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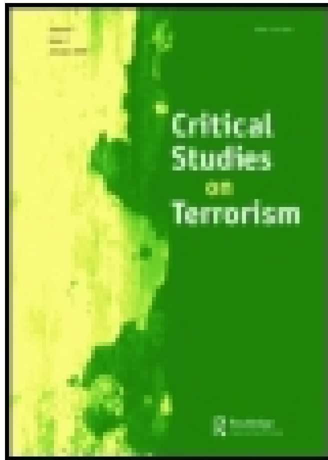

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Terrorists, scholars and ordinary people: confronting terrorism studies with field experiences

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RESEARCH NOTE

Terrorists, scholars and ordinary people: confronting terrorism studies with field experiences

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Fieldwork in the study of terrorism remains the exception, allowing for scores of publications to be produced each year with little or no contact with the perpetrators of terrorist violence and scarce direct observation of the social realities in which it occurs. While examining some of the serious drawbacks and pitfalls such research can entail, this article makes a case for more fieldwork in terrorism studies, arguing that it can bring greater depth to our understanding of terrorist violence. The discussion focuses on a common assumption – the existence of the 'terrorist' as subject – and a common practice of terrorism studies – the concentration on extraordinary events at the expense of 'ordinary life' and 'ordinary people' – and how they are called into question by the material gathered during field research conducted in the Southern Philippine region of Mindanao. The article concludes with a reflection on some of the challenges facing researchers in danger zones, from their dependence on local knowledge for security to the need for methodological flexibility when faced with the complexity of research in conflict areas.

Keywords: terrorism; fieldwork; Mindanao; Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF); Philippines; ethnography of violence; methodology; conflict transformation

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Introduction

What is terrorism? Are there different kinds? Who are the 'terrorists', and most importantly, what can 'we do' to counter them? Publications addressing these questions – considered *the prime* security concern by many governments and publics alike – have flourished in the first decade of the 21st century. Psychologists, criminologists, military experts, counter-insurgency experts, journalists, and last but not least students of politics, have worked to try to make sense of 'the ubiquitous yet almost unmentionable, the glorified yet heavily tabooed' (Zulaika 1995, p. 206). Indeed, the past years in security studies could be described as a collective attempt to understand terrorism. Insightful material has emerged across disciplines and across the world.

One thing that this push does not appear to have done however, is reverse a longstanding trend of 'terrorism studies' lamented by Andrew Silke in a key review of the field: the lack of primary sources (Silke 2001, 2004a, 2004b). The study of terrorism is indeed not in a 'healthy state', he concluded in 2001: 'It exists on a diet of fast-food research: quick, cheap, ready-to-hand and nutritionally dubious' (Silke 2001, p. 12). Although his assessment was less bleak a few years later, he stated nonetheless that 'the effort devoted to gaining an objective understanding of terrorists has often been extremely deficient' (Silke 2004a, p. 20). First-hand research regarding terrorism is of course filled with dangers and pitfalls, starting with serious risks to the life and limb of researchers and informants through to a state obsession with secrecy. These obstacles however, confront terrorism studies with an exceptional situation in which scores of books,

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articles, conference papers, and media interviews are produced each year on terrorism and 'terrorists' with little or no direct contact with the actual violence or the perpetrators of this violence (Horgan 2003, White 2000).

Why is this a problem? Field research does not necessarily produce 'better' knowledge and is not essential to all inquiries. A discussion of the ethics of violence for political ends does not require the production of any primary material, while the analysis of the 'terrorism discourse' in the media could thrive on a perfectly healthy diet of newspaper clippings. Nonetheless, it can be argued that 'at some level, however, to be able to discuss violence, one must go to where violence occurs, research it as it takes place' (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, p. 4). Thus, field research – in the form of interviews, participant observation, surveys, and the like – does not have to be omnipresent, but should not be absent from the study of any phenomena, let alone one as contested as terrorism. In part, this is because:

> the ontics of violence – the lived experience of violence – and the epistemology of violence – the ways of knowing and reflecting about violence – are not separate. Experience and interpretation are inseparable for perpetrators, victims, and ethnographers alike. (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, p. 4)

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The aim of this paper is to make a case for more fieldwork in the study of terrorism, while at the same time examining some of the serious drawbacks and pitfalls such research can entail. To this end, I shall discuss how two widespread propositions of terrorism studies – the existence of the 'terrorist' as subject and the concentration on extraordinary events at the expense of 'ordinary life' and 'ordinary people' – appear problematic when confronted with the results of field research, as I discovered in Mindanao in 2007.[1] Making no claims to generalisations, I shall examine how fieldwork was key to my understanding of terrorism in Mindanao, and how primary material gathered through interviews, participant observation, and documentation challenges these two widespread assumptions. I do not, however, aim to turn field research into a 'test' through which all claims on terrorism must pass, and the last section of this paper will examine some of the serious methodological and ethical problems raised by primary research on terrorism. Finally, I shall attempt to argue that an experiential knowledge of terrorism can be one means to complexify terrorism studies, reintroducing the layers of 'life' needed to understand this form of violence.

