



My Journey Behind the Lines of Jihad (11/13/17)

00:00:19 Danielle Hodes: Good evening, and welcome. My name is Danielle Hodes, and I'm the manager of public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. As always, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our members and those tuning in to our live web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live.

Tonight, we are joined by acclaimed journalist Souad Mekhennet. Currently a correspondent for "The Washington Post's" national security desk, Mekhennet has also reported on terrorism for "The New York Times," "The International Herald-Tribune," NPR, among other outlets. She's also the recent award-winner of the Daniel Pearl Award.

00:00:56 Like so many of the stories here, Mekhennet's journey has strong roots in the attacks of September 11. She began her investigative career delving into the German neighborhoods where the 9/11 plotters were radicalized, and later, in the Iraqi neighborhoods where Sunnis and Shia turned against one another, ultimately culminating on the Turkish-Syrian border region, where ISIS was a daily presence.

00:01:17 As a Muslim born and raised in the West, Mekhennet has sought to bring a much-needed mediating voice between these cultures and provide a holistic picture of the complicated world of jihad. All this and much more is beautifully relayed in her new memoir, "I Was Told to Come Alone: My Journey Behind the Lines of Jihad." Please note that there will be a sale and signing after the program on our atrium terrace.

00:01:40 We'd like to thank Souad for sharing her time and insights with us. And we are also deeply grateful to the David Berg Foundation for their

support of the museum's 2017/2018 public programs season. Without further ado, please join me in welcoming Souad Mekhennet in conversation with the 9/11 Museum's director of public programs, Jessica Chen.

(applause)

00:02:06 Jessica Chen: Thanks so much, Dani, and I'd also like to echo that welcome to our museum members. Thank you so much for joining us for all of our programs and conversations. I'm really delighted tonight to be sitting across from someone whose story I've come to very much admire in reading her book, "I Was Told to Come Alone: My Journey Behind the Lines of Jihad." Souad, I was wondering if you could start us off by telling a little bit more about what compelled you to write this book.

00:02:31 Souad Mekhennet: Well, first of all, thank you very much for the invitation. It's an honor to be here with you. Um, there were different... several reasons for the decision to write this book at this moment or this stage of my life. And one was that I felt with, you know, all that's happening, all that happened after the so-called Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, the whole question of what's going to happen in the region or also what is going to happen with ISIS and then Al Qaeda, I thought it might be a good time to actually reflect on what I have learned on my journey through the so-called world of jihad.

00:03:15 But also to explain to readers what, you know, what are the different steps of radicalization, why does radicalization happen, and how does it happen. Because I think it would be a big illusion to believe that just because the so-called caliphate has been destroyed or is going to be, you know, going to go away in Raqqa or in Mosul, that this will be the end of terrorism. It won't, because the reasons of radicalization are still out there.

00:03:46 Jessica Chen: Yeah, I found it fascinating that your book was a combination of memoir and reportage. I mean, it's different from other

books that are written about that subject-- or this subject. Was that something you were very consciously aware of when you were writing?

Souad Mekhennet: So I had to make, to take a decision here, because, I mean, first of all for me, it's very difficult to write about myself, and it was also a difficult decision I had to make, because as a journalist, usually we try to... We don't want to become the story. It's... we write about other people, and it's... I'm sorry, it's the... there's a little...

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But we usually write about other people, about topics, but not about ourselves. So for me, it was a little difficult to... to, to actually say, "Yes, I have to include myself, and I have to also explain to the reader who I am, how I grew up, where I grew up especially, what my background is." But I felt it was needed, because a lot of people ask me, "Why are you doing what you're doing?" And I often try to explain to them because I grew up, I'm the daughter of a Muslim couple, I'm Muslim myself, and it has in fact to do with my own upbringing.

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And so I felt it was important to explain to the reader who I was, or who I am, how I grew up, and all of this. But it was very difficult.

Jessica Chen: And that becomes kind of a central... It's the key that unlocks a lot of the stories that you're able to tell as your career develops. I'd like to start exactly where it's most uncomfortable on the personal side. Your childhood was spent both in Germany and Morocco. Your parents and your grandmother figure very prominently into that, and I was wondering if you could just share a little bit more about how that was an informative experience for you.

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Souad Mekhennet: Yeah, so first of all, the reason why I went away and ended up living in Morocco for three-and-a-half years with my grandmother, just to explain to the people who haven't read the book yet, was because my parents... My older sister is mentally challenged. And I have two older sisters, my parents had a nanny for both of them, but the nanny basically said, "I cannot actually take the third child, as well." And I was born in Frankfurt, in Germany, and then my parents

couldn't afford a second nanny-- they were guest workers-- and so the decision was that I should, I would... You know, they sent me to Morocco, and I grew up there.

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I lived for three-and-a-half years with my grandmother, who was a very strong female character. She was in fact the first feminist I met in my life. Um, she had divorced three husbands, and she had brought up her kids on her own. And this all happened in Morocco, an Arab Muslim country. So and she basically, even though she was divorced from my grandfather, he would still come and visit me. And they would basically, they told me a lot of stories about how they... my grandfather used to be a freedom fighter, basically, against the French colonializers. And they were telling me how they fought alongside their Jewish sisters and brothers against the French.

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Our neighbors in Morocco were Jewish. My first friend in Morocco was a Jewish girl. Even though I went to Quran school-- and my grandmother was very particular about that, because we were descendants of the Prophet-- we were still also brought up in the sense that my grandmother, or my grandparents told me, "We have to look at what we have in common with other religions." So we were... I was brought up like this. And this of course played also a role in how I looked at myself, my religion, and at other people as something, you know, my religion as a bridge-building religion, and so this is how I was brought up.

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And indeed, she also influenced me in the way, I would say, to become an independent-thinking person. And my grandfather, in a way that when... I remember until today how he once told me that the most powerful people in the world were those who could write and read, and especially those who could write down history. And he told me because he felt that his story, or the stories of his generation, or from their perspective, would never be told. And I guess that it's also one of the reasons why I was interested in writing. And then the reason to become a journalist, that came when I was a teenager and watched "All the President's Men," you know, the famous movie.

