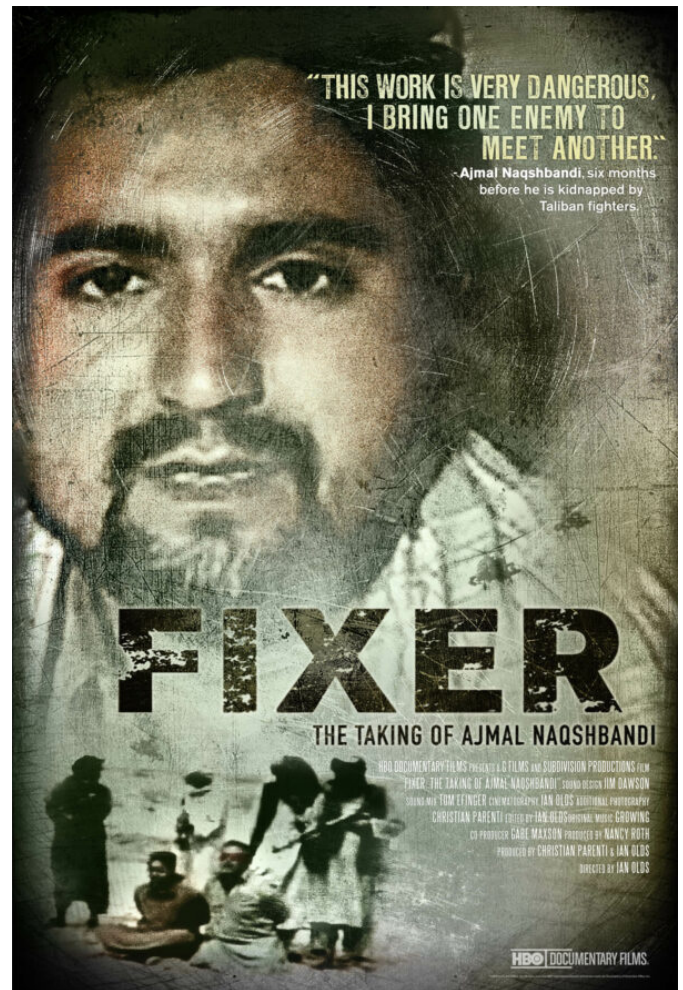
⁷T. Christian Miller, a ProPublica investigative reporter, managed to obtain L-3 documentation on interpreter casualties in Iraq. L-3 is a New York-headquartered defense contractor that has the unfortunate distinction of being “the biggest contractor in terms of war zone deaths” in Afghanistan and Iraq (Nordland, 2012, p. 2). According to Miller (2009), “[a]t least 360 interpreters employed by Titan [acquired by L-3 in 2005] or its successor company were killed between March 2003 and March 2008, and more than 1,200 were injured” (p. 1). Considering that this figure represents the casualties from only one U.S. defense contractor, does not include T/I fatalities from coalition members, and solely covers a five-year period in a war that lasted over eight years — not to mention its extended aftermath — the final count is surely much higher.

⁸Although they are not High Contracting Parties, non-state armed groups are included, as they are considered “one of the dramatis personae in the current humanitarian landscape” (Heffes, 2022).

PRE-WITHDRAWAL

- Afghan interpreter Sohail Pardis received death threats from the Taliban for working for the U.S. army. Soon after, these threats were realized: While driving home, the Taliban shot at his car, which forced him to stop. He subsequently was dragged from the vehicle and beheaded (Sidhu, Coren, Regan & Bina, 2021).
- The nine-year-old nephew of a T/I was kidnapped, detained for two weeks, and then shot in the head by the Taliban in retaliation for his uncle’s collaboration with the British forces (Williams & Brown, 2015).
- After waiting for over four years for a visa, Sakhidad Afghan, a local Afghan interpreter, was ultimately found, kidnapped, tortured, and killed in retribution for assisting the U.S. military (Goodman, 2014).
- A T/I who assisted the German military received threatening phone calls from the Taliban and was subsequently found strangled in Kunduz (Käppner, 2013).
- The body parts of T/Is were shipped to a U.S. army base as a chilling warning to other Afghan T/Is of the horrors that awaited them (Bhatti, 2013).
- Interpreter Sayed Shah Sharifi succeeded in obtaining a life-saving visa and resettled to Canada. Determined to revenge his collaboration with the Canadian forces, the Taliban focused on his family. They set up a roadside bomb that killed his sister, sister-in-law, niece, and two nephews (whose ages ranged from eight months to four years) and injured two others (Ghafour, 2013).
- In an effort to disrupt NATO’s counter-insurgency strategy, the Taliban kidnapped six U.S. military-affiliated T/Is while they were out shopping for fruit and brought them to one of the insurgents’ “safe” houses. The next day, all six were found decapitated at the outskirts of Kandahar, with their tongues cut out and their heads placed on their chests. There was a note pinned to one man’s body that read: “The same fate awaits all those who work for infidels” (Amoore, 2010).
- A local Afghan interpreter and two Spanish police officers were killed by an Afghan national police member during a training session at a Spanish military base in northwestern Afghanistan (“2 Spanish trainers,” 2010).

