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Learning to say 'no': privilege, entitlement and refusal in peace, (post)conflict and security research

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Abstract

In this forum, we focus on the possibility and necessity for active refusal in research, and the complexities of refusal. We offer four different perspectives, based on our shared concerns and understanding of the harms caused by some field research, and driven by our engagement with and membership in some of the communities experiencing this harmful fieldwork in peace, (post)conflict and security settings.Drawing on feminist, queer, indigenous, anti-racist and decolonial literatures and interventions, we seek to further a practice of refusal as an essential component of researcher reflexivity Our various positionalities and privileges, and the research entitlement they can bring, necessitate grappling with refusal: we must do better at saying 'no'. We must also be careful about the ethics of refusal itself: Who gets to say 'no' to whom? What comes after the refusal? We hope our interventions encourage more of these conversations and (more importantly) practices.Refusals can be an important 'full stop' that interrupt exploitative relationships, and that challenge neoliberal and neocolonial conditions of knowledge production. But they can also be generative of different ways of sharing knowledge, leading to new partners and locations, new conversations that cross the boundaries between the imperialist categories of the researcher and the researched, and new relationships outside of research and outside of work.

KEYWORDS
Fieldwork; positionality; privilege; reflexivity; refusal; research ethics

Introduction

Amid the first ever fully remote annual International Studies Association convention, a discussion emerged on Twitter among those following along with the #ISA2021 during the panel 'Teaching Field Research in Troubled Times'. The abstract for the panel explained, 'Our goal is to address both how to teach field methods in "normal" times, and how to adapt that teaching to the current crisis for concerned students and faculty'. Instead, rather than find ways to return to normal or adapt previously planned fieldwork,[1] Jamie J. Hagen, who was following the panel virtually, began a discussion about conflict-related field research and the possibility/necessity of refusal, or of saying 'no' to much of this research altogether.

Following the panel, in the spirit of Sara Ahmed's feminist killjoy, whose acts of feminist refusal are viewed as always getting in the way of others' happiness (Ahmed 2010), Jamie asked people to share on Twitter research they *did not do*, during the pandemic or otherwise. Some people

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responded reflecting on research interventions they opted not to do, or not to publish after conducting the research; others raised issues such as the risk of security officials or anti-immigrant campaigners using findings of their research (Hagen 2021). Our forum here offers four different perspectives from a group of us who connected in these conversations over our shared concerns and understanding of the harms caused by some field research that contributes to the securitisation of marginalised actors (Coleman and Rosenow 2016), driven by our engagement with and membership in some of the communities experiencing this harmful fieldwork in peace, (post) conflict and security settings. We are four white, UK-based researchers (although one of us – Jennifer - wears hijab and is therefore read as Muslim, and often also as brown or Middle Eastern, due to people's conflation of race, ethnicity and faith),[2] and we all have more visa/passport privilege than the majority worldwide. While we are all early career researchers, Jamie and Lewis have permanent academic contracts, Ilaria is a practitioner currently pursuing a PhD, and Jennifer is a researcher and practitioner who has mostly been on short-term contracts, alternating between academic and NGO positions, since finishing her PhD.

On the necessity of refusal

In an attempt to tackle the kinds of ethical issues and harms all of us have encountered, here we focus on the possibilities/necessity for active refusal in research, and the complexities of refusal. For example, we are cognisant of the ableist cultures of the academy, and the associated expectations, commitments, and pressures to publish more and more quickly, at the expense of taking the time to do slow, collaborative research, and that the reality of academic and funding pressures also shape how each of us individually can live our refusals. Likewise, given the colonial foundations of the disciplines in which much of this research happens (including but not limited to politics and international relations), students, colleagues and funders may view questions of security and (post) conflict 'elsewhere' as a more legitimate site of study rather than domestic fieldwork, fieldwork in communities that the researcher is part of, or fieldwork in contexts where the researcher has more familiarity and affiliation. Given that 'we still have to survive the institutions we are trying to transform' (Ahmed 2017, 189), together with our reflections here, we aim to register forms of refusal as a powerful form of complaint. We explore how the continual acts of refusal can serve as part of the feminist pedagogy of complaint that in turn transforms (Ahmed 2021) our relationships within and to institutions and the research we conduct from the institutions. We know that we each must ask ourselves what research we should refuse to do, apply for, review and support as critical academics, and each of us is still on a journey to learn how and when to refuse. We invite others to join us on this journey and share honest and open reflections on what their experiences navigating these decisions have been, and hope that our thoughts encourage more of these conversations and (more importantly) practices.

As white, UK-based researchers, we often grapple with questions of privilege and positionality in our research, as these privileges grant us access to spaces, resources and power over many brown, Black, Global South-based and practitioner colleagues, for example through research hierarchies, and in terms of research funds and their distribution. Our privileges grant us an 'entitlement' to research which we are used to seeing in our classrooms, our reading groups, conferences and conversations. This entitlement is often expressed by justifying our choice to conduct research in communities and spaces we do not belong to because we want to 'give voice to marginalised groups', 'provide a multiplicity of perspectives' or 'do research no-one else wants to do'. These rhetorical devices however often hide more prosaic reasons to pursue a certain research project, such as simply being interested in the topic, following a trend, or wanting to spend time in an 'exotic' location. Regardless of the justification used, what fundamentally underpins these logics is the entitlement of academic researchers everywhere, but especially white, Western and otherwise privileged researchers, to access the lives and experiences of other human beings for the 'greater' purposes of scientific discovery or

social change. It is an entitlement that is patently rooted in colonial discourses of discovery and civilisational mission, as the continued and often uncritical use of the term 'fieldwork' makes plain (Liboiron 2021; Guasco 2022).

We therefore see our privilege, and the entitlement to research it grants us, as necessitating a responsibility to grapple with and address questions of refusal. We want to emphasise the value and necessity of reflecting on refusal practices – especially for those who are privileged by (combinations of) race, religion, caste, location, citizenship and institutional positions – while recognising that saying 'no' means different things to different people in different contexts, including to us. While our group may be seen to have much in common – and in many ways we do – we also bring to the table the experiences of various groups that tend to be marginalised in academia as early career researchers, practitioners, researchers on short-term contracts, queer and visibly Muslim researchers, who in the latter case, as noted earlier, may be white but are often racialised as brown or Middle Eastern in many contexts due to the hijab.[3] We also speak from different points of the spectrum between research 'insiders' and 'outsiders', as we each relate to the communities we work with in different ways, as members, allies, gatekeepers and everything in between. Therefore, the individual contributions below reflect these varied positionalities and relationships, and we want to explicitly recognise that not everyone has equal access to refusal, nor equal possibilities of leveraging their refusal to transform the institutions that create the very conditions that necessitate refusal. We see the politics of refusal requiring intervention in many ways that together and over time will not only transform but also undermine privilege. We therefore seek to further a rereading of researcher reflexivity as refusal, as part of an ethical commitment that is shaped by our respective privileges, and to be responsible for the harm our privileges cause.