(laughter)

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Jessica Chen: Going in a little bit to kind of your childhood in Germany, the child of immigrant parents, but parents who encouraged you to really embrace where you were and to build those bridges. Can you describe some of the more challenging aspects of that?

Souad Mekhennet: Yeah, sure. So, you know, when my parents took me back to Germany, I went to Christian kindergarten for a year, and they wanted me to really... They wanted us all to what we call integrate, right? They wanted us to know about German culture, about also different religions. So I went to a Christian kindergarten. I played Virgin Mary twice in my life.

(laughter)

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Souad Mekhennet: Until one child actually burnt my hair with a candle. Okay, I still have long hair, right?

(laughter)

Souad Mekhennet No, but you know, and they... We celebrated Christmas. My parents would explain to us that, you know, Jesus was a prophet also in Islam. So we were trying... they were trying to, you know, to live a life where we were Muslims, and we knew that, and we honored that, but where we looked at what we had in common with other religions. So, um...

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However, while my parents were actually the ones who wanted us to integrate, it was sometimes very difficult, because of the German environment back then, or the environment at least where, that was... that surrounded us, because we were a little bit this... You know, people wouldn't allow their children to play with us because we were the kids of guest workers. And we lived in this very posh German neighborhood. We were the only ones that came of, that came from a different background.

We were the only Muslim family living there, and so... It was a little... So it felt a little bit like an outsider.

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However, in that same building, we had also a couple, a Jewish couple, and I felt kind of, like, very close to them, because I had this Jewish friend in Morocco, and then they were, you know, there was this Jewish couple, and they were Holocaust survivors. And this was... So I spent also time with them, and then I had also kind of, like, German godparents. However, in the '90s, there was a time in Germany, I was a teenager, where the houses of Turkish migrants, you know, started... I'm sorry, okay, it's the officer back there, hi.

(laughter)

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Souad Mekhennet: No, I was just wondering where this noise came from. But so there were attacks against Turkish migrants. And I felt really... I feared for our lives, because you had this right-wing movement, they increased, and at some stage as a teenager, I found myself and my brother walking in Frankfurt on the street, and a car started, like, chasing us. And people started screaming, "We're going to burn you, we're going to kill you, we're going to put you into, like, the gas chambers."

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And I had, you know, I had listened to all the stories this Holocaust survivor couple had told me, the family Weiss, and about what happened to them in Germany. So I was really worried that now we would be the next victims of right-wing extremism. And those kind of moments were very important, because, you know, I understand now-- or understood much better later when I had to cover radicalization or extremism-- and some of the people whom I interviewed later told me that they felt like outsiders in Europe. Or that they, you know, I understood the feeling.

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However, my parents, when they felt back then that I started to really question also my own identity, because I thought, "I cannot live in Germany," or we wouldn't be able to live in Germany, they, you know, they tried to explain to me, "Look, you have to start looking at what other people..." "You know, there are still people out there who are trying to

build bridges. Don't look at it from the perspective that there are only bad people out there. Look at it from the perspective that there are still people out there who want to live with the Muslim community and who speak up on behalf of the Muslim community."

00:13:03 And interestingly, back then, the people who went to the houses of those Turkish victims were members of the Jewish community. And that really, you know, when I saw that, it really made me think about what my parents told me, and I decided to actually not give in to the fear, and instead basically they... "Look, okay, we're going to stay here, and I'm going to try to make my career in Germany."

00:13:29 Jessica Chen: Going, you had alluded to "All the President's Men" being this inspiration for you to decide to become a journalist. And you were, indeed, in journalism school when 9/11 occurred. Can you talk a little bit about how those events went on to shape both your immediate actions following, but also kind of how you approached your career?

00:13:50 Souad Mekhennet: So actually, I had just graduated from journalism school, but I was at university. So I went to a journalism school in Hamburg-- now, that's also very important. Journalism school happened in Hamburg, Germany, from 1999-- second half of 1999-- until May 2001. In April 2001, my journalism class and I, we took a trip. It was our, as we call it, school trip before we graduated from the school, and we came to New York.

00:14:22 And I also... You know, it was my first trip to the United States I was quite very excited about this, and New York, and it felt-- it felt so incredible to be in this city and not to feel that you are foreign, because everybody came from somewhere else. And I liked that very much. And then I found... I came to the Financial District, as well, and I stood in front of the Twin Towers.

And I was this very young, you know, I was one of the youngest people who ever went to the journalism school, and then I graduated from journalism school and decided to go back to Frankfurt to finish my

university degree. Until, then September 11, you know, the attacks happened.

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And all of you, or some of you might remember, three of the four 9/11 pilots used to live in Hamburg. So it was very difficult for me to understand how people who used to live in Hamburg, around the same time that I went to journalism school in Hamburg, turned into, you know, people who committed mass murder. And for me, it was, you know, I decided to... I went to my professor, my university professor. You know, I studied political science, international relations, psychology, and so on. And I told him, "Listen, I have to go back, I have to go to Hamburg and find out what happened to those people, because they have committed those crimes in the name of my religion."

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And I was a young journalist, and I wanted... I felt the need that, to really research those neighborhoods, because I couldn't explain what happened to them. And this was the beginning. So I went back to Hamburg, and I started to go to neighborhoods that I had never known before. Um, and it was the beginning for me into, like, basically, a totally new world. And the first time I found myself being really directly confronted with an interpretation of, of the religion that is very much mixed with politics, that my parents always... You know, my parents had always tried their level best to keep us away from this kind of mindset, and then suddenly, I found myself actually covering it.

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Jessica Chen: You had an interaction with a 9/11 family member that essentially kind of gave you that primal question that you continued to ask throughout your investigation of what was going on in other countries and then back home. Can you talk about that interaction a little bit?

Souad Mekhennet: Yeah, this was actually Maureen Fanning. She was the wife of a firefighter who died during 9/11. And she came to Hamburg. There was a trial against somebody who was a close friend of Mohamed Atta and the other two so-called 9/11 pilots who used to study in Hamburg.