- *The New York Times* journalist Stephen Farrell was captured by the Taliban but saved by the British. His interpreter, Sultan Munadi, was killed during the raid (Schmitt, 2009).
- In 2007, Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo, his interpreter Ajmal Naqshbandi, and their driver were captured in Afghanistan. The driver was decapitated soon thereafter. The journalist was rescued in a controversial deal struck between the Afghan and Italian governments that swapped him for imprisoned Taliban fighters. The interpreter was not included in that exchange and was ultimately beheaded by the kidnappers (Khan, 2007).



Poster for the documentary *Fixer, The Taking of Ajmal Naqshbandi*

Iraq

- Khaled and his father served as interpreters for the U.S. army. One evening, there was a knock at the family's home. The father opened the door and was shot 13 times in front of Khaled as retribution for their having worked with foreign troops. Khaled subsequently fled Iraq and made his way to Australia by boat. In 2012, he was given safe haven and a bridging visa. After a minor run-in with the police, he was indefinitely detained at Villawood detention center, where he was diagnosed with "a complex history of psychological trauma and likely PTSD." He remained locked up for about two years under dismal conditions that drove him to sign a repatriation form, which contained a clause stating that he understood he might be at risk of harm in returning to Iraq (Cannane & Anderson, 2015).
- A father and son were both employed as T/Is by the British forces in Basra. The father was kidnapped, tortured, and killed. The son was sent a tape of his father's murder and was himself threatened; he subsequently fled to Syria (Haynes, 2008).
- Jill Carroll, a *Christian Science Monitor* journalist, was abducted in Baghdad in 2006 together with her local interpreter Allan Enwiyah. After nearly three months, Carroll was released physically unharmed, while the T/I was found dead with two bullets to his head (LaFranchi, 2006).
- Two Romanian journalists from *Romania Libera* and one from *Prima TV* and their interpreter, Mohamed Munaf, were taken hostage by the *Muadh ibn Jabal Brigade* in Baghdad. The kidnappers threatened to assassinate their captives if Romania did not pull out its 800 troops. The Romanian government refused the demand but negotiators ultimately managed to secure their release (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2005).

Various countries

- **Congo:** Two UN officials, their interpreter, Betu Tshintela, and three Congolese drivers were kidnapped and killed in the Kasai region. They were investigating mass graves believed to exist after an armed struggle between government forces and a militia group (Reuters, 2017; "DR Congo issues death sentences," 2022).
- **Ethiopia:** In the conflict-ridden Tigray region, two interpreters who assisted journalists from *Agence France-Presse* and the British *Financial Times* were detained in 2021. Soldiers barged into the home of Fitsum Berhane, arrested him at gunpoint, and accused him of being a traitor for working with foreign media, supporting the Tigray People's Liberation Front, and possessing a satellite phone. Alula Akalu was arrested at a restaurant. Officials never gave reasons for these arrests and released both interpreters a few days later ("Ethiopia releases," 2021).
- **Somalia:** Yusuf Sheikh Hussein Ibrahim, a Somali T/I who worked for the Turkish embassy in Mogadishu, was fatally shot by an unidentified gunman. The shooter escaped and no group claimed responsibility (Your Green Bridge, 2012).
- **Sudan:** A Sudanese interpreter who assisted the African Union (AU) forces in Darfur was killed in an AU police station overrun by rioters protesting a UN official's visit to the Kalma camp for displaced Sudanese (McDoom, 2006).
- **Syria:** Two T/Is, one a military linguist and the other an interpreter working for a defense contractor, were killed in an Islamic State suicide bombing in a restaurant in northern Syria (Opperl Jr. & Schmitt, 2019).
- **Turkey:** Two British journalists from *Vice News* and their Iraqi interpreter, Mohammed Ismael Rasool, went to southern Turkey to cover a story on the clashes between pro-Kurdish youth and Turkish security forces. All three were arrested on August 27, 2015, and charged with supporting a terrorist organization. A week later, the two British nationals were released and returned to the United Kingdom. Rasool, on the other hand, was held in a maximum-security prison until, thanks to international pressure, he was freed on bail after 131 days of imprisonment. Since his release on January 5, 2016, there have been no updates (Uras, 2015; Jackson, 2016).