The 'terrorist'

Terrorism scholars disagree on how to define terrorism, on how to categorise different types of terrorism, and on the best way to counter terrorism. Most however, agree on one thing: there is such a thing as a 'terrorist', a human being who can be defined by such a term. Many volumes on terrorism indeed begin with the 'terrorist'. Walter Laqueur, for example, opens his study of *The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction* with the following statement:

> Four hundred twelve men, women and children were hacked to death by terrorists on the night of December 19, 1997, in three isolated villages in Algeria's Elizane region. Four hundred perished when a group of the Shah's opponents burned a cinema in Abadan during the last phase of the monarchy in Iran. There were 328 victims when an Air India aircraft was exploded by Sikh terrorists in 1985, and 278 were killed in the Lockerbie disaster in Scotland in 1988 which was commissioned by Libya's Colonel Khadafi and carried out by terrorists. (Laqueur 2001, p. 3)

Although 'even terrorists don't like to be called terrorists' (Richardson 2006, p. 19), they certainly populate terrorism research. In her recent book, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat*, Louise Richardson is adamant:

> [A] terrorist is not a freedom fighter and a terrorist is not a guerrilla. A terrorist is a terrorist, no matter whether or not you like the goal s/he is trying to achieve, no matter whether or not you like the government s/he is trying to change. (Richardson 2006, p. 28)

Even those authors intent on demystifying the 'terrorist' retain the category, like Richard Rubenstein who stresses that most 'terrorists' scarcely 'resemble the stereotypical villains of television and motion picture dramas', that they 'are no more or less cruel and cold-blooded than the Resistance fighters who executed Nazi officials and collaborators in Europe', and are 'generally no crazier than you and I might be if some implacable authority robbed us of our land and turned our dream of a better life into ashes' (Rubenstein 1987, pp. 5–6). They may not be what 'we' think they are, but they remain the prime subjects and actors of terrorism studies.[2]

'Terrorists' exist, but until recently they were often neither seen nor spoken to within terrorism studies: '[S]ince terrorism is unspeakable Evil, you must avoid any contact with it or even contemplation of it, let alone projecting yourself into the terrorist's subjectivity' (Zulaika and Douglass 2008, p. 32). Moreover, in 'the name of scientific expertise, specific instructions for stigmatizing' actors are 'championed' (Zulaika 1995, p. 212). Although more and more research is based on interviews, one can still say this remains a small part of the vast production of terrorism studies (Horgan, 2003, White 2000, Breen Smyth et al. 2008, Zulaika and Douglass 2008). Why is there such a reluctance to engage, particularly when such an engagement could increase the very knowledge academia aims to achieve? One answer is the one offered by Rubenstein, that one might discover that 'terrorists' are 'no crazier than you and I'. Zulaika takes the argument a step further, stating that contact forces 'us' to restore humanity to the 'terrorist' – a humanity stripped by the accusation of terrorism which 'allows us to deface the accused person' (Zulaika 1995, p. 220). In other words, 'the mere act of paying attention to what the terrorists have to say is a fateful step towards perhaps making an effort to understand their motives, something that might lead to somehow "justifying" what is unjustifiable' (Zulaika and Douglass 2008, p. 32).

One may also discover that there is no such human being who can be readily categorised as a 'terrorist'. My research in Mindanao raised this crucial point. I already had serious reservations about using the label 'terrorist' before my fieldwork in the Philippines. The notion that a human being should be defined solely by what is often a single act they have undertaken, or even several acts, is deeply problematic. Such a designation denies individuals their past and the possibility of a future – a past when they did not take part in terrorist actions and a future in which they may not. Furthermore, the term often taints and engulfs all actions of the individual, whether they are terrorist acts or not, and reduces a human being to a single two-dimensional identity marker – a label (Bhatia 2005). My research on the ground however, revealed another concern with theories based on 'terrorists' as subjects, possibly a more powerful one, namely, that actors, relationships, and processes on the ground, at least in Mindanao, are far too fluid for such labels to have any meaning or enhance our understanding of political violence in any way.

Mindanao is home to numerous armed groups. Leaving aside the communist insurgency, there are three main groups fighting for the Moros, the term used to designate Muslims of the Philippines. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) signed a peace deal with the government in 1996 and has been largely integrated into the state and military apparatus, although it continues to have an armed presence on the ground. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has a presence of at least 15,000 troops on the ground and has been in talks with the government over the creation of a Moro homeland since 1996. Neither of these groups has been designated as a 'terrorist' movement, although bomb attacks attributed to the MILF have led politicians and the press to use the label in the past. The 'terrorists' of Mindanao are the Abu Sayyaf Group, a group of several hundred fighters who have engaged in bombings and kidnappings for the past 15 years and are believed to have collaborated closely with al-Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiya (Abuza 2003,

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2004, Goss 2005). They are designated by the United States and the European Union as a 'terrorist' group, best known for their kidnappings of foreign tourists and acts of extreme violence such as beheadings (Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism 2007, European Union 2002).