00:17:09 And this woman came to Hamburg in order to attend the trial, and we went with her for dinner. I had started working for "The Washington Post," and there were a couple of journalists who worked for U.S. media. And then at some stage she looked at us, and she said... She basically asked, "Why didn't we know that there are people out there who are hating us so much? Where does the hatred come from? And our politicians didn't tell us, but you are journalists, you also didn't tell us, and why do they hate us so much?"

00:17:39 And she... She looked at me, and she asked the question, as well, because I was the only person in that circle of Muslim-Arab descent. And I thought she wanted an answer, and I couldn't give her a real answer back then. And on the way back to the hotel, I spoke to my-- back then-- you know, colleague, Peter Finn, who's today my editor, actually, at "The Washington Post."

00:18:04 And I asked him, I said, "Peter, why, I mean, why are we not speaking to those people? Actually, we owe it to those people like this woman and others to give them an explanation." And he said, "It's not like we wouldn't want to talk to them, but it's, A, very dangerous, and those people, they don't want to talk to us."

So that was the beginning of my journey into the world of jihad, basically, and I felt always that I, as a journalist, owe it to people like her and others to give an explanation. And I also never wanted to be in front of somebody who had lost a beloved one, who would basically tell me or other journalists, "Why didn't we know? Why didn't any person tell us?"

00:18:51 So I wanted to tell the story from a different perspective. Which meant, for me, also, to take more risks, of course. To travel into places and talk to people who were members, leaders, of terrorist organizations, or people who actually also wanted to become suicide bombers. So it was a totally different approach. We no longer covered the stories that... after they happened, but we also spoke... we then started traveling, or I started traveling into areas to speak to people who were on their way of

doing something, or who were leaders or members of these organizations.

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Jessica Chen: And that actually becomes a very complex process, almost a self-reflective process for you. Starting out, in 2003, you traveled to Iraq, and you became, you came face-to-face with kind of the complexity of the sectarian conflict there. How did your personal background give you insight into what you were observing?

Souad Mekhennet: So the personal background was helpful, but also sometimes challenging. So I come from a-- I'm basically what people call a "sushi" because my dad is Sunni, my mom is Shia. So that's why...

(laughter)

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And both are descendants of the Prophet. Um, so when I was in Iraq, and I started, you know, realizing that there was this deeply rooted hatred between some people who were-- you know, the Sunni/Shia divide, as we call it. And this increased, actually, after the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime, because some people came back to Iraq who used to live in Iran, and they were, you know, they brought in new militias, some people, a lot of arms were running around Iraq. It was a very, very difficult situation. So I actually for the first time also learned from my parents how they had to fight before, I mean... when they wanted to get married, against the prejudice.

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You know, some of the... Some family members of my mom didn't want her to marry my dad, because he was Sunni. Um, so it was, for me, very, very difficult to understand why is this happening, why are people fighting because of something that took place so many, so many years ago, right? The whole question of who should be the... who should be the... basically... follow after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. So this was the whole beginning of the Sunni/Shia aggression.

00:21:34 So... However, it helped me to a certain extent, also to move into areas in Iraq. When, for example, I needed to go into the Shia areas, and they learned that my mom was a descendant of the Prophet from the Shia side, they would grant me some access to places. When I went into, like, the Sunni areas, it was helpful that, of course, I had been to a Quran school in Morocco, and knew also about, you know, the Sunni perspective. So it helped, but it was very challenging for me to understand the hatred and where the hatred came from.

Jessica Chen: Mm-hmm.

00:22:16 Souad Mekhennet: And also if I may add this, it was very difficult for me to also understand why certain decisions were made back then. Why the... I mean, first of all, the whole question why the U.S. and also the U.K. decided to go into Iraq in the first place. The whole question of weapons of mass destruction. Um, you know, because we all know there were no weapons of mass destruction.

00:22:44 The whole... I was in Iraq when people decided to dismantle the army and the police, and I started, and I basically said, "Oh, God, you know, now, this is absolutely going to be a backlash here." Because people were so angry, people started seeing that militias actually took over instead of, like, police forces. And you could basically see, day after day, that this wouldn't end very well. And it was very difficult for me to understand, and don't forget, I was still a full-fledged student.

00:23:20 So when I was in Iraq and covered war during the day, in the evenings and in the night, I was actually writing the reports for my professor back in Frankfurt, because he insisted that I would still, you know, finish my papers. And it was so difficult for me to understand and to, to understand why were those decisions made, and what kind of long-term, you know, effects they would have on security, not only in the region, but for all of us. The rise of ISIS-- I mean, first Al Qaeda, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and then later ISIS. This all had to do with what happened in 2003 in Iraq.

- 00:24:00 Jessica Chen: I think you've raised an important question in this chapter-- which later you come back to, particularly when the threat moves home-- which is the question of how we understand the situation in the Middle East, and whether our policies sometimes are reductive. We take a situation that has layers of complexity, and we kind of categorize it in a very, I guess, a black-and-white way.
- 00:24:22 And I thought in this chapter it wasn't just the... It's not the first time, but you do interrogate this idea of implementing American values like democracy in such a society where, you know, it's... Our understanding of why and how it should be implemented does not exactly match the reality of the situation. And I was wondering if you can just kind of unpack this further, particularly someone who popped out to me in this chapter was Aqila al-Hashimi. And so if you can talk about that a little bit.
- 00:24:51 Souad Mekhennet: Yeah. So you know, when... um, you... A lot of people here might remember, we had the whole idea that Saddam Hussein was somebody who was, you know, killing Kurds and Shia, right? I mean, this was the story back then. When I went to Iraq, I started... At some stage, I realized that actually, you know what? There were some members of the Baath Party who were also of Kurdish descent, there were some members who were of Shia descent, and there were some members who were, for example, also Christians.
- 00:25:26 So it wasn't... It was back then not the question whether you were... Of course he killed, we know that he killed Kurds, and we know also that he killed people who were Shia, but he also killed people who were Sunni. So the whole perspective of, you know, "This is the regime that killed Shia," wasn't really what I saw on the ground.
- 00:25:47 Aqila al-Hashimi was a Shia woman. She was a very high-level member in the Baath Party, and with a lot of, you know, responsibility under Saddam Hussein. And she also, after the fall of, or the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein, she still tried to be part of the new kind of, like, you know, government somehow. And she had a lot of knowledge, she was highly educated, and she was killed.