While we would argue that saying 'no' in research is an issue that is generally under-addressed, our interventions build upon previous reflections and discussions of these questions. Notably, a decade ago Marsha Henry (2013) wrote a blog for *The Disorder of Things* compiling a list for students of 10 reasons not to write your dissertation on sexual violence as a weapon of war. Some of the reasons she gives to discourage students from researching sexual violence include that the topic inspires voyeurism, resulting in student dissertations that 'often become regurgitated and simplistic snapshots of other work . . . with little new insight or critical perspective provided' (Henry 2013). Tuck and Yang (2014) made a proposal for 'pedagogies of refusal' to counter dominant settler-colonial research frames that perpetuate damaging narratives about the superior value of Western-centric knowledge making and undermine the sovereignty of indigenous people and of those living in the majority world outside of the Global North. We draw on their work, and more broadly on feminist, queer, indigenous, anti-racist and decolonial literatures and interventions to offer a set of analyses that will help researchers – especially but not exclusively those with various forms and degrees of privilege – to think about how we research topics that risk similar problems of proximity and voyeurism to the ones Henry discussed. We also see this as a way to engage with some of the commitments called for in critical race feminism (Henry 2021), as refusal can be one way to confront racial hierarchies of knowledge production (Haastrup and Hagen 2021) and continuing barriers to participation (D'Costa 2021). Refusal may also prove a point of intervention when it comes to taking seriously securitisation dilemmas faced by certain communities (i.e. refugees, Muslims, queer people) when they become subjects of our research (Olesker 2018), by questioning mainstream understandings of what security is or how knowledge production should occur (Coleman and Rosenow, 2016).

Building on these contributions, we want to reinforce that a 'good' research question is not a good enough reason to do research. Abolitionist thinking helps us rethink why we must say no, and a way through the refusal to different life worlds. As anti-racist scholar activists Remi Joseph-Salisbury and Laura Connelly (2021, 209) explain, reflexivity requires three things: 1) recognising one's own social capital and relative power, 2) harnessing that power in service to communities of resistance and 3) guarding against the reinscribing of unequal power dynamics. This is in the work of saying 'no'. Not to simply acknowledge one's own privilege, but to

meaningfully engage with the questions of *how* to harness power in service to resistance and *how* to avoid reinscribing inequality through our work as researchers. Sometimes, we believe, that *how* is refusal.

By thinking and writing together we hope to both contribute to aforementioned longer-standing discussions about research ethics and refusal, commit ourselves to action, and to engage those with privileged positions and positionalities in the academy in questions and practices of refusal. Far too often shortcomings in research processes are acknowledged as 'limitations', but the research continues nevertheless, or conversations such as this one prompt 'reflections' but no concomitant action. So – for the avoidance of doubt – when we talk of research refusal, we really mean it; we must do better at saying no. We want to argue that saying 'no' should perhaps even become the default answer for (especially privileged) researchers, and we should approach research 'opportunities' with a sceptical eye, proceeding if there is a pressing reason to do so, rather than waiting for someone else to stop us. Relatedly, we need to do better at holding each other accountable for saying 'no', which can involve breaking norms of white civility to challenge the harmful research practices that others are, or plan to, undertake. The breaking of such norms may appear – to some – as a 'radical' act, but rather we wish to emphasise that this can and must be a productive beginning, not an end.

The act of refusal is also about engaging in transformative commitments to changing the dynamics that require those with privilege to say no. Refusal risks becoming a self-serving act of ethical confession if it is not oriented and articulated in ways that go beyond our internal moral compass and towards challenging the structures that create and sustain researchers' entitlement. Therefore, we want to think through who is considered a legitimate researcher and who can say 'no' to research. In what ways can we be part of a community of practice working to collectively refuse research that should not be done by people unsuited to/untrained in/inexperienced in/poorly supervised in fieldwork? Who makes such judgements and decisions? Can refusals be productive, generating demand for trauma-informed research methods and fieldwork training, or different research methods, questions and agendas altogether? As we engage in this conversation in spaces that are inaccessible to most people and especially to many whom we wish to engage in our research activities, such as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) women living through conflict or people experiencing forced displacement, we offer our refusal as one of many potential strategies to disrupt the systems that prevent their knowledge being valued or listened to.

In what follows, Jamie J. Hagen writes about queer feminist research practices and what forms of refusal she enacts in the UK university as a teacher, supervisor and researcher, especially in research pertaining to LGBTQ communities in conflict-affected contexts. Ilaria Michelis shares her journey from humanitarian practitioner and gatekeeper to researcher on gender-based violence and how her double positioning informed, but also challenged, her acts of refusal during a doctoral research project. Jennifer Philippa Eggert speaks to the challenges of conducting research that disproportionately affects marginalised groups when you are part of that group, reflecting on her experience of doing research on terrorism and counterterrorism. Lewis Turner discusses the calls for 'refugee voices' to be included in research on refugees and humanitarianism, exploring in particular the possible unintended consequences of such calls, and whether ethical imperatives may lead to research refusals.

In speaking to one another about the tensions we address here, we realise that although these conversations are often experienced as 'uncomfortable', there is a need, and desire, to confront the possibility of refusing.

Refusal as queer-feminist research counter-strategy

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Refusal as an ethics of harm reduction

My friend, a comic artist, gave me one of their illustrations before I left Providence, Rhode Island to take up my new job as a Lecturer in International Relations in Belfast. I keep it on my desk, as a simple reminder to myself every day. The illustration the size of a business card is drawn to the edges with lush green leaves surrounding two pink bubble letters with one direct word of advice in the middle: 'NO'.