Government officials and scholars say the three groups have collaborated in the past (Dureza 2007, Islam 2003, Yegar 2002). However, they continue though to place the groups in distinct categories: the 'terrorist' category for the Abu Sayyaf, and the 'non-terrorist' category for the MILF and the MNLF. This could be read as meaning that the MILF for example, has not taken part in any terrorist actions, while the Abu Sayyaf does exclusively that. This categorisation however, does not appear to reflect the fluidity on the ground. Indeed, the MILF has, according to government officials but also to national and international analysts and NGOs, taken part in a number of actions that can be described as terrorist, including bombing airports, urban transport services, and public places in Mindanao and Manila (Dureza 2007, Afable 2007, Garcia 2007, Rabasa and Chalk 2003, Abuza 2006, International Crisis Group 2004). Although senior MILF officials denied in interviews that the MILF has ever taken part in 'terrorism', they admit that some 'lost commands' of the group may have participated in such actions (Alonto 2007, Sullivan 2007, Abuza 2004). How 'lost' the lost commands are, is a matter that is constantly debated in the Philippines.

Although the MILF is broadly believed to have taken part in terrorist actions, there is little doubt that this does not represent the rebels' primary mode of operation. The MILF takes part in a whole slew of other activities, from running schools to Sharia courts, from development programs to help the poorer farmers of Mindanao, to holding consultation processes (Vitug and Gloria 2000, Yegar 2002, Santos 2005). Even in terms of its violent tactics, terrorism has never been its primary tactic of choice and may be best described as 'a plausibly deniable … option in its strategic toolbox' (International Crisis Group 2004, p. 3). Thus, if the term 'terrorist' is to be adopted, the MILF would then have to be described as composed of 'occasional terrorists' or 'sporadic terrorists' – terms that, to say the least, have little explanatory value.

If the categorisation as 'non-terrorist' for the MILF does not seem to reflect its choice of tactics entirely, neither does that of 'terrorist' for the Abu Sayyaf. Indeed, although the Abu Sayyaf does not seem to have a strong social and political structure behind it and has for many degenerated into a kidnap-for-ransom gang (Garcia 2007, Rabasa et al. 2006, Abuza 2003), this does mean that individuals linked to the group can be described as mere 'terrorists'. Associated Press correspondent Jim Gomez says that when he travelled to Sulu – parts of which contain a strong Abu Sayyaf presence – he asked to speak to the Abu Sayyaf fighters in villages. He discovered 'ordinary' farmers who owned a gun of particularly high calibre, turning them into prized associates of the Abu Sayyaf when it needed to operate in that area. Gomez said that some had no particular political or religious agenda or beliefs and had taken part as support elements in a kidnapping operation with the Abu Sayyaf simply because the group had offered to pay them the equivalent of US$3500 – a fortune in the Philippines – for one month's work (Gomez 2007). These men could be best described as 'terrorists for hire' – hardly a category serious scholarship wants to be working with. Thus, if some members of the MILF have taken part in some terrorist actions, while some members of Abu Sayyaf have only sporadically participated in operations, the distinction between 'terrorist' and 'non-terrorist' is not as clear-cut as the Philippine and Western governments, as well as some renowned scholars of terrorism in Southeast Asia, would lead one to believe.

Furthermore, even were one to accept such categories – arguing that the Abu Sayyaf is *principally* involved in terrorist activities while the MILF has only engaged in such violence *sporadically* – what government reports and terrorism experts have so far failed to note is that in many cases it is impossible to distinguish between an Abu Sayyaf fighter, an MILF, or an MNLF one, making it once again impossible to distinguish between the 'terrorist' and the 'non-terrorist'. Family ties overlap with organisational ties in such a way that father, son, sister, and brother can

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all be linked to different organisations (Dureza 2007, Alonto 2007, Gurrea 2007, Mercado 2007a). 'Given the complexity of the relationships among Muslims, among the Moros, you cannot avoid or prevent the fact that some members of the MILF who have relatives who may be members of the Abu Sayyaf, who may be bandits, pure and simple bandits, or whatever, that he might provide refuge or might be helping them', Maulana Alonto, a leading MILF official and peace negotiator, acknowledged in an interview (Alonto 2007). Allegiances change, armed groups in certain areas can be linked to one group and then find it more to their advantage to be linked to another (Mercado 2007a). As Father Mereado explained, '[W]hen you go to these islands, sometimes they introduce themselves as ASG, Abu Sayyaf Group, sometimes they introduce themselves as Moro Islamic Liberation Front, sometimes they introduce themselves as Moro National Liberation Front' (Mercado 2007b). Finally, they may even switch allegiances and decide to support government forces.

The case of Wahab Akbar can be seen to epitomise this fluid, changing reality. Akbar, a MNLF rebel turned preacher who trained in the Middle East, is believed by many to have been one of the founders of Abu Sayyaf (Abuza 2003, Torres 2007, Gutoc 2007). He denied the accusation, saying that he only knew Abu Sayyaf founder Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani and may have 'inspired' future Abu Sayyaf fighters through his sermons preaching *jihad* (Torres 2007). Akbar went on to become governor of his home island-province of Basilan, and when his three terms expired, to be elected as congressman for the island, during which time he assisted the army's counter-terrorism operations against the Abu Sayyaf.[3] His counter-terrorism approach was violent and unorthodox: he armed villagers, threatened to kill relatives of Abu Sayyaf fighters if hostages were harmed in a 2000 kidnapping, and admits 'he ordered the arrest of innocent civilians, including relatives of suspected Abu Sayyaf bandits' (Torres 2007). Despite his campaign against the Abu Sayyaf, he acknowledged in a speech to parliament in July 2007 that the military continued to distrust him and rumours of his ongoing support for Abu Sayyaf persisted (Akbar 2007, Anson 2007). His death was as violent as his life: he was killed when a bomb exploded in parliament's parking lot as he prepared to leave the building. Akbar is believed by authorities to have been the specific target of the attack that has been blamed on Abu Sayyaf, although political rivals are also suspected, as well as forces tired of his alleged double-crossing. Was Akbar a 'terrorist'? A 'state terrorist'? A 'counter-terrorist'? All of the above? None of these terms seem capable of portraying the complexity of Akbar or of helping in the understanding of his life and actions.[4]