00:26:20 She was... I was supposed to interview her, and she basically told me over the phone when we had the conversation that things were not going well, and that she was very worried about how the directions, the situation Iraq was taking. And she was killed, she was killed by some militia. And it was one of those moments where I realized, I said, "Wait a second, we are presenting this story from a totally different perspective somehow." This whole black-and-white, like, he, Saddam, the Sunni, was killing Shia, didn't really fit into what I saw on the ground.

00:26:41 And that was one of the moments where I realized this is not going into the right direction. And you know, she was a woman who was not only highly educated, but she was also very independent. And I saw a lot of women-- and no matter whether they were Sunni or Shia-- who were very highly educated, independent, and some, in the neighborhoods, in the Shia neighborhoods, started telling me they would no longer be allowed to go out, you know, by themselves.

00:27:30 They had to cover. And so Iraq changed, the whole situation changed for women. And I started realizing, you know, we might have to look at this from a different perspective, not only from a perspective of, from a sectarian perspective, but it was more the question, if people were members of the Baath Party, they had, you know, they were treated differently from people who were not members of the Baath Party. And this was the conflict I saw on the ground.

00:28:04 Jessica Chen: I want to go a little bit into the sloppier elements of the war on terror. You talk about the case of Khalid el-Masri, who... And I was hoping you could kind of share a little bit more about that, but it brings to mind just kind of the conflicts between our ideals, the Western ideals of democracy, how they're implemented. Also kind of how, you know, do we delegitimize some of the values that we hold in trying to achieve those values in other places?

00:28:37 Souad Mekhennet: So, you know, it's a very interesting case, the el-Masri case. This is a... So after Iraq, I returned to Germany, six months later,

basically. And I had to study for my... You know, for some tests, and suddenly I got this phone call. And it was this man on the other end of the line, and he asked me, "Are you the journalist Souad Mekhennet?" in Arabic. And I said, "Yes." And then he told me, "Well, my name is Khalid el-Masri. I was kidnapped by the C.I.A., and I just returned," and he started talking, and talking.

00:29:17 He was... he said his family disappeared, and he was worried, and what happened to his family? Did something happen to them? And I tried to stop this man. I mean, first of all, I thought maybe this is somebody who is trying to make a bad, you know, joke or something. However, you will find later, you will see in the book, I describe how we actually found out that what he told us was the truth.

00:29:40 This man, there was a, you know, they thought he was somebody else, and they kidnapped him, and he was taken to Afghanistan into the secret detention centers until somebody figured out, "Oh, we got the wrong guy." And they basically... Basically just took him to the border region of... Albania, and told him, "Okay, you can leave, but forget about telling any person about your story, about what happened to you, because nobody's goin to believe you. You have no evidence."

00:30:13 Now, this story is something that we might not have on our radar any longer. I mean, I do, because of course, I worked on it, and it became a very important story to cover for us. However, some of the people who got recruited by Al Qaeda, and later by ISIS, until this day, talk about the el-Masri stories and other stories.

00:30:37 And they, as you rightly say, when it comes to our values, they say that we are hypocrite, because they would say, "Look at what happened to el-Masri, or other people who ended up in secret detention centers, and who were tortured. What kind of justice did they get?" Especially given that el-Masri was really an innocent person.

00:31:02 And so we... I often hear from people who got recruited that they believe we in the West are hypocrite. And that's indeed a problem, because as

long as we don't talk about these cases, and we don't talk about, you know... some kind of, what can we do in order to discuss them, but also to... Yeah, what has to happen? How can justice happen? Recruiters will use them against us, and they will say that we are hypocrite. So that's a big, big topic until today.

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Jessica Chen: What are some other kind of factors that go into the recruitment of individuals? How do they... you know, what are some common factors that you can cite from your reporting for people joining groups like ISIS?

Souad Mekhennet: Yeah. So, you know, there is... So firstly, people who grew up in Europe have very often a different kind of background than people who later got recruited by ISIS, and who grew up in North Africa or the Middle East. However, there are some things they have in common. First of all, the war in Iraq, 2003, they are basically saying, "So where were the weapons of mass destructions? Why were there no consequences for the people who took the decision to go to Iraq and topple the regime?" That's number one. So they, again, say we are hypocrite.

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Um, in terms of people very often who got recruited in Europe, they would talk to me or tell me about a phase in their life, and I also know from my upbringing, which is when, that they say they try to become part of the European society, but they always felt rejected. And that they felt there's a war against Islam going on, that people, for example, the so-called Muhammad cartoons that were printed in Europe, that this also showed double standards because the newspaper, the Danish newspaper "Jyllands-Posten," who printed the so-called Muhammad cartoons refused to print Jesus cartoons, saying that, you know, a couple of weeks before they printed the Muhammad cartoons, saying that those Jesus cartoons would hurt the feelings of their readers.

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And on the other hand, they printed the so-called Muhammad cartoons, saying this was part of freedom of speech. So people would use all these things to say, you know, there's a war against Islam going on, especially in Europe. This is how they see it. So, and they would, you know, go one

point after the other, and what is so important about this is while they do this, and while they explain, and while they tell me about their own narrative.

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I figured-- I understood they see themselves as victims. So, and that's very important, because the problem is: those guys, when they see themselves as victims, they don't understand, they don't see their actions as terrorism. I mean, they wouldn't describe it as this, they describe it as, "Oh, we are just defending ourselves." And that-- sometimes when I had discussions with them, and you saw in the book, like the ISIS commander whom I interviewed, we had a huge debate in this car, because I basically tried to explain to them, you know, "You are no longer the victim, you are actually perpetrator. You are killing people, and this has nothing to do-- even though you see yourself, even though there might have been a time where you felt that you had been a victim, it doesn't justify what you're doing."