Since taking up my job in an academic institution I have found a near constant need to engage in the 'NO' of refusal. I see my refusal as part of a community of resistance, engaging with refusal as a transformative tactic of solidarity. Perhaps the most public manifestation of this is the ongoing University College Union (UCU) cycle of strikes on four key issues: falling pay, the gender and ethnicity pay gap, precarious employment practices, and unsafe workloads. In a state of agitation, I agitate right back. But as a white academic based in the Global North I also see the need to refuse in my research and teaching in everyday ways. While acts of public protest and strikes are one way of registering refusal, most of our refusals are small and private.

If invited to an all-white panel at an international relations conference, I refuse to participate. I refuse to be on a panel taking place on campus during our ongoing UCU strike. I refuse to apply for a government bid to a project in the middle of a pandemic when we knew that the people who should be leading the project (feminist and queer members of my community) would not have the capacity to work on the project. I refuse to supervise another MA dissertation asking the same essentialist, colonial questions about gender-based violence (Henry 2013). I refuse to be on a podcast after I learn about the questionable research practices of the organisation hosting the podcast. I say I refuse (rather than refused) because it keeps happening. I have to keep saying no. But this saying no is generally not simply standing aside, it often involves asking questions, pausing, waiting, inviting more people in to the conversation.

Given my work on queering peace and security studies I am concerned with how academic research is impacting queer and trans communities living in conflict-affected communities. I am motivated to think about how to advise, supervise and mentor a growing community of Global North-based white students and researchers interested in researching LGBTQ persons in conflict, given the global and racial hierarchies of this research (Haastrup and Hagen, 2020). In my approach to this research I refuse the artificial line between peace and conflict as presented in so much international studies. I refuse to prioritize in-country fieldwork and original interviews over other equally valuable research practices. As a queer feminist committed to emancipatory research practices, I also have reservations about people who are not queer or trans writing about queer and trans experiences. Queer feminist refusal in my research, supervising and teaching practice helps me work through these challenges.

I see my refusals as part of queer feminist counter strategies to offer alternative approaches to knowledge production within the university. In my explorations of queer feminist interruptions to internationalising UK higher education I argue that queer feminist research practices remap what global collaboration *is* and *does* when researchers are motivated by activist solidarity informed by the lived experiences of queer feminists (Hagen 2022). Queer liberation strategies offer alternative visions for transnational engagements in research, in scholarship and in teaching, helping academics think differently about promoting, participating in and developing international research practices.

Refusal as queer feminist solidarity

Queer feminist refusal offers an alternative to a sense of entitlement to research about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people's lives based simply on a 'good' research question or a 'lack of data' as defined by Western imperial standards of value. My ongoing research focuses on the experiences of the LGBTQ community engaged in peacebuliding, and specifically queer women in

the Colombian peacebuilding processes. This is a an extension of research I began as a doctoral student focusing on queering the Women, Peace and Security agenda The experiences of LGBTQ people in peace and conflict is not always legible within scholarship about gender, peace and security. Importantly, policy work from groups like the Stockholm-based SIPRI Peace and Development Forum (Cóbar 2020) and the Lebanese organisation MOSAIC (Maydaa, Chayya, and Myrttinen 2020) illustrate how the experiences of queer communities in conflict are also part of the gender dynamics of peace and conflict.

I refuse the conflation of queer people with only queer men. In practice, LGBTQ can become a monolithic term that under patriarchal norms often defaults back to the most readily available voices: class-privileged white gay men. In my research I focus on the often excluded and marginalised voices within the larger LGBTQ communities: lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. I refuse further marginalisation of the peacebuilding work by queer and trans women by insisting on disaggregating communities in research practice and policy recommendations. I also push back against claims about how it is too dangerous to work with these communities or there are not any openly queer women to interview. I refuse to segregate LBTQ women from the broader comunity of women, recognizing queer and trans women as women too. These are methodological challenges that require further engagement by feminist researchers. In this way simply registering more questions aligns me with the ethos of refusal of the slow researcher (Berg and Seeber 2017).

The guard rails for doing ethical research are more than what does/does not get approved by an ethics committee. María Daniela D. Villamil, a Colombian lawyer and professor, previously of the Colombian LGBTQ rights group Colombia Diversa, explains some of the harmful research practices she faces from those who fail to value existing in-country research. This lack of engagement is in no small part due to a lack of ability by many Global North researchers working in Colombia to speak Spanish and thus engage with research published in Spanish. Villamil argues, 'A virtuous path ahead involves looking into more detail at what organisations and victims are already producing in order to dignify stories of violence'. She continues, 'Colombia is a country that has been producing high-quality analysis of its conflict for at least four decades. Ignoring it is an irresponsible practice that reproduces inequalities from the point of view of knowledge production between the Global North and South, as it favours the vertical and foreign gaze over the local and implicated gaze of those who develop specialised knowledge about a conflict that runs through them' (Villamil 2021). Citing this work is a feminist practice, as is refusing to cite some of the 'canonical' IR scholarship (Duriesmith 2020).

A lesbian in the field

These refusals are especially important for me to sit with as a cisgender white lesbian working within a UK academic institution. Travelling with my United States (US) American passport and speaking English as a first language grants me access to most places with relative ease. Because I present in a traditionally feminine way, people often assume I am straight. There is a harm that comes with this femme invisibility, but because of my other privileges, I can directly engage in any room where I speak about how I am a lesbian while reminding people that sexuality and gender identity is relevant to everyone, not just those within the LGBTQ community. Even in virtual spaces, my affiliation with a UK university and my PhD mean that my expertise on queer lives is at times valued above those who are from queer communities in conflict, or who have been working directly to support communities in crisis. Given these dynamics, I confront the assumptions about heteronormativity (assumed straightness) and queerness in feminist peacebuilding spaces with very little negative repercussions. In turn, I am able to use my privileges to take up space when invited to speak to policy makers, politicians and other academics about gender, peace and security, calling for attention to the visibility of queer women and refusing our assumed absence.

Refusing certain opportunities presented to me as an early career researcher can feel like a risk and a loss, but it is something I must constantly take up as an action of solidarity if I am to continue to bring a feminist queer intention to my research practice. Sometimes the most important work I can do as a queer feminist counter-strategy and as a form of harm reduction from my position of privilege is to say: no.

The PhDs I did not do

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From gatekeeper to researcher

I like the term 'refusal' because it can go both ways, one can enact a refusal by saying 'no, I will not do this', or one can be refused, one's demand to speak to someone, go somewhere, rejected. I come to this conversation as both a practitioner and a researcher, someone who has rolled her eyes and ignored the emails of researchers requesting access to survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict zones, and someone who has since grappled with how to ethically conduct research on GBV in those same places.

