PT PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM

Research Article

Studying Terror Through My I's:
Autoethnographic Insider/Outsider Reflections of an Arab-Muslim Researcher

Ahmed Ajil*

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The phenomena referred to as terrorism and political violence have become a major object of academic interest over the past two decades. While the lack of first-hand data collection has been criticised, a growing number of researchers are conducting field research and interviews with individuals involved in these phenomena. Among them, there are scholars with ethnic, cultural or religious subjectivities that place them sometimes as insiders and other times as outsiders with respect to their research subjects. The way this insider/outsider-positionality impacts the research is explored in this paper through my experience as a scholar of politico-ideological violence which is analysed using the tool of autoethnography. The findings point to the difficulties related to navigating a securitised identity in a securitised research field and to the fact that while the Arab-Muslim identity can often facilitate access to the field, on other times it can become a major obstacle. It is argued that scholarship on terrorism and political violence may benefit from increased efforts to promote reflexivity among researchers.

Keywords: Positionality, terrorism, autoethnography, reflexivity, Iraq, Lebanon

* *Corresponding authors: Ahmed Ajil, University of Switzerland, email: ahmed.ajil@unil.ch*

Introduction: Studying Terrorism “From Below”

Empirical research into terrorism and political violence has exploded over the past two decades. Nevertheless, the field continues to be criticised for a lack of first-hand empirical data collection, with most research being based on secondary data and open sources.[1] Some explanatory factors include the difficulty of gaining field access, a reticence to provide interviewees with a potential platform to publicise their ideas or whitewash their image, apprehensions that interviewing as a social practice may be seen as a form of complicity or connivance, fear of legal consequences of getting involved with offenders, doubts regarding the veracity of interviewees’ accounts, and a general aversion to fieldwork.[2] As a result of this, some argue that researchers on political-ideological violence have remained “removed from the violent field”[3] and preferred working with second- and third-hand data while benefitting from the relative comfort of the ivory tower.[4] This is unfortunate for arguably, some of the best research on political violence “is undertaken by researchers, who, on some level, interact with the people being researched”[5] and who understand that the phenomenon is “politically, socially and morally sensitive.”[6]

This situation is gradually improving. In fact, there is a growing presence of researchers in the field, and, as a result, a nascent body of scholarship is engaging with the methodological challenges of conducting field-based qualitative inquiry into various forms of politico-ideological violence. Much has yet to be done in this respect, however, and this paper aims to make a contribution in this direction. Based on doctoral research conducted between 2018 and 2020 involving over 100 interviews with individuals who had joined terrorist groups, non-violent activists and practitioners, and ethnographic immersion in relevant contexts in Lebanon, Switzerland and Canada,[7] I will be discussing methodological issues related to qualitative inquiries when it comes to terrorism research.

The complex web of interactions between the researcher, the object of research and the researched can be referred to as *positionality.*[8] I believe that the researcher’s positionality in such a sensitive and highly politicised field must be critically engaged to produce knowledge that not only has value in terms of knowledge production but also considers the importance of scientific integrity.

In the present analysis, I will therefore focus particularly on my positionality as an Arab-Muslim researcher and discuss critically how I have both positively and negatively shaped and been shaped by my research on various forms of terrorism and political violence in relation to the Arab World. For this, I will be using the method of autoethnography. Through an ongoing, iterative and thorough autoethnographic explorative process, I am putting my personal and cultural attributes, experiences and perspectives at the service of this research, analytically, methodologically and ethically, by critically appraising how the research affects me emotionally and intellectually and how it may in itself be revealing of certain aspects of the phenomenon under study.

Engaging with One's Positionality in Research on Political Violence and Terrorism

It has been lamented that among those who conduct grounded research into political violence and terrorism, especially through interviews, only a few document the details of their methodology and reflect upon them.[9] With the growing number of researchers on the ground who seek direct contact with active or former terrorist sympathisers or offenders, insights have started to emerge regarding the methodological challenges of conducting field-based research on politico-ideological violence. They usually relate to the difficulty of gaining access to research subjects, the challenges of situating the narrative of the interviewee, and concerns related to safety and research ethics.[10] More critical works, especially with the late arrival of ethnographers in the field, has brought about a more committed discussion of positionality and reflexivity, i.e., an ongoing analysis of the ways in which the research process, subjects and findings are affected by the researcher.[11] Taking reflexivity seriously can contribute to producing knowledge not only on "the workings of our social world but also […] on *how* this knowledge is produced."[12]

The field of terrorism research (like academia more generally) has focused on jihadist forms of terrorism and been criticised for its Western-centrism,[13] with the majority of works being produced in North-American and European universities by White and predominantly male scholars. The challenges pertaining to research methods when it comes to terrorism and political violence have therefore long focused on challenges specific to cultural "outsiders", such as the difficulty of access, the mistrust towards foreigners, attempts at manipulation, and the sort of juvenile exaltation related to meeting the dangerous Other.[14] Such works often fall prey to an orientalist and securitising lens, where the engagement with the research subjects remains shallow and distant, which makes it difficult to provide truly emancipatory reflections that may help us envisage the phenomenon and the relevant research methods in a different light.