Be they of the Abu Sayyaf, the MILF, MNLF, or other groups, describing Moros as 'terrorists' is simplistic, fails to take into account the extreme fluidity on the ground, and does not advance the study of the Mindanao conflict. Armed local leaders may be related to members of the Abu Sayyaf, they may change allegiances to and from the Abu Sayyaf, or they may be hired by the Abu Sayyaf. Alternately, they may not be linked to the Abu Sayyaf and still take part in terrorist actions. Some groups or factions in groups may occasionally take part in terrorist actions, while others may primarily focus on terrorist tactics but include members who only do so sporadically. Accepting the category of 'terrorist' to describe groups or individuals in Mindanao would thus entail both the disadvantages of 'lumping and splitting' (Horgan and Boyle 2008). Within the groups, it would lump together individuals whose primary activity is to take part in terrorist actions, others who take part in terrorist actions occasionally, and others still who have never taken part in terrorist actions. Meanwhile among the groups, it would split groups into different categories, creating an artificial distinction between groups using terrorism and groups not using terrorism, and ignoring the important fluidity that can be seen on the ground.

So why do the Philippine and other governments insist on using the 'terrorist' designation? An answer that emerged clearly from my fieldwork is that the decision to designate Moro groups as terrorist, or to refrain from designating them, was not primarily based on an analysis of the

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groups' tactics, but rather on whether authorities planned to engage in a dialogue with the groups or not (Dureza 2007, Rodil 2007).[5] Since the government has accepted that it cannot defeat the MILF militarily and must therefore engage with them through negotiations, designating them as 'terrorists' would be counter-productive, as 'one does not talk to terrorists' (Dureza 2007, Iqbal 2007, Afable 2007, Rodil 2007, Santiago 2007). On the other hand, the Abu Sayyaf is viewed as a 'peace and order' problem that can still be dealt with via military means (Rodil 2007). The designation as 'terrorist' group in the latter case can help justify the government's 'counter-terrorism' offensive. The labelling of a group as 'terrorist' can thus be seen as part of a totalising and legitimising discourse, as argued by Richard Jackson, that makes a violent counter-terrorism response appear natural while ruling out the possibility of negotiation (Jackson 2005, p. 9).

Crucially, this understanding of the complexity of the relationships and the reasoning behind the designation of Moro groups was principally accessible through interviews with rebels, local politicians, and observers, as well as through participant observation on the ground. Without this primary material, it would have been difficult to achieve the necessary depth to move past the two-dimensional figures of 'terrorist' and 'non-terrorist'. Of course, this single case of Mindanao is not enough to invalidate the 'terrorist' as subject in all terrorism studies or argue that 'terrorists' don't exist anywhere. It does however, allow for the assertion that, at least in the case of Mindanao, the 'terrorist' label does not seem to have much explanatory value, calling into question political and academic arguments that place 'terrorists' as a universal category – the subject of all 'terrorist' acts. It also allows for the following question to be raised: as in the case of Mindanao, would field research in other conflicts involving 'terrorist' violence reveal a similar degree of complexity making the 'terrorist' signifier so restrictive that it turns out to be empty? Although there clearly are acts of 'terrorism', there seem to be no 'terrorists' in Mindanao. Are there 'terrorists' elsewhere?

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'Ordinary people'

The concentration on the 'terrorist' subject and the lack of field research in terrorism studies has also led to an overall void of 'ordinary human beings'. As illustrated by the earlier passage in Laqueur, the empirical material offered generally tells of moments of exceptional violence, the extreme moments in which perpetrators (exceptional human beings) and victims (ordinary human beings made exceptional by their victimhood) come face to face in the dramatic showdown that characterises 'terrorism'. In the words of White: 'As if we were following the media, academics too often focus on one or even a series of spectacular and often gruesome events. In doing this, we may miss the overall picture of what is happening in any given setting' (White 2000, p. 96). *Life* – that which happens before and after the extreme moments and which turns subjects into complex human beings – seems to be absent. With regards to research on war, another kind of exceptional violence, Nordstrom makes the point:

> Theory purporting to describe war that does not address the realities of war—theories that delete any of war's casualties or perpetrators, heroes or villains—is not theory, it is ideology. One might argue that war is supposed to be about militaries, and that justifies deleting noncombatants, women, children, the infirm, rogues, and 'collateral damage' from astute analysis. But writing about what is supposed to be is neither data nor science. (Nordstrom 2005, p. 408)

Similarly, terrorism studies appears to be particularly guilty in this regard, with non-combatants, women, children, food, postal services, and the like, only entering the narrative if directly involved in the violence, usually as victims. The lack of fieldwork may be partly responsible for this lacuna, as without seeing the people, the landscapes, and observing the interrelationships,

life can easily be drained out of the narrative. It is often absent from the newscasts reporting on terrorist violence, as well as from the government and NGO reports assessing conflicts—material often relied upon by terrorism experts.