Since defecting to academia, I have discovered that as a manager of humanitarian programmes to respond and prevent GBV I had often acted in the role of what researchers call a gatekeeper, i.e. someone who determines whether a researcher can access a certain organisation, a place, a group of people (in my case, displaced women and adolescent girls in East Africa and the Middle East). At the time, it felt more like a dam, a barrier between the daily challenges of life in a refugee camp and the potential flood of researchers with various levels of skills and knowledge wanting to know how it feels to experience sexual violence during a war (Boesten and Henry 2018).

Sometimes, the issue was not the number of researchers, but their research questions, which both practitioners and the women and girls themselves had long answered and lost interest in (Boesten and Henry 2018). Rarely available were researchers interested in answering *our* urgent practice questions – questions that started with 'how do we' or sought to navigate the tension between harmful but widespread narratives about survivors as hopeless victims and the need to attract funding to keep services for survivors open. Even less likely were researchers focusing on or oriented towards survivors' questions and thoughts on GBV. Sometimes, despite researchers' training in feminist theories and feminist commitments, they lacked trauma-informed training to be able to discuss violence and conflict with individuals who had experienced multiple layers of trauma, leading to re-traumatisation of survivors and severe emotional consequences for the researchers themselves (Irgil et al. 2021; Schulz et al. 2022).

My decision to undertake a PhD emerged directly from the tension I experienced between research and practice as I worked in conflict and post-conflict zones. As a practitioner, I struggled with the uncritical acceptance of consolidated ways of working, such as exclusionary project designs based on Western models of service provision, and the constant sense of urgency which prevented me and my colleagues from reflecting on, or – dare I say it – changing, our approaches and narratives. When critical engagement took place in the form of academic research, however, I failed to see the extensive knowledge of practitioners, often with lived experience of conflict, displacement and GBV, reflected in the findings. My economic, citizenship, and white privilege allowed me to eventually pursue a doctoral programme at a prestigious Western university. The same opportunity to access time, space and resources to engage in independent research, however, is not available to many of my African or Middle Eastern former colleagues, despite their professional and personal experiences. Those who do enter or return to academia are much more likely to be pigeonholed in the reductive roles of 'native informant' or 'research assistant' than as valid producers of knowledge or theory (Bunting, Kiconco, and Quirk 2020; Nyenyezi et al. 2020; Sukarieh and Tannock 2019). So, when my turn to knock at the doors of the gatekeepers came, my white privilege, my capacity to

leverage a professional network for introductions and my offer of free consultancy in exchange for access and time meant that I was rarely refused by the feminist and women's rights organisations I contacted. Yet, I chose not to pursue either my first or my second doctoral research plans.

Changing plans

Early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, I was encouraged by my supervisor to shift my data collection plan online. I grappled for a few weeks with the question of how to turn a Participatory Action Research project in a refugee camp in Northern Uganda into a predominantly remote exercise, but none of the available solutions seemed appropriate. My professional experience alerted me to the fact that my whiteness and the privilege attached to it would be significant barriers to establishing a relationship of trust with women and girls escaping the conflict and deprivation in South Sudan. I knew this would represent one of the primary challenges during my planned research fieldwork, which had led me to design enhanced and iterative consent *processes* (rather than forms) which would, I had hoped, enable refugee women and girls to engage with the research activities only if and when this felt safe, comfortable and useful to them. I never found out whether and how these processes could have disrupted or at least attended to the power imbalances I foresaw, however, as I refused to move ahead and adapt my methodology to the new global circumstances. The added physical and technological distance necessitated by the pandemic would have only amplified the gap between myself and refugee women, increased my reliance on organisational gatekeepers and compromised consent processes. In short, I believed it would have fundamentally undermined the possibility of a productive research encounter, meaning a meeting of different views and perspectives that would encourage refugee women, over time, to share their own experiences and reflections and to collaboratively build a more complex picture of how power operates within their lives. This encounter would instead be replaced by the kind of extractive, researcher-led questioning I had despaired about in the past. Furthermore, in the shifting sands of the early months of the pandemic and with the impact of COVID-19 in Uganda yet to be determined, I could no longer justify pursuing a research project that would demand time from frontline humanitarian workers. Research felt like a luxury that none could afford.

Similar concerns about taking time and energies away by engaging practitioners or, in this case, feminist activists in research activities also motivated my second refusal. In summer 2020 I was finalising my new research design, employing a mix of remote and in-person data collection methods in Lebanon, another country I had lived in and maintained strong networks within. However, the devastating explosion which destroyed the capital Beirut in early August meant that, once again, I could no longer envision demanding the time of feminist activists who were grieving their relatives, friends and homes and working to support the reconstruction of their neighbourhoods, their safe spaces, their services.

Holding the power to say 'no'

As I now reflect upon these acts of refusal, of choosing not to go ahead with my research plans, I find myself asking: who is doing the refusal in these scenarios? I am. While I still believe these were the right choices to make, I recognise that I retained all the agency in these research decisions. That might partly be a product of the individual nature of a doctoral research project, but it also speaks to the (Western, white) researcher's ultimate power in determining if research will go ahead and, often, under which conditions. I made an educated guess that humanitarian workers in Uganda and feminists organisations in Lebanon would not be interested in discussing intersectionality with me at a time of mourning and upheaval, but I did not reach out to them to confirm that this was indeed the case. Even writing to ask what they thought about my research and whether it seemed feasible in the changed circumstances felt insensitive and pushy. Of course, I wrote to inform them of the change of plans and received generic words of agreement that this was, indeed, a difficult time, but

I will never know what alternative solutions or, better yet, alternative research questions could have emerged if I had attempted to have a more open conversation. As I never made it to Uganda nor Lebanon, I also never had the chance to go past the first line of (institutional) gatekeepers and engage directly with refugee women and girls in those contexts. I will therefore also never know what they would have thought of my concerns for a more comprehensive and intersectional understanding of their experiences by humanitarian GBV practitioners.

Finally, I will never know if the prospective research participants felt relieved or disappointed by my refusal. People engage in research for a variety of personal, political, institutional reasons (Panfil 2022; Sikweyiya et al. 2017; Tuck 2009). By retaining the final say on whether the research project went ahead, I effectively denied all potential participants the choice to benefit from the research process in terms of visibility, learning, material gains, connections and introductions and several other ways I may not be aware of.