Meanwhile, thanks to the growing diversity among academic researchers, there is a body of scholarship produced by scholars who share certain cultural attributes with the individuals under study. In relation to jihadist forms of terrorism, this often means sharing religious (e.g., Islamic), sectarian (e.g., Sunni, Shia), ethnic (e.g., Arab, Kurdish, Afghan) or nationality characteristics (e.g., Nigerian, Lebanese), depending on the research context and the specific phenomenon under study. As a result of this, there has been a renewed impetus to the *insider/outsider* debate in the social sciences and specifically in relation to the field of terrorism and political violence. Insiders are researchers who in one way or another belong to a particular ethnic or religious community or who match the gender, socio-economic status or political orientation of the individuals they are interested in studying. Oriola and Haggerty, for instance, discuss the challenges of doing research as "academic homecomers", i.e. individuals who travel to the Global North to study and return home to conduct research.[15] Oriola, as a Yoruba man who was pursuing his PhD in Canada and came back to Nigeria to study violent militancy, experienced the ambivalence and malleability of the insider/outsider status first hand and noted cogently:

> *While I resented being perceived as an 'Other' by my own people, to my chagrin I also realized that I was no longer fully Nigerian in the same way that the Agge people were. My time away had apparently made me less warm and somewhat aloof in my interpersonal relations. Rather than being regarded as yet another citizen, I was often treated as a*

> *stranger needing protection and guidance, something that was both appreciated and unsettling.*[16]

In a fascinating study, Adebayo and Njoku also discuss how their positionality has been redefined during the research process, as Nigerians working in the Nigerian context.[17] Miled presents a compellingly self-critical account of her experience conducting research with Muslim youth in Canada in a highly politicised context marked by the War on Terror and Islamophobia, noting that

> *as a Muslim, my research cannot be disconnected from the embodied experiences of being the Muslim in the West. From these experiences, my research emerges; the academic and the personal eventually become intertwined in shaping my research. I admit that it is hard to map the contours of a research done by a Muslim researcher researching Muslim youth; the boundaries of researcher/researched and the insider/outsider get blurry, fluid and changing.*[18]

Badurdeen similarly observed that during her research on al-Shabaab in Kenya, her positionality and identity as a Muslim woman, arguably providing her with an insider status, has both facilitated and hampered the research process.[19] Necef, in analysing his interviews of an incarcerated jihadist in the Netherlands, recognised that it is not only his presumed Muslim identity but also his own left-wing extremist past that have shaped his positionality and influenced the way he engaged with the interviewee.[20]

The insider status does not per se facilitate research, and the nuanced debate emerging on such questions is a highly fruitful one. There has been some scholarly debate regarding the benefits of being an 'insider' instead being an 'outsider' when it comes to the study of political violence.[21] In terms of analysis of the findings, the insider status can make it difficult to see certain themes that are so commonplace to a particular culture, identity or type of existence.[22] In that case, outsider status can be beneficial because the fresh view can be helpful in recognising and naming dominant themes that are simply too normalised to insiders. I realised this myself, when I only found later in the analysis of the data that Anti-Americanism and the Iraq War were such dominant themes for individuals who mobilised for causes and conflicts in the Arab World. They are so commonplace in discussions between Arabs that it can be difficult to identify their role for grievances and politico-ideological mobilisations.

Papadopoulos and Lees criticise this dichotomic conceptualisation of a researcher's identity for being simplistic and reductionist, while at the same time arguing for a process of ethnic matching between the researcher and the researched.[23] Joosse, Bucerius and Thompson agree in part, but also put forward the potential benefits of being a 'trusted outsider' and argue for a combination of insiders and outsiders in immersive fieldwork and interviewing.[24] The insider-outsider debate is of course reminiscent of academia's traditionally problematic engagement with the Other and there is a risk that interviewees' identities are instrumentalised (via *tokenisation*) by research directors who themselves have no 'insider status' but end up translating the research findings into their own words.

Ahmed suggests going beyond the insider-outsider dichotomy by reflecting on this question using different 'I's': in her case, the 'non-Islamic appearance I', the 'Muslim I', the 'British I', etc. These multiple subjectivities allow for a more nuanced engagement with the insider-outsider debate. Following, I am engaging critically with the multiple identities and subjectivities that have influenced my research in recent years, especially during my doctoral research.

Studying the Self: Autoethnography

In my doctoral research, I conducted a mainly interview-based study on politico-ideological mobilisation and violence for causes and conflicts in the Arab World. I interviewed a total of 109 individuals, including former and active terrorist offenders, political activists, and practitioners including social workers, police officers and religious figures. Interviews took place in three countries, namely Lebanon, Switzerland and Canada. For an ongoing and iterative analysis of my positionality and reflexivity, I used autoethnography.[25]

Autoethnography denotes, in essence, the study and documentation of self. Autoethnographers study their own life stories to reveal sociological phenomena through 'privileged' knowledge that comes by lived experiences.[26] Self as subject offers advantages unavailable through other methodologies. Narrative theories of identity emphasize that we understand our lives through constructed narratives of a cohesive self.[27] Typical methodologies capture only pieces of individual life narratives. In autoethnography, the full scope of perceived experience is accessible, including unflattering or taboo aspects typically hidden or euphemised in others' responses.[28] Adding autoethnography as an instrument allows for a triangulation of data collection, a thorough engagement with the researcher's subjectivity and therefore a more holistic engagement with the object under study. In addition to fieldnotes, I therefore engaged in a continuous process of autoethnographic writing. The purpose of these writings has been to document the reflective and autoethnographic confrontation with the research project and object, the methodological difficulties and the personal challenges. Autoethnographic and reflective writing allows the reader to contextualise the findings presented by the researcher. Importantly, autoethnographic analysis in relation to the research method and the research object provides research findings in their own right, which are of particular interest to other social scientists.