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And... but it's very important to understand that this whole perspective of seeing themselves as victims gives actually... They believe that it gives them the right to do the kind of actions they have done. And that they felt the urge of creating some kind of Islamic state in order to, what they call, defend the, you know, the religion, because they felt strongly that the religion is under attack.

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So that's people who come from Europe. In the terms of people from the Middle East, what they have in common with some of those who have been recruited in Europe, is that foreign policy is a big, big topic. All the things we no longer discuss, such as the war in Iraq, Guantanamo, they, and especially people who saw how Shia militias started to take over certain areas in Iraq and also committed atrocities before-- since 2003, those are all very, very, important points that we, you know, that basically help recruiters to brainwash people in that area, and the reason why ISIS was able to establish the so-called caliphate or to take over Mosul so easily was because when they went to the Anbar region, they explained to people there, "We"-- now, I'm quoting ISIS commanders-- "We, ISIS is going to be the savior of Sunni Muslims in the region. We are going to defend you from the atrocities of Shia militias."

00:36:30 And when some of those Sunni tribes in the region understood what ISIS wanted and how they changed also the whole life of people in the region, and they rejected it, they were the first ones who got beheaded. And... so there was... but in order to... It's very, very important to understand that ISIS also played with the fears of people living in that region, and that's the-- it's a very, very dangerous, of course, power game, given also if we look at what's happening today in Iraq, who's fighting against ISIS?

00:37:08 It's again militias, which also raises the question: what will happen in the next couple of years in that region? It might... the way how people behave at the moment, how militias behave, might this actually help a new kind of extremist group to raise again in that region?

00:37:29 Jessica Chen: I definitely want to go back to where you think we're headed in the next couple of years, but I do want to focus a little bit on kind of the difficult situations in which you're reporting from. You are a single Muslim woman, and reading this book as a woman, there are moments where you kind of say, "Well, you know, this is an experience that any woman can identify with when people are asking you about your marital situation."

00:37:49 But I'm also curious-- there was such danger that you traveled into, both from the people that you were interviewing and not knowing for sure that your safety was guaranteed, but also from the countries in which you were entering that there were various kind of elements in which you couldn't be certain kind of where your security lay in terms of who is making those decisions. Can you talk a little bit about how you navigate that and how you process some of these narratives while also thinking about, you know, kind of, where you are going to be next?

00:38:22 Souad Mekhennet: So, you want me to talk about the marriage proposals first, or...

(laughter)

Jessica Chen: I personally would love for you to talk about that, yeah.

Souad Mekhennet: Okay, okay. Yeah, so that's actually quite a big challenge. I mean, it's... You know, when you are in the middle of the night in a car with a Taliban commander, and then you... I mean, first of all, the whole setting, to be in Karachi, the place where you mentioned, I mean, Daniel Pearl was just mentioned, the award, which is, of course, a big honor to have received this award and I'm very humbled.

00:38:59

But you know, I found myself in a car with the Taliban commander in Karachi, and I then realized, "Oh, my God, we are actually driving out of the city," and I remembered Daniel Pearl, and I remembered other colleagues who had been in difficult situations. And then you realize, you know, at some stage that they want to take you to a barbecue place, which is somewhere by the... you know, saying the best one is close to, whatever, the highway. And then we ended up having this situation where I, you know, I sat having barbecue with a Taliban commander and these two other Talibs.

00:39:42

And once they brought the food, the guys said, "Okay, let's forget about politics. Let's talk about the real important stuff." And I'm, like, "Okay, what's coming next?" Maybe he's talking, he's telling me about the future of the group and so on, and then he basically, you know, starts asking, telling me that he was looking for a second wife.

(laughter)

Souad Mekhennet: I said, "Well..." And I was able to convince him that it wouldn't be a good idea to get married to me, so but...

(laughter)

00:40:14 Souad Mekhennet: But I had several such situations and it's sometimes, I mean, to navigate that and to figure out how can you say no to one person who basically is carrying a gun and you don't know how they would react. And especially to people who have a totally different point of view of how women should be, which I found also very-- to a certain extent, very weird, because I would ask them all these tough questions, and they would answer, and then still want to get married, which I'm, like... You really want to have these kinds of discussions every day? But no, so that's one.

00:40:57 That was very, very challenging sometimes. However, you asked, I mean, the question about how do you navigate when you are, as a reporter, of course, our job is to be-- not to take sides. Even if it's sometimes very, very difficult, because, you know, you find yourself in a situation where you discuss with people or you have to interview them, and even though you might fundamentally disagree with them, your job is to be fair to all the sides, and to give again, talk to every side, and to challenge every side.

00:41:42 So sometimes I would go home and actually just, honestly speaking, could barely-- it's difficult to understand how people sometimes think, and it's difficult to-- for me to really-- or it was difficult for me to also... (sighs) You know, the challenge, how to deal with the hatred.

00:42:15 That was something that took a long time for me to process, as well. How do you deal with people who so deeply hate? How do you deal with people who hate people or hate people because they belong to a religion who are, you know, friends of yours? How do you deal with hatred against one group or the other, and you know you're having, within your own family, people who belong to that group?

Jessica Chen: Yeah.

00:42:46 Souad Mekhennet: Actually, it was one of the biggest challenges that I faced. And then, of course, when you cover these kind of topics and you interview people, leaders of terrorist organizations, it is our job-- or my

job, to make sure that, you know, as much as I have to care about my own safety and security, I also have to make sure that they, when they meet me, that nobody follows me, that nothing happens during those meetings.

00:43:18 And it's quite challenging, especially-- and you find the Algeria chapter here-- I mean, when you suddenly figure out that some intelligence services are after you, as well, because they know that you are trying to interview the leader of Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb, and they are trying to actually find this guy.