I wonder how much of my decision not to go ahead with these projects was motivated by the fear of being rejected, and of that rejection confirming that I have indeed become one of those annoying researchers I used to roll my eyes at. A rejection which risked destabilising the practitioner identity that I continue to cling on despite the academy's best efforts to devalue it and eradicate it. Instead, my refusal pre-empted the possibility of being refused, of activists and practitioners on the ground saying 'no' to me, of accessing their 'power to begin shifting the discourse' (Tuck 2009) away from my objectives and towards theirs.

At the same time, my professional experience has made me deeply aware of the impact that my positionality can have in countries with a history of colonisation like Uganda or in insecure contexts where dependence from humanitarian assistance is high. My whiteness, my Europeanness, my historical association with international organisations all act as markers of an undeserved authority which can make saying 'no' an impossibility for some. For that reason, refusing to engage in research appears to me as the only possible outcome of a meaningful process of reflexivity in certain situations. As privileged researchers, we must set aside our noble intentions and consider the many scenarios where no amount of acknowledging one's positionality and employing feminist methods can even begin to disrupt the enormous power imbalance between a researcher and a research participant. Scenarios, for example, where the person we wish to interview is worried about losing access to resources or services if they refuse us, or where they are concerned about their safety and privacy but feel unable to say 'no' to having the interview recorded for fear of angering us, disappointing us, or being considered unwelcoming. These power imbalances are rooted in historical and contemporary global systems of white supremacy, colonialism and knowledge production which place the goals of a Western, white researcher, however politically engaged or transformative, on a higher ground than the comfort and dignity of people we want to research (with) in the Global South (Guasco 2022). These are the systems that have created and continue to support our entitlement to researching marginalised groups and distant populations. Recognising where that entitlement comes from is a first step, refusing to act on it is the next one.

Nonetheless, as we engage with the question of which research we should *not* do, we need to expand that question to consider *who* gets to decide. Whose refusal is valid and whose refusal do we dismiss as that of an overprotective or self-interested gatekeeper? Which forms of refusal do we recognise and which forms do we fail to even register (turning up late for an interview or going 'off topic')? Tuck and Yang encourage us to see refusal as 'a generative stance, not just a "no", but a starting place for other qualitative analyses and interpretations of data' (2014), but is that always true? In certain cases, a refusal can simply assuage the researcher's moral compass. In others perhaps, refusal can be truly disruptive, opening up spaces for others to conduct more relevant, more ethical research or to create and cultivate knowledge outside of the colonial gaze of academia altogether (Eve and Wayne Yang 2014).

Refusing to do terrorism research? A Muslim perspective

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When research is personal

I have been working on non-state political violence and terrorism (the deliberate, indiscriminate targeting of civilians in order to spread a political message) and how to prevent/counter terrorism affecting communities for more than ten years. I do not find researching terrorism easy. It is a constant balancing act between addressing one wrong (terrorist violence against civilians) without inadvertently promoting another (violence in the name of counterterrorism and increasing securitisation of 'suspect communities'). I often ask myself if I am doing the right thing. I wish a lot more of my non-Muslim colleagues who work on terrorism, especially when it is Muslim groups they work on, would do the same. The way forward here is not necessarily a refusal to engage with the literature, concepts and terminology of terrorism studies altogether as practiced by some feminist conflict researchers (although that is, of course, an option), but at the very least a more in-depth grappling with questions of privilege and positionality, which may very well end with an acknowledgement that one is not the right person to do this research in this way.

As a Muslim, research on terrorism has always been personal. My research on terrorism and counterterrorism has focused on Europe, Eurasia and the Middle East where it is people who look like me, a visibly Muslim woman wearing hijab, that are targeted by Islamophobic, poorly conceived and implemented counterterrorism strategies (Kundnani 2014; Elshayyal 2018) and the predictable backlash after every single terrorist attack on Western soil (ODIHR n.d.). It is people who look like me that are labelled as terrorists when they resist state violence and oppression or have mental health issues (Betus, Kearns, and Lemieux 2021). And it is also people who look like me who are more likely than any other faith group to be the victim of a terrorist attack (Cordesman 2017) – but we do not often hear about that part in the news (Kearns et al. 2019; Hanif n.d.), do we?

Between a rock . . . and a hard place

Working on terrorism as a Muslim researcher is not easy. There is the mental and emotional burden. For most non-Muslims, working on terrorism may be just another topic you chose to focus on, a 'topical' issue that allows you to 'advance your career'. For us, researchers who are (visibly) Muslim, it is not. It is our lives and those of our families that are affected. I know that many colleagues from areas that have been afflicted by terrorism and violent conflict for years feel the same. For them, like for so many of us, it is not just a topic one is 'interested' in, but something that goes much deeper and is very personal. Then, in many contexts including here in the UK, there is suspicion from large parts of Muslim communities, communities that for decades have felt the direct impact of harmful counterterrorism strategies and securitisation of their faith identity or affiliation. I am too familiar with the questions, questions I have encountered myself before: 'What exactly is she working on? Why? Can she be trusted? Is she working for – gasp! – the government?!' Maybe at times – in those situations where people know that I am white – this suspicion is further compounded by reservations held against white converts (who, for some, due to their race are never quite Muslim enough). And lastly, there is the marginalisation and othering from the white, non-Muslim majority, be it colleagues in academia or other members of society that you engage with as part of your work.

At conferences, workshops and expert meetings, I have often been the only visible Muslim in the room. I hear the condescension and lack of knowledge when non-Muslim colleagues speak about my faith and communities. I read their analyses that get basic

Islamic concepts and facts about Muslim-majority countries wrong but nevertheless 'inform policy and practice'. Analyses where Chechnya 'becomes' part of the Arab world, or people get the English translation of *salah*, the daily prayer of Muslims, wrong. I see non-Muslim colleagues come up with 'funny titles' for their books, papers and talks that dehumanise Muslim, brown and Black people, for example by likening them to animals. I have my 'neutrality' when it comes to the production and dissemination of knowledge questioned by non-Muslim colleagues as if my Islamic faith made me less 'impartial' than non-Muslim colleagues. I get stopped at the airport when I travel to conferences abroad and need to explain myself to border officials, always thinking twice about how much to share about my research, because a Muslim working on Islamist terrorism at the airport – isn't that a bit suspicious? I get uninvited from expert meetings because the organisers think the Islamic faith-based organisation I work for is 'problematic'. I know exactly what happened to Muslim colleagues working on (counter)terrorism, such as Rizwan Sabir (falsely accused of planning terrorism) and Tarek Younis (publicly accused of sympathising with terrorism) (Younis 2020; Sabir 2022). At times, decolonial or critical groups of researchers working on political violence and/or terrorism feel more welcoming, but completely safe? I really only feel this with a handful of selected colleagues and friends, having too often found that even the 'very critical, progressive and open-minded' are prone to overt or subtle Islamophobia. It is exhausting.