The autoethnographic data consists of notes that I took during activities immediately related to the research, such as fieldwork, transcription and analysis, in the form of fieldnotes and memos. On MAXQDA[29], the parts of interview transcripts that were deemed pertinent methodologically were coded using the label 'method' – the coded segments were added to the autoethnographic material. Beyond this material that is immediately related to my doctoral research, I also wrote reports whenever I communicated orally on my research, for instance during conferences, workshops and lectures. I also included reactions to my written communication about the research, in the form of anonymous peer reviews for instance, replies by editors to submitted opinion pieces, as well as comments on published opinions. Finally, my doctoral research was also a personal journey. I therefore included ongoing reflections and spontaneous thoughts about the research during unrelated activities, which I took care to always note down in my

personal digital notebook. I will also draw on a collaborative autoethnography conducted during my doctoral research in which I engaged thoroughly with methodological aspects of my work, and for which I compiled a considerable body of material including personal reflections and diary entries.[30]

The autoethnographic writing process has also proved a useful way of handling the psychological and emotional repercussions of conducting fieldwork on such a highly sensitive phenomenon. I always found it relieving to write, especially after finding myself in difficult and stressful situations. It helped me process strong emotions such as sadness and anger and make sense of them, also in relation to the phenomenon at hand. For me personally, autoethnography has since become a form of self-therapy.

Findings

After presenting the intricacies of handling an Arab-Muslim identity in the context of terrorism research, I will engage with the multiple subjectivities that have shaped and impacted my research process.

'As an Arab, I would be afraid': Navigating a Securitised Identity

During the Q&A session following a presentation of my latest findings at an international conference, a heavy atmosphere hung over the room. Several researchers in the audience, some of which I knew had ties to governmental research centres, pointed out the risky and potentially illegal nature of my research methods. Someone I later got to know more closely spoke up and said "As an Arab-American, I would be very afraid if I was in your shoes".[31]

I was slightly surprised that this was such a dominant concern, although one has to take into account that there are significant barriers to conducting fieldwork in North American academia, which can lead to a certain sensitivity in this respect. The question, however, was one that accompanied me throughout the research. Many people asked me how I was making sure to protect myself both during my fieldwork but also against potential legal consequences. On the one hand, these amplified concerns reveal stereotypical ideas regarding the phenomenon, and it would be interesting to analyse them in depth in a separate research endeavour. On the other hand, of course, they are certainly warranted.

Early on, I exchanged with researchers who were also doing fieldwork in Lebanon, as well as with institutional actors regarding my research project. I got in touch with the Swiss embassy in Lebanon and its representative for questions related to P/CVE was very helpful in connecting me with NGOs and researchers on the ground. I met with a fellow researcher who informed me about various measures he had taken in order to ensure his safety on the ground, including special insurance and daily check-ins. I did not resort to any particular measures other than informing the Swiss embassy, my university and my supervisor, as well as my family and my fiancée regarding my plans in terms of fieldwork in Lebanon. I also gave them the contact of the NGO I was working with during my fieldwork. Moreover, I sent a formal request to the General Security Directorate to enter Roumieh prison and provided them with several identification

documents, and an official letter from my university.

What kept me up at night, however, was the risk of exposing myself to potential legal entanglements. I was in contact with individuals who had been convicted for terrorism-related offences and corresponded to the (stereo)typical "risk" profile of a potential terrorist. Also, my political views which I share publicly are not necessarily radical, but can be state-critical and provocative.

To mitigate these risks as much as possible, I tried to preserve an unproblematic profile and maintain links with various institutional agents. Through my work in the realm of the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism, I was regularly in touch with representatives from the police and the intelligence services. Regarding my social media activity, I changed the name of my profile and remained careful regarding the content I posted. When communicating with individuals whom I strongly suspected were being monitored, I tried to remain as clear and straightforward as possible, knowing that in criminal trials, messages via Facebook and WhatsApp were used to incriminate individuals. Expressions such as "brother" or involving "God" have been treated as part of a code language used by terrorists in criminal trials.[32] Importantly, I decided against using crypted communication channels to avoid conveying the impression of clandestinity. However, some respondents preferred encrypted applications like Signal or Telegram, which I switched to in those cases.