00:43:38 And so it's a very, very difficult situation, you know, to be in the middle, but it's our job. Otherwise, we are not able to tell people, like the wife of the firefighter, we're not able to give them answers. And in all-- to be able to give answers, you know, it means you have to travel there and you have to talk to the people, and have to deal with what you hear. But it's the only chance to give Maureen Fanning and all the people like her an answer, and that's why we have been what we're doing for all these years.

00:44:20 Jessica Chen: You allude to kind of the hate-- the hate, in particular that's being directed to these communities that you belong to. But something I also found fascinating was that that hate didn't seem to always-- it never seemed to be directed towards you, personally. And that was kind of an interesting dynamic. I wondered how that made you feel in terms of realizing that some of the access that you're being permitted was in part, also, because they found you to be someone that they could confide their view in. How did you kind of navigate that tension?

00:44:50 Souad Mekhennet: Well, I mean, look. They had been-- you'll see in this book, you'll find a situation where, actually, I had German police showing up at my apartment and basically telling me that there was a threat against my life, as well. So, there were also challenging moments in my own personal life.

00:45:12 But when it comes to those leaders who are interviewed, whether it was the leader of Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb, or Shakir al-Abssi, members of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's network, the ISIS commanders or the Taliban, of course, first of all, they don't-- it's not like I pick up the phone and I say, "I want to interview you," and they say, "Yes, come here." No, it's a process. This really takes a lot of time. It means that you have to travel, you have to talk to different people. And of course, by now, I mean, then, they read what we are doing. It's not like they don't know.

Jessica Chen: Yeah.

00:45:53 Souad Mekhennet: They monitor. They monitor what we write, they see what we tweet, they know who we are. And of course they know that when I'm, like, in my personal life, I don't wear the veil, I don't wear the hijab, I'm a person who speaks. I give, you know, I... I write books, they know that. However, I think the reason why they, at the end, decided to talk to me, there were different-- I mean, different reasons. First of all, as I said, they read what we write, and I think they understood that I my level best as a journalist, to get all the sides. In the story. And that I challenge all the sides, because it's my job.

Jessica Chen: Yeah.

00:46:42 Souad Mekhennet: Then, they-- so you kind of, like, have a reputation, as well. The other thing is... I had situations where I basically didn't do interviews because people had a different idea of how a journalist should be, or what a journalist should be.

00:47:03 So, when I go, before I meet those people, I explain to them, I say, "Look, I'm a journalist. My job is to challenge you. My job is to ask you questions. I'm going to come, I'm going to take the, you know, this risk. I will travel, I will try to hear your side of the story, but I will also challenge you. And I'm doing the same with every other side. So if you think that I'm just going to be there and do some PR piece, that's not who I am. And so if that's what you're expecting, we shouldn't do this interview,

because I don't want to risk, to you know, later be the target of whatever."

00:47:38 So, and I think that's one of the reasons why they decided to talk to me, and of course, I speak Arabic, so which means I don't have to take a translator with me. Which means they don't-- it makes things a bit easier, but it's not the only reason. The reason is really that it's been-- I've been doing this for many years, now.

00:48:01 Jessica Chen: Yeah. There's a critique in-- and I want to get really quickly to the Arab Spring, because it very much influenced kind of why you wanted to write this book-- but also there's a critique of how the media decides to describe a situation. You know, the people who write the history. And for you, you know, when you're talking about the Arab Spring in here, you have a different take on what was really going on. I mean, we were hearing that you know, democracy is close, and you know, you have all of these power structures kind of changing and people are taking action. What was the sign that you saw that wasn't covered at that time?

00:48:42 Souad Mekhennet: So I have-- in this book, you will find a couple of stories of people who get radicalized in Europe, there's this-- some of you might know-- the rapper, the German rapper, Deso Dogg, Abu Talha al-Almani, and he was also a couple of times targeted by U.S. drones, but he's still alive, actually. He joined ISIS later.

00:49:06 People like him and others, I saw them, basically, getting very enthusiastic about the so-called Arab Spring, and some other, you know, Al Qaeda leaders, Taliban commanders, they were telling me, "This is amazing, this is great, it's the Islamic Spring." And I said-- and I understood, I mean, they told me, "This is great, we're getting rid of all those people like Gaddafi and all those rulers and leaders and we will be able to get into the countries and infiltrate."

00:49:40 Now, I also saw in 2000... so this happened all in 2011, already. In 2011, 2012, I saw people traveling from Europe to Libya, and later, or then later

to Syria. And this was, for example, one of the side of the stories that people didn't want to cover. Or the people didn't want to see.

00:50:03 I was in 2011 in several countries where protests emerged. I was in Egypt, I was also in prison in Egypt at some stage. Not visiting the prison, I became a prisoner, actually, just to make sure. So, because we happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But when we covered the protests in Egypt and also in Bahrain, or when I was there and I speak-- as I said, I speak Arabic-- we made a couple of mistakes here.

00:50:34 First of all, the whole-- so if you remember, everybody looked at the-- for example, in Egypt-- at the Tahrir Square, right? The Tahrir Square became the picture of the protests in Egypt. However, I was in Alexandria with my colleague, Nick Coolidge, and when we interviewed people there or when I spoke to people who protested and asked them, "Why are you protesting here?" I would hear some people telling me, "Yeah, we want a strong leader like Gaddafi, you know, because he really takes care of his people." I'm, like, really?

00:51:09 But that's not... he's not a democrat. Or some people said, "We are protesting because the bread prices are so high, we want better healthcare, we want this, we want that." And I realized, wait a second, not everybody here wants democracy or even, for example, in the case when I went to Bahrain and people told me, "We want democracy," I would ask them, "What kind of democracy do you want?" I mean, does it mean that women will have equal rights like men, or so on, and some people would turn to me and say, "Well, maybe our ayatollah will actually decide later what exactly this means."

00:51:45 And so I understood, wait a second, there's something wrong here. It's not about, you know, some people really wanted democracy, but not every person who participated in the protests wanted, first of all, the same democracy or the kind of democracy we envision as a democracy. They were talking about voting systems, and voting systems, so basically that the majority will rule over the rest, but that didn't necessarily mean they were talking about the same value. And this was something I actually saw when I covered Bahrain.