The case of Mindanao again offers a good example of the need to re-inject life into the study of terrorism. Mindanao was labelled by the US administration in January 2002 as the 'second front in the war on terror' (Gershman 2002). But it is far from only that. After spending weeks in Mindanao, I also found it to be a place of centre–periphery conflict of Mindanawans opposing the rule of Manila, of ethnic conflict among the numerous Muslim ethnic groups, of family feuds, and of tensions surrounding gender relations and the impact of global warming on land distribution—among others. It is also a land of incredible beauty, of lush plantations (run by multinationals), and of generals and rebel leaders enjoying a meal together and calling each other 'bro'.

Why is this relevant to the study of terrorism? If terrorist violence is the object of study, what difference does life, the before and the after, make? One example of the key relevance of 'life' is that what may appear as 'terrorist' violence at first may actually be another form of violence, such as criminal or communal violence. In Mindanao for example, there is a high incidence of family feuds, known as *rido*, and in numerous cases violence between government forces and rebels is not primarily about the Moro battle for a homeland and the government's bid to retain Mindanao, but rather the escalation of a localised family feud into a clash between rebels and government forces (Katig 2007, Tocaldo 2007, Gurrea 2007, Canuday 2007). A family feud in 2004 for example, led to a serious confrontation between MILF forces and the army, including street fighting through a market town and the government sending in fighter jets (Hermoso 2007, Canuday 2007). One member of the family had links with the military, another with the MILF. In other cases bomb attacks are part of extortion rackets by criminal groups – linked or not to Moro groups – rather than part of any political campaign. More broadly, *rido* or localised armed conflicts 'impact large-scale armed conflicts because of the ability of parties in local conflicts to employ the military resources of both state and rebels against perceived enemies' (Canuday 2007, p. 254). Although some academic articles have been published on *rido* and its prevalence in Mindanao, it is only in Mindanao that I became aware of its relevance in the conflict. Indeed, it was during a workshop on gender and conflict that women working with NGOs throughout Mindanao alerted me to the importance of *rido*. Without such knowledge, I would have classified many of the clashes originating in a *rido* as MILF–government or ASG–government confrontations. Thus, life does matter, not only normatively, but for the very research undertaken.

Furthermore, it is not only other forms of violence that need to be taken into account, but the endless other actions and processes that also mark and constitute life in zones marked by terrorist violence. Indeed, the very same actors that are involved in the violence – the 'terrorists', if one accepts such a category – are also fathers, daughters, aunts, and cousins, as well as farmers, politicians, school teachers, village officials, and the like. During my research in Mindanao and Manila, I realised for example, that the contacts between rebels, politicians, and soldiers were not limited to confrontations in the battlefield or dialogue across the negotiating table. Lt-Col Dickson Hermoso, who now heads the 7th Infantry Battalion at the heart of the Mindanao conflict zone, was a schoolmate of Von Al Haq, a renowned commander of the MILF who now heads the MILF's ceasefire committee (Hermoso 2007). Retired Gen. Rodolfo Garcia, current head of the government's negotiating team, is very close friends with, and was the wedding sponsor of the son of Michael Mastura, a negotiator for the MILF and key Mindanao politician (Garcia 2007). Maulana Alonto, an MILF negotiator, at one point was even sitting across the negotiating table from his aunt, Dr Emily M. Marohombsar (Alonto 2007). This is far from purely anecdotal, as participants argue that such prior contacts and relationships facilitate dialogue between the groups and increase trust, both in maintaining the ceasefire and in making progress toward a peace agreement (Alonto 2007, Garcia 2007).

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My stay in Mindanao and Manila also allowed for at least some contact with 'ordinary people', those not singled out because of either perpetrating or being victimised by violence, those who have oral rather than textual lives, and whom one can often only listen to and not read about (Gunning 2007). Through the gender and conflict workshop organised by the Mindanao Commission on Women, I thankfully was able to have several conversations with Mindanawans – men and women – and to reintroduce certain layers of life to my understanding of the region. For example, I learned that women's lives can have very specific characteristics in Mindanao, from being used as travel companions to avoid vehicles being searched at checkpoints since soldiers or militias are unlikely to search a woman, to fearing retribution by conservative Muslim groups in certain areas if they do not wear sufficiently 'modest' clothing.[6] I was also able to meet local officials of villages at the heart of the conflict zone, who helped me understand what an 'MILF community' is. Thus, apart from adding texture to the armed actors of Mindanao, observation, interviews, and casual conversations also brought depth to those around them, as well as elucidating the links between armed actors and non-armed actors.