Non-Muslim innocence

I will never forget the white, blond, non-Muslim graduate student who, when hearing about the experience of Rizwan Sabir (brown, dark hair, Muslim) at a conference, asked where the boundaries of the legally permissible lay for researchers working on Islamist terrorism and what exactly might get one stopped at an airport. I could not bear sitting there waiting for another white, blond, non-Muslim conference attendee to respond, so I raised my voice from the back of the room and said that 'it doesn't matter. You are white, blond and not a Muslim – you'll be fine'. There was laughter in the room, but it wasn't funny. It was our reality as Muslim researchers in an Islamophobic world. We 'went back to business' once the laughter had died down – although the parameters of 'business' in our line of work remained very different for him and for me.[4]

Not just about faith

Transnational identifications with the Muslim faith are incredibly strong in many contexts, and I have often experienced the ways in which this leads to particular strong basis of mutual trust and understanding when working with Muslim researchers and communities across the world, in line with the Islamic concept of the *ummah*. However, I am also aware of the limitations of such collaborations and the fact that as much as our faith often unites us, other elements of our identity, such as race, ethnicity, citizenship and location, sets our experiences apart. What is needed is therefore a nuanced approach to questions of privilege and positionality that considers all factors that could possibly privilege or disadvantage one with regards to research participants, colleagues and wider communities. In practice, following such a relational approach to privilege and positionality is often going to mean that the onus of saying no to research is likely to shift depending on the specific research. Just as I expect some of my (for example, non-Muslim European) colleagues to be more self-reflective when it comes to conducting research on Muslim communities in Europe, there are multiple situations where I, as a European Muslim, should really say no to research on Muslim communities in other parts of the world (including notably in parts of the world where I simply lack the required knowledge and skills to conduct the research in a safe and ethical way).

Refusing to engage?

I have colleagues working on political violence whose answer to these issues is a point-blank refusal to engage with work on (counter)terrorism. This includes many critical researchers who have long been reluctant to do research on terrorism, referring to it as *political violence*, *war*, or *conflict* instead, or just avoiding the topic altogether. This may be increasingly changing with more critical researchers engaging with terrorism (studies) but has been the case for long.

I appreciate the refusal to engage in what is often inevitably violent research, but I cannot pretend that such refusal were not often itself enabled by privilege. If I as a Muslim researcher refused to engage in work on (counter)terrorism, in many contexts there would simply not be any other Muslim in the room, and our voices would not be heard, our perspectives not be included. In most cases, I may not be able to directly address structural Islamophobia but I can make a small contribution to correcting Islamophobic narratives and challenge problematic practices. I would rather sit at the table when decisions that affect Muslim communities are made and our lives and experiences are dissected and discussed.

There are, of course, limits to my engagement. As a practicing Muslim, I am guided by my faith and the values it teaches me. Deciding what is right and wrong in (counter)terrorism studies circles can often be a fine line to walk (and, as is so often the case, there is a lot of nuance and sometimes, vagueness rather than a simple, clear cut answer), but it helps to have Islamic teachings as a moral baseline from where to start thinking about what research to do, how, and with whom. Finding like-minded colleagues is an important part of this process, and as frustrating as working on (counter) terrorism as a Muslim can be, it can equally be incredibly rewarding to collaboratively develop ways of how to do research on (counter)terrorism differently.

Awareness is good, action is better

I do not believe that 'outsiders' can never be good, ethical researchers, but I wish non-Muslim colleagues would reflect more deeply on their positionality and privilege when working on Islamist terrorism. And – because reflection and awareness are good, but action is better – I wish people would not just reflect on these issues but also consider actually saying no: no to conducting that research, no to sitting on that panel, no to speaking to that journalist, no to writing that op-ed, no to collaborating with that think tank, no to doing that consultancy. If that seems restrictive, just remember that every single of these *no*'s comes with a potential *yes*: yes to collaborative partnerships, yes to participatory approaches, yes to emancipatory research, and yes to liberatory work.

The role of refusal in refugee research

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The imperative of 'including refugee voices'

As a researcher of humanitarianism and refugee responses, I work in a field in which there is a widely pronounced imperative to 'include refugee voices' - understood broadly as a call to include the perspectives of those whom the research is 'about' in the research itself. Such calls come against the background of – and in order to challenge – sub-disciplines that have regularly paid very little heed to the perspectives of people about whom they write and in a context in which refugee and migration studies in Europe and North America – like the academy as a whole in these regions – remain overwhelmingly white and privileged.

So far, so good. The whiteness, privilege and narrowness of refugee and migration studies – again, like the academy as a whole – must be challenged and dismantled. Including more perspectives from those who have been marginalised (by the academy and/or by wider structures) such as

refugees is one step in that direction, although such attempts at 'inclusion', often led by white, privileged researchers, can nevertheless leave research hierarchies firmly intact, or perhaps even entrenched (see Sukarieh and Tannock 2019). Similarly, 'participation' is often superficial, and the very category or label of 'refugee' is a political and racialised one, with meanings that vary widely across contexts and within research, the media, and cultural production. But the questions I want to ask in this collective reflection on research refusal are: does the imperative to 'include refugee voices' apply (equally) to all work about refugees? And can the imperative to 'include refugee voices' in fact make some research more, rather than less, extractive?

Should you do research just because you can?

One of my central concerns, based on my experiences in this field since 2014, is that much research, including that which is seeking to 'include refugee voices', is done in ways that reflect both researchers' entitlement and the problematic (often white supremacist, patriarchal, and/or neoliberal) academic cultures in which they work. A great deal of research is fundamentally disrespectful of refugees' time, experiences, privacy and lives, and can enact forms of violence towards refugees even as they are being 'included' and 'listened to'. Plans to conduct new or further research are often based on a claim that there isn't any – or isn't enough – research that exists on a topic. But the claim often appears to be a way of justifying research that a researcher wants to do, or perhaps has already decided to do, or been funded to do, regardless of what may or may not have been done by others before.