In general, however, I felt safer in Switzerland than I did in Lebanon, where my worries were reinforced by statements made by individuals I met. For example, social worker Sara told me that:

> *any researcher should be afraid in a place like this. I don't have anyone protecting me if someone decides to hide drugs in my car. Once, they asked me whether I considered Hezbollah a terrorist organisation. Of course, the goal was to intimidate or incriminate me. I told them that I study Sunni groups only.*[33]

The risks of being associated with the terrorist phenomenon were exacerbated through my Arab-Muslim identity. This was true in general, but became particularly tangible in the Lebanese context, where my physical appearance seemed to correspond to a particular risk profile and prompted actions by security actors which became almost systematic. On several occasions, I was stopped when driving to Tripoli in Northern Lebanon. Several informants later told me that a full beard was clearly a marker that attracts security services' attention. I also soon noticed that army and police officers seemed to be systematically shaved and wear their hair very short. This seemed to create a visible barrier in terms of physical appearance between "legitimate" individuals and "illegitimate" or "suspicious" ones.

One situation was very revelatory in this respect. When trying to enter the campus of a university to conduct interviews with student activists, I was visibly spotted by the security guard at the entrance from far away and denied entry before even I was asked about a potential permit. I then called my friend who came down to talk to the security guards and contacted the head of his department over the phone. While he was on the phone, several individuals who looked

"Western", meaning white, blond and blue-eyed, were simply smiled at by the guards and waved through. My friend looked annoyed and later told me that this discriminatory practice was very common and so revelatory of a lasting imperialist legacy and inferiority complex, and that no American or European-looking individual would have been stopped the way I was. This phenomenon was not entirely new to me, but I was still struck by its flagrancy and blatancy in an Arab country and in that particular situation.

Hence my engagement in research on terrorism was doubly challenging. Not only was I entering a highly securitised field, which, regardless of one's identity, inevitably prompts questions related to safety and security. I was also entering this field with a securitised identity, that of an Arab-Muslim male which in many ways corresponds to the Western-centrist archetypical risk profile of a potential extremist or terrorist. Navigating this securitised identity has meant a constant vigilance and alertness to the potential legal repercussions of my presence in the field, where the boundaries between legitimacy and illegitimacy can quickly become blurred. It also required careful handling of the insider/outsider-positionality, for being too much of an insider could easily be perceived as form of complicity.

'You're Arab, you understand': Navigating Multiple I's

Questions related to my positionality as insider and/or outsider, respectively, were present throughout my entire research process. I was confronted early on with the insider-outsider question, even before I had really started my research. When I presented my research proposal, I was surprised by some of the feedback which insisted on my highlighting my cultural background and linguistic competencies to increase my chances of obtaining funding. The recurring and insisting nature of the comments had a somewhat alienating effect on me, for I felt – a little naively – that they were not focusing on my competencies as a researcher nor the content of my proposal. Back then I was thus already put forward as somehow being the 'right man for the job' based on my ethnic and cultural characteristics. I think that these assumptions turned out to be justified, yet only in part. Resembling the researched in some important aspects has been extremely useful most of the time. Sometimes, however, certain "insider" characteristics have rather complicated my work.

Being "ethnically Arab" has been helpful not only for methodological reasons, i.e., being able to conduct interviews with individuals in (sometimes) the only language they spoke, but also simply to be accepted as "one of us" who is allowed to speak "for us" to a certain degree. This resonates with arguments I put forward elsewhere.[34] For instance, Sara, a social worker who acted as a generous gatekeeper during my stay in Lebanon, said to me very clearly: "You are Arab, you understand these things better. What I can't take is when a foreigner is talking about us". Similarly, my "Muslim I" – defined mainly by my first name, *Ahmed* being primarily an Islamic name derived from the name of the prophet *Mohammed* – has been useful in the sense that I am more readily assumed to understand the difficulties of navigating Muslimness and expected to be less judgmental.

Respondents that I approached often expressed this very frankly. For instance, Ramon, an individual in Switzerland convicted for terrorism-related offences, called me, after I sent him a

letter through his lawyer, stating clearly that my Arab-Muslim identity was a reason why he felt he could share his experiences with me, something he had repeatedly declined to do with other researchers and journalists: "You know, you're Arab, an Iraqi, you understand these things. You understand what I went through and what they are doing". In another situation, after observing the criminal trial of a Swiss-based individual, I approached him and introduced myself as a researcher with my name. He was visibly stressed after the trial proceedings, but the relief on his face was palpable when he asked "You're a Muslim? Finally". He didn't explain what he meant by "finally" but I felt like it referred to his feeling that finally somebody was there who could look at what was happening through a more nuanced lens.

With Justin in Lebanon, who considers himself a "right-wing Christian radical", the opposite was the case. Early in the interview he made it very explicit that, in his eyes, I was primarily a Muslim: "Excuse me, I know you're Muslim, but my father hates Muslims. That's why my parents were a bit worried about me meeting you". He himself, however, seemed to like me a lot and made efforts to meet up again after the interview. Although he was very open about his concerns and his antipathy towards Syrian and Palestinian Muslims, my Muslimness can be expected to have been a barrier. Before we started the meal, he made the sign of the cross, but in a very rushed manner, as if he assumed it could offend me. And at the end of the interview, when we were walking to our cars, he pointed to the cross hanging from his rear-view mirror, saying "See, that's the car of a Christian radical", laughing somewhat nervously, which I interpreted as a form of discomfort.