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The scholar

> The closer one remains to the flow of life, to its often erratic progression, the greater understanding one will evoke among the readership about the daily existence of people under siege. The gathering of local knowledge about events through direct experience – also called participant observation – or at least by talking to the protagonists themselves rather than working through secondhand accounts has been one of the hallmarks of anthropology.[7] (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, p. 13)

Fieldwork can re-inject life into research on terrorism, introducing a necessary level of complexity to actors, relationships, and processes. Accessing life however, is not trouble-free. Security, logistical, methodological, and ethical challenges are considerable. These affect not only the researcher, but also the material gathered. Field research, in other words, is far from a panacea to the pitfalls of terrorism studies; it involves a slew of dangers, both personal and academic. There is the danger of being accused of conniving with an illegal group, the danger of being accused by armed groups of spying for the government or other institutions, and the danger of being unknowingly used as a pawn by governments monitoring armed groups (Kovats-Bernat 2002, Sluka 1995, Zulaika 1995). There is also the danger of emotional involvement in the conflict being studied, the danger of human attachment and the effect it may have on one's perception of events, actors, and processes. Anthropology and to some degree the field of International Relations, has examined many of these concerns. Less work has been carried out, particularly in terrorism studies, on the dangers to the life and limb of the researcher and his informants, and how this affects the fieldwork (Kovats-Bernat 2002). Horgan argues that although he was threatened with violence during his fieldwork with republicans in Northern Ireland, overall, the experiences of researchers interviewing perpetrators of terrorists acts 'have been danger-free' (Horgan 2003, p. 49). In the final section of this paper, I aim to examine some of the issues when research is not, or is not perceived by the researcher as being 'danger-free', through my fieldwork experience in Mindanao.

Firstly, guidelines for fieldwork in danger zones tend to be based on one premise – that the researcher is 'in control' of the situation and can (and therefore should) secure her/his safety and that of the informants (Kovats-Bernat 2002). This pushes the researcher toward employing a 'risk versus desired data' calculation, a calculation which:

> suggests that the amount of data that can be safely collected derives from the balance of what information is important to the study weighed carefully against how much that information is 'worth' in terms of the anthropologist's and informants' personal attitudes concerning the relative possibility of dying or being arrested to exchange it. (Kovats-Bernat 2002, p. 211)

In turn, this leads to framing research in danger zones in seemingly only two possible ways, namely, either as an act of bravery or one of carelessness. If the information is 'very important', then greater risks can be taken and the researcher is thus 'braving' danger for 'truth'. Zulaika tells of how he did not wish to imitate the 'thirst for martyrdom' of his ETA informants, 'yet unexpectedly I too had fallen under the spell that "the truths we respect are those born of affliction. We measure truth in terms of the cost to the writer in suffering"' (Zulaika 1995, p. 208). If the researcher miscalculates, on the other hand, the decision to take certain risks is seen as an act of carelessness if not irresponsibility.

There are several problems with this understanding of fieldwork in danger zones. Firstly, which frame is to be adopted – that of bravery or recklessness – can arguably only be decided a posteriori. If you survive and bring back important material, you are 'brave'. If you die or lead to someone else being hurt, you are irresponsible. This judgement can only be made after the fact because the researcher is generally *not* in control of the security environment and risks. Indeed, when carrying out research in a conflict zone, the stunning arrogance of this premise of control becomes all too clear. Based, according to Kovats-Bernat, on a 'colonial assumption' of the 'pacification of the study populations', it fails to recognise that 'more often than not, the circumstances of such fields force a dramatic shift in power – one in which the anthropologist is more likely to rely on local knowledge and the protection extended by interlocutors or other locals in order to safeguard her or his welfare' (Kovats-Bernat 2002, p. 214).

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In my research in Mindanao, my security was far more in the hands of my interviewees, be they rebels, soldiers, or NGO workers, than vice versa. They knew the territory, the risks, and the best way to carry out *my* research without getting me or anyone else hurt. The greatest risk in my case was kidnapping. Mindanao is home to several kidnap-for-ransom groups (including but not limited to the Abu Sayyaf) for which a white female researcher is the potential source of a lucrative ransom package. I was thus advised not to travel by land unaccompanied to the conflict-affected areas and later advised that flying into the airport of Cotabato City near to which senior MILF leaders are based, was also a risk as kidnappers have 'eyes and ears' at the airport. I was also advised to stay as short a time as possible – ideally under 24 hours – in Cotabato City, to deny kidnappers enough time to arrange an operation. It is impossible for me to say whether this advice reflects accurately the situation on the ground or not. I based myself on the consideration that the knowledge of officials, rebels, journalists, and NGO workers – both factual and experiential – was far greater than mine; to conclude that they were being 'over-vigilant' or trying to scare me away from visiting certain areas seemed both dangerous and arrogant. Furthermore, carelessness in this case would have meant irresponsibility of the worse kind, as a kidnapping can and has led to military operations resulting in casualties of combatants and non-combatants.

Brig.-Gen. Edgardo Gurrea, recently retired as co-chair of the government–MILF ceasefire coordinating committee (CCCH), told me that I could join him and another senior military officer on their trip overland to Cotabato City. To accommodate my research needs, they would stop in a conflict-affected village, allowing me to carry out interviews with soldiers, MILF rebels, and local officials, before reaching Cotabato City in time for my scheduled interviews with MILF rebel leaders. This meant that my interviews that day would be carried out in the presence of several senior military officials, and I was not master of how much time I could spend in each place or even of which village we stopped in. All these factors would no doubt affect my interviews and the type of data collected. I went through the objections that could be raised once I returned to my academic institution. On the other hand, I could see no other way of travelling to these areas without taking a risk that I believed was too great. The choice I felt confronted with, rightly or wrongly, was either travelling accompanied by one party to the conflict or not interviewing ordinary soldiers and rebels working as part of the ceasefire mechanism

and not being able to see the very land that is being fought over nor interview its inhabitants. Accessing these interviewees and observing the interaction between rebels, soldiers, and 'ordinary people' on the ground would allow me to engage in research that had been overall neglected, but this access and what would result from it would have to be shaped by measures taken to ensure my security and that of those around me.