Sometimes this entitlement to research involves or results in ignoring or sidelining existing work, as people look to conduct research and to speak to refugees 'not to increase overall understanding of that phenomena, but rather as a shortcut to increasing individual knowledge on a subject' (Boesten and Henry 2018, 582). For example, in many (although far from all) contexts that host large numbers of people seeking international protection – including Jordan, where I conduct research – there is a wealth of data about refugees and their experiences and views. In one area I research – labour market integration – there are numerous large-scale surveys and reports about Syrians' experiences of work permits, typically conducted by international organisations or non-governmental organisations (e.g. Stave, Kebede, and Kattaa 2021). When research is justified by claims that there is little or insufficient existing research, is the claim more about disciplinary boundaries or methodological preferences than it is about the literature that exists? Or is it more fundamentally about the individual researcher's goals?

While I am fully convinced of the importance of qualitative, in-depth research, in many instances we appear to conduct research because *we* want to, ostensibly for the benefit of marginalised communities, but in practice regardless of what has come before or what that research involves from the perspective of those the research is 'about'. Narratives of what constitutes 'legitimate' or 'desirable' research in this field can therefore mirror the white saviourism of humanitarianism (Richey 2016), and research is driven by individualism, a sense of urgency, and the assumption that 'more is better', all of which are characteristic of organisational cultures of white supremacy (Okun 2019).

What and whose purpose would it serve to ask (often very similar) questions of (perhaps the same or perhaps different) people again, other than to bolster the (apparent) 'credibility' of our work, and to follow the imperative to 'include refugee voices'? This is perhaps particularly the case within contexts in which refugees are readily 'identifiable', most often in refugee camps (Bilal 2016; Cole 2021; Harrell-Bond 1986), which have arguably occupied a disproportionate place in academic knowledge production about refugees, and – to be open about my role in this – on which some of my own work has also focused. At what cost might this research come, and to whom? What value (if any) is placed on the time and privacy and daily lives of refugee interlocutors, out of an apparent concern for their views (see Nayel 2013)? Is more research on a topic always better, when it will involve asking the same community of people for their time, once again?

Given the (often) widespread availability of data, and the individualistic goals of many research projects, are researchers always looking to conduct interviews with refugees who specifically can help them answer research questions? Or do they sometimes want to speak to refugees because it is what they feel they 'have' to do? And if one is seeking to speak to people simply because, as it were, they are refugees, what does it mean to engage with people so generically, through this often-disempowering label? What does this say about researchers' perceived entitlement to others' experiences, time and energy?

Furthermore, are the people seeking out 'refugee voices' well-equipped to do so? Do we go beyond ethical review boards – often experienced as a bureaucracy to navigate or a box to tick – to ask ourselves the challenging questions about our own abilities and capacities? Do we have the requisite language skills, cultural competencies and trauma-informed research methods, or are these simply acknowledged as 'limitations', despite which the research essentially proceeds nevertheless? Even as an early career researcher, I am regularly asked to help people 'find' refugees to interview or to help facilitate their research in Jordan, including, as happened recently, by someone who appeared to find Jordan an intimidating place to which to travel, and thus told me they would prefer to conduct interviews (through a translator) with refugees remotely, from their home in Europe. A research project built around the preferences, goals and comfort of the researcher, undergirded by the entitlement of the researcher, yet ostensibly attempting to 'include refugee voices'.

The fact that I find myself on the receiving end of problematic requests for assistance quite regularly has very starkly demonstrated to me the necessity of refusal, especially by those with racial and citizenship privilege and job security, such as myself. It is important not only to refuse to engage in these practices myself, but also to hold others accountable for their practices, and to hope they will hold me accountable too. This is not to pretend that I stand outside, or separate to, these dynamics. I do not. I am a white, British, man who conducts research in and about Jordan and, like many others, have asked for refugees' time and views as part of my research. But I have also tried to refuse, albeit no doubt at times insufficiently and inadequately. I have refused research methodologies (my own and by challenging others') that I found exploitative or harmful. I have attempted to refuse to replicate the white, colonial lens of humanitarianism, by conducting critical research about humanitarianism, and by conducting research in both English and Arabic. I have attempted to refuse – or perhaps more realistically to mitigate – extractivism by offering my time, skills and resources to organisations supporting refugees, and at times have offered financial and in-kind compensation to refugee interviewees. And, as I explore below, I have refused because of a belief that some questions might be better left unasked.

"What did Syrian refugees think about this?"

In 2020, I published an article that dissects the racialised assumptions and language of humanitarians working in Za'tari camp in Jordan (Turner 2020). I argued that humanitarians' attempts to distinguish Syrians from 'African' refugees, due to Syrians' 'entrepreneurship', is a positioning of Syrians within colonial hierarchies of race that pervade humanitarianism. When presenting this work, I was often asked about Syrian refugees' reactions to these discourses – a reasonable and interesting question, but one to which I do not have a satisfactory answer. I typically explain that these discourses were (in my understanding) discussed among humanitarians about Syrians, rather than with Syrians themselves, and that the constraints of conducting research in the securitised environment of Za'tari camp can limit the quantity and length of (for example) interviews.

But there is another part to the answer that I don't typically give, and have often struggled to express. I have little doubt that my article would have benefitted from exploring Syrians' views on these discourses, but would it have been ethical to search for them, even if it had been practical? Should I have tried to track down people featured in UNHCR tweets years earlier, for example, simply to ask them how they felt about being instrumentalised in a racist discourse? Who would it

help to have a privileged, white researcher explain that they (I) were researching – essentially - how refugees are looked down upon by humanitarians? To explain that while humanitarians may appear to be praising Syrians' 'entrepreneurship' - and while acknowledging that Syrians might be strategically leveraging humanitarians' assessments of them – what is motivating humanitarian praise are deeply racialised perceptions of refugeehood, of Syrians, of Black Africans, of white people. Would that have been the right thing to do, even if it 'included (more) refugee voices'?

Is it therefore the case that while there are topics that cannot adequately be researched without the inclusion of 'refugee voices', there are other topics that can be, and maybe should be? Are there contexts in which the only feasible ways for researchers to 'include refugee voices' are ways that are disrespectful to or even violent towards refugees' time, lives and wellbeing, particularly when that research is undertaken by those with such fundamentally different levels of privilege and status, particularly along lines of race and citizenship, with the chasms in power differentials that this implies. I think there are probably many such contexts. It may feel deeply uncomfortable to even ask the question of whether one should say 'no' to attempts to 'include refugees' voices' in research, and perhaps some will be troubled by the question. But it strikes me that refusing, that saying 'no', in some contexts, maybe even many contexts, is not only the right answer, but might be a better fulfilment of the ethical imperative that motivates the calls for 'including refugee voices' in the first place.