- 00:52:22 In the terms of Egypt, I felt that we were focusing so much on Tahrir Square, and we didn't realize that a lot that happened in the rest of the country, and a lot of people who were on the streets there had a different idea from what they wanted from the people who were in Tahrir Square. So we use all these squares-- Pearl Square, Tahrir Square-- and I don't know what else, and thought that this was representing the rest of the country, and I think this was one of the fundamental mistakes we made.
- 00:52:55 The other thing I realized... so because, of course, I asked myself why am I seeing this from a different perspective than so many others, you know, other journalists? And I realized at some stage, first of all, I speak Arabic, so I didn't need a translator. I could do the interviews on my own.
- 00:53:16 Very often, colleagues who came from different countries, whether from the U.S. or from Europe who didn't speak Arabic, hired translators or so-called stringers, people who would organize interviews for them, who were actually also part of the protest movement. Which, unfortunately, led to the situation that they would only show them one side of the story. And that-- just to mention some of the points that I witnessed, which I also mention in the book, yeah.
- 00:53:47 Jessica Chen: We're running short of time, and I've just realized there are so many other questions I want to ask you, largely because I think you capture such a variety of stories and perspectives. But one narrative I definitely wanted to touch on was your story of Sonia in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. And kind of the stories, you know, speaking about the stories that aren't kind of told or highlighted. I was wondering if you can kind of tell that story and help us to understand the importance of telling stories like hers.
- 00:54:16 Souad Mekhennet: Yeah. Yeah, it was one of, a very important stories. So, you know, after the attacks in Paris happened, you might all remember, there was one person who was one of the leading figures, one of the plotters, Abdelhamid Abaaoud. And Abdelhamid Abaaoud, he

was actually plotting a second wave of attacks, and then at some stage, he was killed in one apartment building in Saint-Denis in Paris.

00:54:49 And one of the reasons why the French authorities were able to find him was because of Sonia. Sonia, a Muslim woman who lived in Paris and who was actually friends with Abaaoud's cousin, she was the one who actually called the police and told them that she knew where Abaaoud was hiding. And if it weren't for this woman who risked her life and who told the French authorities where he was hiding, we might have had a second wave of attacks.

00:55:24 And I-- you know, back then, when we wrote the story and I was able to find her, like, to contact her, and we interviewed her. I found that her story was so important because, you know, especially in Europe during this period of times and until today, we have unfortunately the rise of some very right-wing movements, or populist. And she, you know, it was important to show people, look, there are Muslims and she is one of them, who are risking their lives in order to do what she-- and I'm quoting her now-- she said, "I had to do the right thing because this guy killed innocent people, and this is not what my religion has taught me."

00:56:09 And it was just incredible that we were the first newspaper to actually tell a story that would say or basically mention that this woman, the woman who helped finding Abaaoud, was a Muslim. And I think it was important to explain to people, it's not black and white.

Jessica Chen: And there were some obstacles, too, with you even being able to publish the story, correct?

Souad Mekhennet: That was Jihadi John.

Jessica Chen: Oh, got it. Yeah.

Souad Mekhennet: It was Jihadi John. When I helped uncovering the identity of Jihadi John.

00:56:44 Jessica Chen: And just because I know this is probably something that many of you do want to hear about, and I will definitely plan time for questions, too, so prepare to get those questions in mind. Can you tell us, just very briefly, kind of the story of kind of unmasking Jihadi John? Because I think, in a lot of ways for me, the courage of her kind of standing and saying, you know, "I'm a Muslim woman who chose to do the right thing. This is my-- I'm acting in the right here." For you, there was also a very personal decision to have your name associated with the unmasking of Jihadi John.

00:57:18 Souad Mekhennet: Yes. So, first of all, Jihadi John killed some of my colleagues I mean, colleagues of ours, of journalists. That became, you know, very personal to many of us. Not only to me, but, secondly, I later found out that the person, the ISIS commander whom I interviewed in the car, was the boss of Jihadi John. That he was the person who had overseen all the kidnappings of journalists, which I didn't know back then when I was with him in the car.

00:57:53 And so, third, I was actually involved somehow, like some other journalists we were trying to help, getting some of the hostages out. And in the case of Peter Kassig, we actually were-- we had the feeling that we were on a good... there was a chance to get him out, and then, as I mention in the book, some articles emerged that weren't very helpful, and then he was killed, as well. So it became, from that perspective, a very personal story for all of us.

00:58:29 Yeah, so when I found out who Jihadi John was and I explained in-depthly the different steps and how difficult it was, and I worked with my colleague Adam Goldman on this story, there was this moment where somebody, an Arab colleague, asked me, he said, "Do you really want to put your name up there?" And I decided that I had to.

- 00:58:53 First of all, I'm a journalist. But secondly, it was also, to a certain extent, a message to Jihadi John and people like him that he was hiding behind this mask. And that we, as journalists, and in this case, I as a woman of Muslim descent, we will do our jobs and we will take away the mask from them. Yes, and they will, you know, they will be known and they will be seen and it was very important to me to do the story.
- 00:59:28 Jessica Chen: Now I'm going to go into the audience for questions. If you have a question, go ahead and raise your hand and we'll have a mic travel to you. Right here. One second while the mic comes.
- 00:59:59 Woman: Thank you for coming. But, specifically in Europe, and I'm sure you can answer this in other areas, as well, if you would like, but this question is pertaining to Europe. What conditions do you think need to be changed, or what policies do you think need to be implemented, or what socioeconomic developments do you think should be addressed, maybe, in Europe, to reduce the rise of radicalization?
- 01:00:22 Souad Mekhennet: So, you know, I'm... I mean, first of all, I'm a journalist. I cannot-- I'm not trying to be a politician, here. What I can tell you, what's not helpful-- let me do this from the other perspective. From what is definitely not helpful is to have people who generalize about, you know, Muslim. That's definitely not helpful, whether it's in Europe or anywhere else.
- 01:00:51 The whole question of why people get radicalized to-- you know, here's the thing. I get a lot-- very often, people ask me in Germany, don't you think that the Muslim community should be more active, and attend more protests, and do more protests, and show that they are against this kind of terrorism? And then I try to explain to people, the moment where you describe it as, "The Muslim community should do it," you are actually confirming what those terrorists are saying, that they are basically doing this because of Islam.
- 01:01:35 But in the moment where we all say it is something that everyone, everybody, every person should actually attend protests, and it's not a

matter whether you are Muslim or not, but it's a matter whether you want to protest and set a sign against terrorism. That's a much stronger message, because the moment where we make it sound as if it's purely related just to Islam, we basically are confirming what those people want us to confirm. Because they say they are doing it in the name of Islam. I describe in the book that it's not Islam radicalizing them, they are radicalizing Islam, and I think it's very important to-- it's one of the key messages.