In Switzerland and Canada, my "Arab I" often overlapped with my "Migrant I", for, in the eyes of my interviewees who were also immigrants, themselves Arab or sympathetic to the Arab World, or invested in anti-racist and anti-imperialist causes, I was readily presumed to be an insider or an ally. The migrant identity facilitated contact with most interviewees in Canada and Switzerland. Daniel, a leftist internationalist who joined Kurdish groups fighting in Syria, pointed to our common experience as second-generation immigrants:

> *It's really good to talk. You know, that's one of the problems also. It's like the thing with being a secondo [second-generation immigrant in Switzerland]. These are experiences that very few people have been through. You can't share them with anyone.*

This phenomenon has accompanied me throughout my life, leading me to mingle and connect more easily with individuals of migrant backgrounds or who know the feeling of being culturally or ethnically different. The Iranian philosopher Shayegan coined the term *cultural schizophrenia*, arguing that

> *this issue can only be addressed and analyzed by those who have been raised in cultures like what we have lived in. While it's about death, nobody can die on behalf of others. Similarly, those who have lived outside our civilization cannot wholeheartedly experience the presence of such a gap in their conscious. In other words, this duality is our unique and non-transferable fate.*[35]

I believe it is mainly my own experience (assumed because of my physical appearance and my name) of cultural schizophrenia, this inherent duality of being or growing up in a place one is not “really from”, that made me an “insider” for many interviewees outside the Arab world.
In the case of individuals who are originally Arab but who do not speak the language very well, I noted something else. While talking to Khaled, an Arab-Canadian, who is very invested in causes related to the Arab World, but does not speak Arabic very well, I realised a power imbalance in our interaction, where I felt that I was suddenly construed as “more legitimately” Arab. This was sometimes also the case with individuals from the Maghreb region, against whom, unfortunately, there are many stereotypes in the Arab Mashreq concerning their lack of “Arabness”, mostly due to their specific local dialects. From these collective stereotypes, some repercussions could be felt on the individual level. The ensuing position of inferiority of my interviewee could be clearly felt and was not unproblematic, for it created a sort of discomfort and insecurity that usually hampers authenticity and openness. To counterbalance this phenomenon in those cases, I usually switched to the language that the interviewee seemed more comfortable with.

With other interviewees, especially older ones, I was placed into a position of inferiority. This was the case in my interviews with religious men or older Arab researchers. With all of them, I felt like I was being lectured and treated like a son of theirs. This was a position that sometimes felt inadequate because I did not feel taken as seriously as I would have liked to be, but it was a comfortable position from my perspective as a researcher. It allowed me to lean back and sit comfortably in the position of the naïve and eager student and ask questions to which I received long and elaborate answers. It is also a position I am very familiar with as a young Arab man in general, because Arab culture posits respect for elders as a highly valuable attribute.

Being or appearing Arab can be problematic when conducting research, at least partly, on Arabs. During a trial observation at the Federal criminal court in Switzerland listening to the testimony of a Kurdish-Iraqi man accused of supporting the Islamic State group, I realised something important. At one point he stated:

> *I know some things about the legal system, and I don’t trust the federal police. I know that Switzerland sent a message to the Lebanese authorities accusing my wife there of planning a terrorist attack. She spent three months in jail because of that. The authorities don’t care what happens to those people, whether they are arrested or killed. They are comfortably sitting in their offices. So, if it was just you, the judge, and me, I could give you the names. We could even call them now. But like this, with everyone present in this room, I will not risk their lives. I don’t know if there are spies here.*

He repeated this concern, that spies might be present, several times during the trial. It was only after the third time that he said it that it struck me that I, the only one in the room that resembled an Arab or Iraqi, could in fact be perceived as a spy. Especially since I had no obligation to introduce myself. I was simply sitting there, very attentively, taking notes. Of course, I was suspicious! This outside perception may have hampered many of my attempts to gain access to individuals from the Arab World, especially those who were wary not to get into further legal troubles.

As an Arab, but more specifically, as an Iraqi, both terrorism and the war against terrorism have been topics that have always had very personal relevance for me. When the US-led coalition started bombing Baghdad, I was about 12 years old. I personally remember getting up early that day, because of some noise in our house. I went down to the living room and saw my parents standing in front of the TV, watching the first bombings, speechless. At the time, most of my family members were still living in Baghdad. Today, almost everybody has fled to Turkey, Jordan, Egypt or Europe and North America. I also recall going to school that morning and my French teacher, a usually rather serious not to say stoic woman, being strongly affected and expressing her sadness about what was happening. Ever since, my home country has been haunted by civil wars, attacks by terrorist groups, and violent extremist gangs. My grandfather was killed at the hands of extremists, targeted for standing up against the growing sectarianism in the country's capital. My cousin was kidnapped for several weeks. Terrorist attacks that cost tens to hundreds of lives became a normal feature of life in Iraq after 2003. At the same time, it is with sadness that I observe the country's engagement with the problem – which rests on sweeping criminalisation, torture and indefinite detention of those associated closely or loosely with jihadist groups – as well as its violent repression of non-violent protests by a people that is fed up with the never-ending corruption of the ruling class. The repressive posture and the anti-democratic means of engaging with political dissent are breeding the next generation of young men who will turn to violence as an answer to their grievances.