This was one of many compromises that I had to make on the ground. Methodology thus had to become an 'elastic, incorporative, integrative, and malleable practice' informed by 'the shifting social complexities unique to unstable field sites' and dependent 'on a level of investigative flexibility on the part of the ethnographer, who cannot always be expected to work in safety and security' (Kovats-Bernat 2002, p. 210). This undoubtedly has an effect on the data collected and it is impossible to know how the means chosen affected the material gathered. The rebels I met did not put themselves forward at the start of the meeting, although they slowly appeared to 'loosen up' and be more willing to talk about their relationship with the soldiers, despite the latter's presence in the room. But whether they were more reticent or not because of the presence of the senior military commanders and how this reticence affected their answers remains an unknown. Nevertheless, the only other way I can envisage for this kind of material to be gathered without these security constraints is that a local researcher carry out the work. A Filipino or a Moro would not be confronted with the same level of kidnap risk, and could blend into the local population without attracting quite so much attention.[8] This does not mean that s/he would not be confronted with other dangers, dilemmas, and choices that would again affect the data gathered.

Research in conflict-afflicted areas demands methodological and ethical approaches that are adaptive to the environment; it requires accepting that the data gathered is open to challenge by academia's deontological guardians. In other words, 'doing research in a dangerous environment may produce situations in which researchers must consider modifying or perhaps even compromising their work' (Sluka 1995, p. 285). These very constraints however, may actually generate valuable data. For example, during my interviews an army officer helped a rebel – his partner in the local ceasefire mechanism who had difficulty expressing himself in English – answer my questions. There is no doubt that the soldier's presence, his interpretation of my questions and of the rebel's answers, affected the data. His answers were very formal, but it is impossible to tell whether he might have behaved differently if the soldier had not been present. However, the very cooperation in tackling my question that I witnessed between these two men spoke volumes about their relationship and the feeling of brotherhood they described. They laughed together and appeared to cooperate fully in trying to understand what I was trying to learn from them.

Furthermore, the dilemmas raised by fieldwork may also increase the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny: 'A fieldwork crisis, as personal as it is political and theoretical, may deepen the understanding of ethnographers, of the people with whom they associate, and of the violence they study' (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, p. 14). My personal fieldwork crisis was fear. On my flight out of the Philippines, I wrote:

> I was petrified in my weeks of fieldwork in the Philippines – scared as I haven't been since childhood. I was scared of lawless groups, of disease-bearing mosquitoes, of harmless giant cockroaches. I was scared of not coming home. I was so scared that a few times even my shadow gave me a fright. (Toros 2007)

I am studying terrorism – one of the principle characteristics of which is the inducement of fear in a wider audience through violence or the threat of violence. Fear is central to terrorism and feeling that fear constantly with me for weeks was key to reminding me what terrorism 'feels like'. Again, the experiential is crucial to a thorough understanding of the object of study.

If violence and fear affect and mould the fieldwork, the data, and the experience of the researcher, they also affect and mould social relations:

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> Here we see the importance of considering the fears and anxieties of the anthropologist on the ground; as a functioning agent in the local culture of violence (that is, as a *subjective* rather than *objective* agent), the ethnographer is obligated to demonstrate how the pervasion of violence modified her or his own field relations and how similar modifications extend to those ordinary relations of the local community as well. (Kovats-Bernat 2002, p. 217)

The fear that I experienced in Mindanao, the need to be protected by armed groups (be they military or rebel) becomes thus a reflection, albeit distorted, of the fear and dependence on the protection of armed groups of the people of Mindanao. It is again material that advances the understanding of violence in the region. The *how* one acquires data takes a place in the analysis of the *what* being studied.

Thus, although field research is key to achieving a greater understanding of terrorism, it does not come free. It comes with dilemmas and compromises that cannot be resolved and simply have to be adapted to. The dangers of field research in terrorism may in certain cases mean that fieldwork is simply not worth it and that academia will have to do without that key element. If research is considered viable, it requires a recognition that methods need to be flexible in an attempt to keep everyone not totally safe, but *as safe as possible*. Crucially, it requires a change of focus from ourselves, the researchers, to those around us, be they the specific interviewees or 'ordinary people'. This means giving greater value to *their* understanding, it means treating them not only as objects of study, but as partners in the gathering of material and more broadly in the journey that constitutes fieldwork. It means recognising that the researcher is not an objective observer but a participant who experiences the field while studying it. Once returned from the fieldwork, the experiential aspect of the research must be given space – space in journals, space in conferences, space in theses. Part and parcel of the findings, the experiential data should not be limited to the rare seminar on field 'experiences', but rather incorporated as valuable material that can further the understanding of terrorism and violence more broadly.