- **USA:** Ahmed Al Halabi worked as a translator at the Guantánamo detention camp. Called an Al-Qaeda sympathizer and considered a threat to U.S. national security, he was charged with a total of 30 counts in 2003 and potentially faced the death penalty. But all these charges fizzled down to a guilty plea of taking pictures of guard towers as souvenirs and improperly transporting classified information (he took his assignment sheet to his living quarters without placing it in a special folder). The witch-hunt nature of this prosecution went so far as to include a false accusation of sharing pastries with inmates (Hess, 2021).



Senior Airman Ahmad Al Halabi on his way to court at Travis Air Force Base, California | Photo: Marcio J. Sanchez / Associated Press

- **Venezuela:** A journalist from *Al Jazeera* visited Caracas to cover the Venezuelan presidential election in mid-2013. With the assistance of a local interpreter, he was able to conduct an interview with Juancho Montoya, the leader of the Tupamaro, one of the most feared urban guerilla groups in Venezuela at the time. When the article was published, Montoya was furious with his portrayal and the group texted dozens of death threats to the interpreter. The latter went into hiding for several weeks while the journalist made some amendments to the article to defuse the situation. Montoya was murdered a few months later (Arsenault, 2013; M. Hess, personal communication, December 13, 2016).

Acknowledgment of Specialized Harm

Red T and the Conflict Zone Interpreter Group of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) have been advocating since 2010 for the acknowledgment of specialized harm perpetrated on translators and interpreters operating in conflict situations.⁹ At first, the uptake of the issue by governments and intergovernmental bodies was slow; however, this has changed dramatically and the issue has increasingly gained visibility and recognition. For instance, in its Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing Asylum Seekers from Afghanistan, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has made a case for special protection of those working for international military forces, specifically citing interpreters on the list of particularly endangered persons (UNHCR, 2016; UNHCR, 2018). The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) likewise has acknowledged that T/Is experience specialized harm in that “those associated with the presence of [...] foreign troops, such as interpreters or guards, are according to several experts interviewed on this topic, top priorities to be targeted” (EASO, 2017, p. 35). In their 2019 risk analysis, the EASO writes:

The acts to which individuals under this profile could be exposed are of such severe nature that they would amount to persecution (e.g. killing).

Not all individuals under this profile would face the level of risk required to establish well-founded fear of persecution. Interpreters and security guards are regarded as a top priority target and in general, well-founded fear of persecution would be substantiated. For others under this profile, the individual assessment of whether or not there is a reasonable degree of likelihood for the applicant to face persecution should take into account risk-impacting circumstances, such as: specific role and visibility of the applicant, being on the payroll of foreign troops, origin from a contested area or areas with insurgent presence, etc.

Family members of some individuals under this profile could also be at risk of treatment that could amount to persecution. (EASO, 2019, p. 51)

⁹ Our cause was subsequently joined by the International Federation of Translators (FIT; umbrella organization of T/I associations worldwide), International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI), Critical Link International (CLI; international voice of public service interpreters), World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), Conférence Internationale Permanente d'Instituts Universitaires de Traducteurs et Interprètes (CIUTI), International Association of Translation and Intercultural Studies (IATIS), Conseil Européen des Associations de Traducteurs Littéraires (CEATL), European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (EFSLI), European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association (EULITA), European Network for Public Service Interpreting and Translation (ENPSIT), and others, as well as human rights partners, among them Amnesty International, the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP), and PEN International.

The majority of states that were coalition members in Operation Iraqi Freedom in the Iraq war and the International Security Assistance Force/Resolute Support Mission in the Afghan war have acknowledged this specialized harm through their resettlement efforts — whether by adjudicating T/I visa requests on a case-by-case basis or through special programs, among them the American Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for Iraqi and Afghan Translators/Interpreters¹⁰; the United Kingdom's Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), The Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), and the Afghanistan Locally Employed Staff Ex-Gratia Scheme; Germany's Federal Admission Program for Afghans at risk; Australia's Afghan Locally Engaged Employee Program; Canada's two Special Immigration Measures (SIMS) programs for Afghans as well as affiliated pathway programs; New Zealand's policy of resettlement of all their T/Is and their immediate families; Norway's special admittance procedures for interpreters and their subsequent across-the-board relocation; and many more.