On a more technical level, my "Iraqi I" has been a two-sided sword. On the one hand, Iraqis are well respected in the Arab World, for they are considered to be of the "true Arabs", for their cultural heritage and their local dialect which is close to formal Arabic. Also, while in some countries, Iraqis are specifically stigmatised, in Lebanon, there are few negative sentiments against Iraqis, in contrast to the strong prejudices held against Syrians or Palestinians for example.[36] And although an insider thanks to my Arab identity, I was somewhat an "outsider" because of my Iraqi identity. Being an outsider in that respect was helpful because it allowed me to remain something of a black box, not easily classifiable to Lebanese interviewees, some of which have strong feelings against Lebanese from other regions, confessions or political affiliations.

As a general observation, it can be said that I am seen primarily as an Iraqi when I am in the Arab World. Although I usually introduce myself as a Swiss-Iraqi or an Iraqi living in Switzerland, most people forget about that information soon afterwards. This is usually helpful in interactions with ordinary citizens. However, with official actors, especially police and military officers, or even during border control, it is problematic. Although my Swiss passport should grant me the privileges of a Swiss citizen, authorities always dig for further information about my Arab documents, refusing to simply treat me as a Swiss citizen. I was frequently questioned in a separate room while other foreigners passed through customs much more quickly. When I left Lebanon in the summer of 2019, a border control officer specifically told me: "You keep popping up in relation to a suspect, because your name in the Swiss documents is ambiguous [Arab documents usually include the name of the father and the grandfather]. I highly recommend that you procure Arab papers for the next time you come to Lebanon."[37] During my second research visit to Lebanon, I first tried to obtain authorisation to enter the refugee camp Ein El-Hilweh by personally submitting my request as a researcher. I was waiting for what seemed to be the head

officer to take a decision on my request, while sitting in a room with two subordinate officers. The conversation between the two revealed much of the debate regarding competing identities, a foreign and an Arab one:

> *Officer A: I don't think he should tell the organisation that he wants to go visit in there... that he is Iraqi. It might get him killed, because they consider him as an unbeliever. But being Swiss might also get him killed.*
>
> *Officer B: I don't think he should tell the organisation that he is Iraqi. Maybe someone simply doesn't like him and gets him into trouble.*
>
> *Officer A: But how should he conceal that? His accent is very obvious.*
>
> *Officer B: No, his passport is Swiss, the rest doesn't matter.*[38]

When the head officer finally arrives, he passes by me, casually asking officer A "What does he want here?" I get up to introduce myself and explain that I would like to enter the camp for research. He asks me where I am from. When I say "Swiss", he just stares at me, visibly unhappy about my answer. I then add that I am originally Iraqi and he says: "Ah, Iraqi, that sounds about right". He then quickly rejects my request, suggesting I get the consent of an organisation that would be responsible for me inside the camp, which was what I ended up doing.

The Iraqi identity also turned out to be problematic because of the conflict between Sunni and Shia groups, which has been exacerbated by the Iraqi civil war after 2003. Many of my interviewees in Tripoli had strong anti-Shia sentiments. As discussed above, these feelings are fostered certainly by sectarian hatred in general, but also by the Lebanon-specific role of Hezbollah, which has a strong grip on the security apparatus which criminalises and terrorises them, and the local conflict with Alawite groups sympathetic to the Assad regime, which are associated with the Shia sect.

It was therefore very common to be asked where in Iraq I was from exactly. Depending on my answer, I would be assumed to be either of Shii or Sunni background: Western (e.g., Fallujah) or Northern Iraqis (e.g., Mosul) would be assumed to be Sunni, and Southern Iraqis Shia. I usually responded that I was from Baghdad, which was neither predominantly Sunni, nor Shia, and made it difficult to categorise me. Some of my interviewees relentlessly tried to find out more regarding this aspect. Sometimes it led them to ask directly, as when Walid asked me "Are you Sunni?" At other times, it transpired subtly, as when Sheikh Nassif, whom I had already told I was from Baghdad, introduced me to Rashid, a former member of a group led by Ahmed Al-Aseer in Southern Lebanon, as "this is our Iraqi brother…from Mosul, right?" Interestingly, it would have been easier to be of Christian confession, to be placed outside the Sunni-Shia divide. A fellow Lebanese researcher, who was also conducting research with Islamist groups in Tripoli at the time, warned me that I should be very careful, and that he found it to be advantageous to be a Maronite Christian. When meeting a fundamentalist cleric, for instance, he told me he had tried to avoid revealing his background, but when he finally did, the cleric shouted: "Oh, you should have told me! I was afraid you could be Shii!"[39] Aziz also told me very clearly that "here in Saida or in Tripoli, people can be very stubborn. For example, a Sunni might not want to talk to a Shii". On another occasion, a situation brought this issue to the fore subtly yet powerfully. During a meeting with ex-detainees who had been in Roumieh prison for terrorism-related offences,

one of the interviewees, Salman, asked me where I was from and I answered that I was Iraqi. He looked at Sara, and said, in a serious tone, “you should have told me”. I and everyone else in the room froze and the discomfort and tension grew instantly to an unbearable intensity. After a few seconds, he shouted: “*ala rasnah al-iraqeen*!” (literally, “Iraqis are on top our heads”), meaning, rather positively, that he welcomed me, and everyone broke into laughter, as a visible sign of relief. Whether he genuinely meant it or also simply wanted to defuse the situation remains unclear.