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Conclusion

Field research can restore the much needed 'before' and 'after' to the study of terrorism. It incorporates into the study human beings, relationships, and processes that exist and have significance outside and beyond the acts of terrorism. Violence 'is a dimension of people's existence, not something external to society and culture that "happens" to people'; as such, it is 'confusing and inconclusive' (Robben and Nordstrom 1995, pp. 2–3). Although the chaos of violence can never be fully told, as narratives demand a story line and story lines demand order and sense (Nordstrom 1997), much research in terrorism seems to have reduced complexity to such a degree so as to exclude a key component of terrorism: 'life'. In this paper, I have argued that through fieldwork, the researcher can attempt to re-inject as much as possible the fluidity and complexity that inhabits the lives of victims, perpetrators, researchers, and 'ordinary people' back into the study of terrorism.

Fieldwork may lead the researcher to find that the boxes of terrorism studies have little or no resonance in the lives of those affected by terrorism. In the case of Mindanao, my research brought me to the conclusion that having the 'terrorist' as the central actor and subject of terrorism research does not offer much if any explanatory value; on the contrary, it can mask important interrelationships between parties on the ground. Reducing these complexities to a label – 'terrorist' – in the case of Mindanao at least, obfuscates rather than clarifies. Similarly, fieldwork may help to understand how 'terrorism' and 'life' interact. An example is how family feuds and terrorism in Mindanao converge into single acts of violence, making even those clear acts of terrorism – those moments of extreme violence that are often placed at the fore of any

study of terrorism – suddenly less clear, less obvious. The family feud component complicates the understanding of terrorist incidents in Mindanao, but at the same time adds greatly to that very understanding. Lederach urges scholars to make complexity a 'friend, not a foe' (Lederach 2003, p. 53). It is by being confronted with complexity and accepting complexity as a reflection of the lived experience of terrorism that knowledge and understanding of this form of violence can advance.

Field research, particularly in the case of terrorism, is not however an easy or quick solution to the broader failings of this kind of research. The danger that may exist in this research limits the students of terrorism in innumerable ways, sometimes to the degree that such research cannot and should not be undertaken. Other times, it forces the researcher to adapt to the circumstances and accept limitations that may have a profound effect on the data gathered. It confronts the researcher with dilemmas that simply cannot be resolved and have to be endured. Most of all, it forces the researcher to accept her/his limitations, to abandon the colonial arrogance of omnipotence, and to come to terms with the fact that her/his well-being may be in the hands of the research subjects.

This breaks down the traditional distinction between researcher and researched, making the researcher also actor and therefore the subject of her/his own research. S/he too comes to be viewed with greater complexity, allowing her/his life to be re-injected in the study. Thus, the experiential knowledge of fear or deprivation and the constant compromises that researchers, like those living in conflict zones, must reach actually contributes to furthering the understanding of violence, be it 'terrorist' or other. Furthermore, life – even in danger zones – is not only about pain and deprivation (Fetherston and Nordstrom 1994), and the creativity that researchers and those helping them come up with to solve the logistical, methodological, and ethical hurdles of such fieldwork is also a key part of the learning process and advancement of knowledge. If this experiential knowledge is an integral part of the study of terrorism, it needs to be included in the papers, articles, books, and theses seeking to contribute to a greater understanding of the topic. And thus fieldwork may succeed in restoring at least some form of 'life' to the subjects of terrorism studies: perpetrators, victims, scholars and ordinary people alike.

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Notes

1. I conducted four weeks of field research in Manila and Mindanao in late 2007, including in conflict areas around Cotabato City and North Cotabato. This fieldwork was undertaken as part of my doctoral research entitled: 'Talking to "terrorists": conflict transformation in Northern Ireland and Mindanao.'
2. A few authors, approaching the study of terrorism from a post-structuralist perspective, have challenged the notion that there is such a thing called a 'terrorist', mainly on the grounds that terrorism is best understood as a totalizing discourse in which counter-terrorism turns into the 'only prudent course of action' (Zulaika and Douglass 1996, p. ix). These scholars 'question the very possibility of defining, and thereby giving a satisfactory account of, the facts categorized as terrorism' (p. xi). This paper however considers that there are acts that can be classified as terrorism, and although its definition remains elusive, argues that it can be broadly understood as a violent means aimed at triggering political change by affecting a larger audience than its immediate target, which is broadly deemed illegitimate. For a more detailed discussion of this position, see Toros and Gunning (forthcoming).
3. With his first wife replacing him as governor and his second wife elected as mayor of the largest town, his power could not be underestimated.

4. I became aware of the case of Akbar because I happened to be in Manila when the bomb attack on parliament killed him.
5. In making this point, Jesus Dureza said that he was expressing his personal opinion and speaking in a private capacity rather than as secretary of state in charge of the peace process.
6. This information was gathered in informal conversations with participants in the workshop as well as through various small group sessions in which participants were asked to discuss the interaction between violence and 'ordinary life' in Mindanao (Katig 2007).
7. Although what is being examined here is not anthropology, this argument can arguably be adopted for the study of any social process.
8. Furthermore, a local does not carry the colonial baggage of a western doctoral student picking at other people's scabs to find out if 'they' bleed the same blood 'we' do.

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