

Danger zone

Interpreters working in conflict zones often lack support. Maha El-Metwally introduces Red T, a new organisation designed to lobby on their behalf



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Last academic year, I was invited to participate in a careers day at an inner-city school in Birmingham. The students came with a list of questions to ask the professionals to help them guess what they did. One of the questions was: is your work dangerous? I found myself saying yes, although up until that moment I had never really considered my work to be dangerous. Maybe I gave that answer because the careers day was soon after the terrorist attacks in Brussels, which targeted places that are very familiar to me. But, when you think about it, conference interpreters often visit airports and board planes, which are likely targets for terrorist attacks. However, conference interpreters themselves are not targeted. The situation is quite different for interpreters who work in conflict zones.

Western forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, notably US and UK troops, used hundreds of interpreters. Those in charge never anticipated that the military would need so many interpreters. Yet as both countries shifted into post-invasion stability operations, the majority of combat units increasingly found themselves interacting with the local civilian population, meaning interpreters were crucial. According to a 2011 Congressional Research Service report, at the conflicts' height of hiring, the US employed 82,534 Iraqis – including 9,268 interpreters – and 80,725 Afghans, with a similar proportion of interpreters. Due to the enormous risks these interpreters were taking, the US was able to recruit them in part by making explicit promises of a path toward earning visas and naturalisation. The UK Government equally pledged to offer safety to Iraqi and Afghan staff who worked with the UK armed forces.

'Translator-traitors'

Many of these interpreters assisted foreign troops because they believed that they were helping their countries get rid of extremists and start the reconstruction process. This brave move not only put them at risk during army operations, but also exposed them and their families to retaliatory acts by extremists since they were seen to be

cooperating with the 'infidels'. This is what Maya Hess, founder and chief executive of Red T, a non-profit organisation dedicated to linguists at risk, calls the 'translator-traitor mentality'. Many of these interpreters and family members lost their lives as a direct result of working for US and UK troops, and significant numbers had to flee their homes and go into hiding.

But despite these trying circumstances, resettlement programmes often leave a lot to be desired. For instance, while the UK had a welcoming policy towards its Iraqi interpreters, it has changed its stance with Afghan linguists. In fact, only a fraction of Afghan interpreters have been granted visas, and the Home Office even tried to return some of those who made it onto British soil and sought asylum there. Fortunately, the courts stopped the government from deporting them by issuing a ruling that Afghanistan was too dangerous. However, the case was taken to the Court of Appeal, and the interpreters in question now risk getting kicked out after a ban on returning them to the war-torn country was lifted.

Until recently, interpreters in conflict zones did not have any organisations to represent them and publicise their plight. This changed in 2009/10, when an International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) project to help interpreters in conflict zones was founded in Europe and Red T was formed across the Atlantic to act as the voice of this voiceless group. Red T, the only organisation exclusively dedicated to this cause, advocates worldwide on behalf of translators and interpreters in high-risk settings and seeks policy changes across the globe that promote their safety.

Rights and responsibilities

In 2010, Red T partnered with the AIIC and the International Federation of Translators (FIT) to issue a conflict zone field guide. This guide, which exists in 16 languages, outlines the rights and responsibilities of the translators and interpreters, and those of the organisations using their services.

Red T has also initiated the Open Letter Project with the same partners.

This project, also supported by the International Association of Professional Translators and Interpreters (IAPTI), Critical Link International (CLI) and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI), aims to research cases of linguists in dangerous situations, and advocates on their behalf by writing letters to relevant authorities. So far, the initiative has resulted in 15 open letters addressed to various governments.

Unlike journalists who work in conflict zones, linguists do not enjoy protected status. To remedy this omission, Red T, together with its five partner organisations, is seeking a UN resolution that grants protected-person status to civilian linguists in conflict zones. To obtain popular support, the coalition has launched a change.org petition. The current goal is 50,000 signatures and, at the time of going to press, 41,416 signatures had been collected. As professional translators and interpreters, ITI members are invited to sign this petition. See <http://chn.ge/1PwFL0W>.

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To make it clear that Red T represents both translators and interpreters, the logo separates the horizontal and vertical bars denoting the T and I: translators and interpreters