The Sunni-Shia divide haunted me also outside the Arab World, notably in Switzerland. Sometimes, the question was asked respectfully, after my answer regarding my precise origin in Iraq was judged to be insufficient. Sheikh Mouloud, for instance, asked me, at the end of our interview: “Just out of pure curiosity, I don’t have anything against any sect, but are you Sunni or Shii?” In another situation, my Iraqi origin was a barrier. I asked an acquaintance, who had gotten in touch with an Iraqi refugee who had been convicted of terrorism-related offences in Switzerland, whether he could ask him about a potential interview. He got back to me with the following message:

> *I just met the man and asked him whether he would meet you for an interview. He replied that it depended on whether you are Kurdish, Shii or Sunni. If you are Sunni, I could give you his number, otherwise it would be out of question.*[40]

Since I had made the choice, from the outset of my research, not to give in to sectarian classifications, I was unable to get access to that person.

Finally, specifically to the Swiss context, I was also juggling with multiple subjectivities. Having grown up in the Swiss German part, I am fluent in Swiss German and therefore have a very present cultural and linguistic “Swiss German I”. On the other hand, having spent many years in the French-speaking part, I am usually also considered as a “Francophone Swiss”. In fact, I have realised throughout my various activities, both in academia and policymaking, that I am rather stubbornly associated with the francophone part of Switzerland. For instance, individuals from francophone Switzerland have repeatedly and unconditionally considered me as “one of them”, often rather surprised that I am originally Swiss German and also frequently forgetting that I am. On the other hand, Swiss German actors, especially in discussions and meetings at the federal level, tend to repeatedly put me into the Swiss francophone box, even after we may have had several side talks in Swiss German. A hypothetical explanation is that there are barely any actors of Arab-Muslim background operating at a federal level. When they are, they are usually coming from the francophone part of Switzerland, where they are also represented more strongly than in the German-speaking cantons. My repeated categorisation as francophone Swiss can, in my view, be understood as emanating from a specifically Helvetic racist classification of the Arab-Muslim Other. It is a classification that makes it hard to reconcile this Other, when he arrives to a certain socio-political status, with a Swiss German identity.

On a technical and cultural level, my fluency in both Swiss German and French has allowed me to navigate both contexts in all their subtleties and details. I have realised, over the past years, that although there are many bilingual speakers in the Swiss context, the cultural mobility

often remains rather limited. Especially when it comes to research, the so-called *Röstigraben* – a metaphoric expression meaning the gap between francophone and German-speaking Switzerland – remains very present. Hence, being able to conduct interviews in both contexts and get a good grasp of the regional specificities was certainly beneficial for my research in the Swiss context.

Finally, a further insider/outsider vector that I have found to be relevant for my research runs along the line of political affiliation. Since many of my interviewees are critical of state power, it would have been difficult to arrive at the same depth in the conversation had I been leaning towards state-centric positions. Also, as part of my research, I have engaged more seriously with leftist, internationalist, communist, socialist and anarchist ideas, some of which have influenced my political views. Therefore, being somewhat well-versed in these ideologies and adhering at least to parts of them myself has been a facilitating factor during my interviews. It has enabled me to get access to gatekeepers and interviewees who would otherwise have refused to help me. In the Lebanese context, I was also asked about my specific political affiliations on several occasions, as for instance with a Lebanese Alawite on my position towards the Syrian regime or a former Hezbollah sympathiser regarding my view on Lebanese politics.

Concluding Discussion: Towards a Holistic Engagement with Securitised Research Terrains

Autoethnography was used in this paper to explore both the research topic and the methodology through an in-depth investigation of my role as a researcher in the field of politico-ideological violence and my positionality. Conducting research into terrorism and political violence as an Arab-Muslim inevitably prompts questions regarding one's own safety and potential incrimination. While it is generally problematic for any researcher to conduct research into illegal activities, it is even more problematic to conduct research into terrorism as an Arab-Muslim researcher. I have tried to be careful throughout my research as to the ways in which my research could potentially make me liable for a criminal offence.

Importantly, I have engaged in-depth with the different subjectivities that define me as a person and as a researcher. Although an outsider in some respects, I can be considered as an insider in many others. Oftentimes, I was inevitably both an insider and an outsider at once. The status of an insider has been generally useful throughout the research although it was sometimes an obstacle to my research efforts. The subjectivities that have been discussed, namely the "Arab I", "Muslim I", "Migrant I", "Iraqi I", and "Swiss I" have all had some impact on my research and certainly on the findings. Many of my subjectivities overlap with those of my interviewees, thereby allowing me to gain a more in-depth understanding of their trajectories by tapping into my own. A major finding is that the Arab-Muslim identity is generally helpful in the research process, because of the researcher's ability to navigate the terrain linguistically and culturally. It is a two-sided sword, however, because the Arab-Muslim researcher must make an additional effort not to be categorised along national, religious, sectarian or political affiliations, of which some can seriously hamper his or her access to the field and to interviewees.