In addition to special programs and individual relocations, various countries launched extraordinary evacuation operations. To cite two: Denmark conducted a secret airlift of 200 Iraqi interpreters and family members, and Italy evacuated all its linguists prior to the final Kabul exit.

The acknowledgement of specialized harm was likewise evident in statements made by heads of state, ministers, and parliamentarians as well as the NATO Secretary General. For instance, during his presidential campaign, Emmanuel Macron compared the treatment of local Afghan T/Is who assisted the French army to that of the Harkis who served alongside the French in the Algerian war. He admitted that the Harkis were “victims of the betrayal of the French state, abandoned although they fought in our ranks. We made a comparable mistake with our Afghan interpreters: it was a betrayal” (Red T et al., 2017). And he promised, once elected president, to resettle them out of harm's way. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, in his personal response to Red T, stated that “I have encouraged Allies and partner countries to accept local employees, including interpreters, who are considered at specific risk due to their NATO employment” (M. Hess, personal communication, June 26, 2021). And in a parliamentary exchange, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, the UK Minister of State for the Middle East, North Africa, South

Asia and United Nations at the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, stated that “[w]e recognise the vital role that interpreters and translators play in conflicts and the particular threats faced by this group” (House of Lords, 9 February 2023, HL5126).

The ongoing proactiveness of UN member states that have been seeking to obtain special protection for T/Is is further testimony to the specialized harm perpetrated on this group. Foremost among them is the Permanent Mission of Spain to the United Nations, which has been driving the issue at various meetings and side events at UN headquarters in New York City. Together with the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Fiji and the UN Department of Safety and Security, the Spanish mission also cohosted a #ProtectLinguists panel discussion to raise awareness among member states. Similarly, the Permanent Mission of Belarus organized a roundtable to advocate for the protection of linguists, and the Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the UN, which heads the Group of Friends for the Protection of Civilians (GoF PoC), invited Red T to address and familiarize the GoF PoC on this topic. The European Parliament likewise took up the cause and held a cross-party hearing focusing on the protection of T/Is in conflict settings. In fact, Member of Parliament Carlos Coelho from Portugal stated: “Our competence in this context is much limited. But as Members of this house, we will continue to raise awareness, influence our own Member States and — surely — the other European institutions. We need to bring the attention of the world to this issue. [...] It is time Europe delivers” (Words at War, 2018). Similarly, national parliaments, such as the House of Lords, have organized events to shine a light on the issue and call for special protection.¹¹

¹⁰ <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/siv-iraqi-afghan-translators-interpreters.html>

¹¹ In addition to Red T, the major international and national translator/interpreter associations, and academic institutions, there are a number of human rights organizations — among them Amnesty International, PEN International, and the International Refugee Assistance Project — that have participated in some of the above-mentioned intergovernmental events in support of T/I protection.

Conclusion

As it stands now, T/I protection is virtually absent in the current international legal regime. Linguists are not specifically mentioned in legal doctrine and international practice except in cases where others have a right to their services. Or, in limited instances, they are subsumed as associated personnel of other expressly protected groups, such as journalists, a subsuming that has zero protection effect. Based on a study by international humanitarian law expert Giulio Bartolini, the legal protection for interpreters can only be inferred (Bartolini, 2009). But as the ample and gruesome evidence above has shown, inferential rights are not sufficient, especially since linguists affiliated with troops, humanitarian organizations, and the media often operate on the frontlines and in other violent settings.

Another factor compounding this lack of protection are the changes in the traditional model of warfare. Among these changes are asymmetrical warfare with belligerents who do not comply with international humanitarian law; a growing tendency to outsource wars to private defense contractors whose profit motives supersede interpreter welfare; and technological advances that allow insurgents to easily target linguists.

All combined, it is evident that mechanisms are required to augment T/I protection as civilians. These could include the issuance of legal instruments, such as a UN Security Council Resolution to Protect Civilian Translators/Interpreters in Conflict Situations, as well as the insertion of protective language in international texts. Specifically, these remedies would recognize that linguists in armed conflict situations face the ongoing risk of threats and violence, call on states to publicly condemn attacks targeting linguists, and urge them to ensure accountability by investigating and prosecuting such attacks. This explicit acknowledgment of specialized harm would usher in a paradigm shift in the perception of the civilian T/I role, promote a culture of safety, and ultimately save lives. ■



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