01:02:31

However, the current situation in Europe, the rise of, you know, right-wing extremism, the fact that we have now, also, some political parties and parliaments who are fascist, I mean, I cannot use any other term than that, it's not very helpful. It unfortunately helps the recruiters, because they are using the hatred from the other side. So each side is using hatred from the other side, which is very dangerous. Yeah.

01:03:09

Jessica Chen: Another question? In the back. In the center of the room. And then we'll come right to you next.

Man: Thank you. I've got a two-fer, if that's okay. First, do you think there should be an independent Kurdistan? And second...

(laughter)

01:03:26

Man: And second, you mentioned at one point a lot of people kind of being apathetic towards U.S. foreign policy, whereas in the Middle East, it's kind of the hot topic. So, especially among young people, I'm curious as to what you see as far as their views go towards the United States. You know, you talk about a lot of deep-seated hatred among some of these different sects of Islam, but do you see that kind of deep-seated hatred being perpetuated towards the West at the same kind of way? The mindset of the young people, the younger generations, I want to know a little bit about that.

01:04:19 Souad Mekhennet: Your first question, I... Again, I'm not a politician. I'm not going to answer that, and I don't know. And I don't really have an answer to your first question.

The second... (sighs) So, you know, the circumstances at the moment are not very helpful. Let me give you an example. So, I was recently... I was in the Middle East because the book actually came out in Arabic. And I saw a couple of politicians who were actually talking about the new kind of friendship with the new U.S. administration.

01:05:05 However, what is interesting is, if you talk-- when I spoke to young people in the region, or also young Muslims in Europe, they do listen very carefully about how people here spoke about Muslims and Islam during the campaign, and they didn't forget.

01:05:30 And it's very interesting because they also are very-- some of them are very angry about how their leaders in the Middle East are now becoming, you know, best friends with this administration, and don't basically raise those topics with people. Like, how did you talk about Muslims and Islam during the campaign? So that's... That's, you know, also quite interesting/worrying because while the leadership is, you know, is looking at it as something positive, and if people don't address those issues.

01:06:14 I mean, here, we are back again to what I said earlier, we don't address the issues that recruiters are addressing. Recruiters will always have a very easy play. And if people, if leaders in the Middle East don't understand, or even people, yeah, people in North Africa or the Middle East won't understand that if they don't raise issues, some of what has been said during the campaign with, you know, this administration, they are seen or viewed by some of their own people as hypocrite, as well. And that's very, very, you know, it's a dangerous situation, so...

01:06:56 Jessica Chen: Going to take a last question from...

Woman: I also have kind of two questions, but they're kind of very similar. So my first question is in regards to social media, how do you see it play a role in the recruitment in the West and in the Middle East? Along with my second question, which is more about how do socioeconomic conditions affect the likelihood of a person being recruited into a terrorist organization or does that not play a role, or is it more of an alienation that leads to recruitment?

01:07:31

Souad Mekhennet: Let me start with your second question. So it did play a role in some cases. So it's not the only reason, and it's not necessarily the main reason why people would go, but I came across people who went to the so-called caliphate because they really believed they would find a better lifestyle there. I mean, don't forget ISIS at some stage used propaganda videos showing those big houses, cars. Basically telling people, "Come and live here. There will be a job, there's a house for you, there's this, there's that." And people-- "and you will get a salary." And some people told me that they went indeed because they believed they could get jobs there.

01:08:22

So some people from, you know, North Africa, especially people who I interviewed, often Tunisian, Algerian, or even also Moroccan background. However, people-- some of those decided to return because they said, "This wasn't really the kind of lifestyle we wanted to live in." Again, but it's not the only reason. There were also some character who left because they believed that they wanted to live in a so-called caliphate.

01:08:57

There were some characters who went and joined ISIS who already had been members of Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. And they just believed, now ISIS is the big thing in the region, and that's why they swap basically from one terror organization to the other.

Which is interesting because now we will see... We are in the situation where the son of Osama bin Laden is getting ready to take more responsibility inside Al Qaeda, and that's going to have, you know, an interesting dynamic, as well. Because we might see people who are now switching again from ISIS back to Al Qaeda because there's this new figure, you know, a bin Laden figure, his son.

01:09:42 Now the, the... Your first question. Social media played and still plays a very big role. I mean, ISIS has a still functioning, very big social media presence. They use social media for recruiting, and they are still using it. They are also using it for, you know, in terms of radicalizing people who never traveled to the so-called caliphate. I mean, that's the new kind of danger that countries will have to face.

01:10:21 We had cases in Europe where we had teenagers, or even in one, we wrote about a story where a boy was eight years old and actually-- or ten, we had eight-year-olds, ten-year-olds, 12-year-olds or older who became so-- how can I say this-- who, ISIS was able to recruit them via social media. They watched the videos, or somebody got in touch with them, and became, like, a mentor, and it's a very, very big recruiting tool still until today.

01:11:02 Jessica Chen: I'm going to encourage everyone, if you do not yet have this book, you can purchase it and have it signed just outside the auditorium. I haven't quite done it its due justice in an hourlong conversation. If you could join me in thanking Souad Mekhennet for her time.

(applause)

Jessica Chen: And thank everyone so much for coming out tonight. We hope to see you again at our next program, November 30. Thanks.