As a generally helpful attribute, researchers engaging with individuals of which many are highly critical towards the state and its institutions may benefit from questioning the extent to which they themselves have been influenced by state-centrism and thereby adopted a lens that is judgmental and moralistic. State-centrism makes it extremely difficult to engage holistically with a phenomenon that is born to a large extent out of the actual or perceived wrongdoings of states and conventional actors.

Related to this, it can be said that I have been both subject and object of my research on radicality. Over the past three years, I have myself gone through significant emotional and cognitive changes that have taken me into different directions but mostly fostered a more determined and more radical posture. Early during my fieldwork, in March 2019, I wrote in my fieldnotes: "If you come looking for the crime, be prepared to find pain, suffering and injustice."

Previously, I had worked on refugees' living situations and feelings of insecurity before shifting my focus to political violence and terrorism. I was hoping that this change of perspective would allow me to gain some distance from the desperation and misery of the individuals I was interested in. I was wrong. Worse even, the individuals I was dealing with, the purported or actual terrorist offenders, were not only already at the global bottom in socio-economic and political terms. In addition, they were criminalised and demonised, and experienced the full-fledged and merciless power of the state. The injustice of their situations was too flagrant and the more I understood about terrorism and counter-terrorism, the more my indignation grew.

Hence, I myself experienced several moral shocks, went through moments of great indignation and anger, phases of profound alienation and disappointment, but also, like my interviewees, appropriation and even responsibilisation.[41] I felt that I could not remain idle when I understood the serious implications for individuals who were designated as terrorists, and realised that the way they were dealt with was often not only unjust, but also counterproductive. I see my academic work as my engagement, and whenever possible, I transport the findings of my research into the public sphere by participating in conferences, giving workshops or writing accessible articles and opinion pieces outside of academic journals.

I have grown more interested in and increasingly critical of hegemonic power and the ways in which it influences state and international politics and, crucially, knowledge production. I have experienced how anything in the name of security as a big noun seems to override everything that can be seen as security as a small noun,[42] the feelings of security and fundamental rights of individuals and groups who usually lack the means and the power to defend themselves. This has prompted a philosophical and epistemological questioning of the bases of my pre-existing beliefs, assumptions, and concessions.

Importantly, working on this topic with my cultural, religious, and ethnic background, inevitably exposed me to the racist and imperialist violence of mainly epistemic nature. Whether it is the public debate surrounding terrorism, Islam, and Muslimness, and *dangerous others* or the theories and their underlying assumptions, or my personal experiences of alienation and othering in politics, academia or in both professional and personal interactions: I had to grapple with this violence emotionally and cognitively and needed to find ways to use it constructively

for my work and my personal life.

At some point, I stumbled over Lola Olufemi's book *Feminism, Interrupted,* and part of her introduction struck me as it encapsulated what my research endeavours, including the various enlightening readings, have done for me at a personal and emotional level:

> *Everybody has a story about how they arrived and keep arriving at radical politics. Some of us are politicised by the trauma of our own experiences, by wars waged in our names, by our parents and lovers, by the internet. It's useful to share the ways we become politicised if only because it helps politicise others. Growing up as a young black woman, I felt the oppressive way the world was organised with my body and through interpersonal relations long before I could articulate what those feelings meant. Revelling in the discovery of the word 'feminism' and its history as a political practice in my early teenage years at school, I found a personal freedom. I read ferociously. Black feminism, Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Anarchafeminism, Eco-feminism. Feminism opened up my world. I saw in it, conflicting theorists and activists, all giving their ideas about the way the world should be. Perhaps most memorably, it released me from the desire to comply with the world as it is.*[43]

I had the unspeakable privilege to devote time and resources to these questions that opened my eyes, that destabilised me, that made me question everything I had ever believed was true. I found peace and consolation in the works of scholars who choose to defy mainstream academia by asking courageous questions and seeking frightening answers. This process has allowed me to deal more confidently with the ontological insecurity arising from working at the crossroads of my personal racialisation and radicalisation, but also my privileges and the ways in which I myself am an enactor of injustices in this world, be they political, socioeconomic, epistemic or else.

Violent extremism, terrorism and political violence are likely to always constitute a major field of research and interest for many scholars around the world and first-hand data collection will continue to grow in importance. I believe that a holistic engagement with such highly securitised research terrains requires a particularly pronounced effort by the researcher to truly practice reflexivity in order to engage with one's positionality, multiple subjectivities and their impacts on the research questions, process, analysis, findings, presentation and dissemination. Autoethnography is by far not the only instrument that can support and structure reflexivity, but it is a very potent and accessible one, if care is taken continuously to produce autoethnographic writings. If reflexivity becomes an inherent part of research, scholarship in this field is likely to gain significantly in quality and foster a truly holistic scholarly engagement with the phenomena at hand.

Ahmed Ajil is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the School of Criminal Justice, University of Lausanne, Switzerland. He has held positions as a practitioner in the realm of counter-terrorism. His work deals with politico-ideological violence and mobilisation, counter-terrorism law and practice, security, criminal policy, migration, prisons and policing.

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Contact

E: pt.editor@icct.nl
W: pt.icct.nl

Universiteit
Leiden