Yet at the same time, as discussed by Ilaria above, critics of this approach might point out – correctly - that this leaves the decision in the hands of the researchers, rather than those whose lives and circumstances are the focus of the research, and that such refusal thus might replicate, rather than challenge or disrupt, prevailing power dynamics. This, in turn, circles back to the questions raised earlier – if one wishes to involve 'the community' or 'refugee voices' in that very refusal, to whom does one speak, on what basis, and as representatives of which group or 'community'? There are no easy answers to these questions. But they demonstrate the importance of refusal not only to stop damaging research being done, which is vital, but also of refusal as potentially generative (Eve and Wayne Yang 2014). Refusing to replicate problematic dynamics ourselves, and refusing to be complicit when others do the same, has the potential to (contribute to) creating new spaces and conversations, challenging existing hierarchies, and producing better (and perhaps less) research.

Conclusion

Ethics of fieldwork require self-reflexivity beyond what the productivity paradigm of higher education would have us prioritise as 'best practice'. Instead, we propose to be bold, and err on the side of slowing down and saying no. Our contributions here are not an attempt to establish or present 'expertise' on refusal. Our experiences are of course not representative of academics across the board. Rather here we are working to open up more conversations and reflections about fieldwork – especially among privileged researchers – beyond the nuts and bolts of methodology and formal, tick-box-exercise-like forms of 'ethical approval'.

Starting from the presumption of refusal

Reflexivity is not a 'get out of jail free' card. Being aware of our specific positionality and choosing a research project that, we assume, will serve marginalised groups' interests is a starting point, not an ending. We suggest that reflexivity must start from the option (or perhaps presumption) of refusal, of saying 'no' to whatever research project we are thinking about. When we meaningfully consider refusal as the possible and sometimes quite likely outcome of reflexivity and research ethics, we can start opening up space for other research questions, other researchers, other ways of constructing and sharing knowledge.

When we take 'no' as the default position, we reframe the idea of ethical assessment and shift the locus of decision-making from ourselves to those who stand to benefit from, or be harmed by, any

research activity. Many marginalised groups and individuals have already rejected research that is exploitative, extractive, designed to satisfy outsiders' curiosity or uphold dominant structures (Bunting, Kiconco, and Quirk 2020; Nyenyezi et al. 2020; Tagonist, 2009; Tuck 2009). It is from the words and writings of the people most impacted by planned research that we must start our process of reflexivity, rather than from our desires and interests as privileged researchers. Instead of finding ways to justify our involvement, by stopping and taking seriously the possibility of simply not doing some types of research, we hope we can support and help create space for those around us to refuse us, to tell us 'no, you cannot do this research here, in this way'.

Saying no as a full stop or a new beginning

Saying no can, and sometimes should, be a full stop that interrupts exploitative relationships and removes us from spaces where our privilege can cause harm, as 'sometimes standing-with-but-over-there is the best place to stand' (Liboiron 2021). At the same time, we know and hope that refusals can also be a beginning, an opening towards different ways of doing research and sharing knowledge, leading to new research partners and locations, new conversations that cross the boundaries between the imperialist categories of the researcher and the researched, and new relationships with activists and practitioners that may lie outside of research and outside of work. While new ways of working and partnerships can take our research into new directions, they can also help build alliances that allow us to stand strong in the face of the hostility and incomprehension we may encounter from colleagues who do not agree with our specific refusals. After refusal comes the work of following where that 'no' has taken us and what alternatives it has created. What have we done instead (if anything)? How has the time and space we did not occupy through our research been used? Have we used the moment of refusal as an opportunity to forge different kinds of relationships with those we are *not* engaging in research activities?

For those of us institutionally privileged, saying no makes space for others to say no, whether that is a refusal to act upon feelings of entitlement to conduct research, to always publish more (Berg and Seeber 2017) or to give in to pressures for 'productivity' from the white supremacist academy (see Okun 2019). Those of us committed to 'decolonising' the university know that refusal is at the heart of this work (Last 2018). We must give space, give life to our refusals. There can be pleasure in refusal, in insisting to take up the space and time necessary to care, to listen, to be changed. Saying no challenges academic entitlement to research and knowledge, and forces researchers and policymakers to venture outside of their comfort zones to find spaces where indigenous, queer, feminist, Muslim researchers, people experiencing displacement, activists, and practitioners are speaking, doing, creating. As we consider the ethics of our individual refusals, we offer a collective politics of refusal as one amongst many tools that those of us within the academy can use to chip away at the master's house.

Notes

1. We acknowledge fieldwork is a problematic framing for research, steeped in the history of natural and social sciences as instruments of Western colonialism. In the words of Liboiron, the constructs of fieldwork and field site 'imply an outside, a Natural wilderness, a terra nullius ready for scientific discovery by settler academics, when in fact these places are homelands, homes, and houses' (2021, 68). As Guasco summarises: 'fieldwork is dependent upon colonial imaginaries of exotified places as sites for discovery, all of which is predicated upon a violent and entitled form of access' (2022). While we are not able to explore the entanglement of traditional framings of fieldwork with Western research entitlement in this article, we encourage readers to reflect further on these connections and how these can be made visible, and thus refused, in academia.
2. Considering the experience of white Muslim women wearing hijab offers an opportunity to consider the complexities of race, faith and ethnicity, highlighting the fluidity of whiteness and the extent to which it can be lost when engaging in behaviours that are associated with the Muslim faith, which is usually read as non-white (by the majority of Muslims and non-Muslims), conflating race and ethnicity on the one hand with faith on the other (see, for example, Moosavi 2014).

3. For a discussion of the extent to which white Muslims lose their whiteness due to hijab, see Moosavi (2014).
4. What exactly a researcher's experience is going to look like when they get stopped at an airport for carrying what the police or border officials would classify as 'suspicious' material, would obviously depend on a variety of different factors. My Western European passport is likely to offer me additional protection; to some extent possibly also my originally-European-sounding name (although you never quite know with this, as there is also a stereotype of white converts being particularly 'dangerous'); affiliation (or lack thereof) with a Western university or NGO is likely to offer additional privilege; as is the fluent command of the English language. On the other hand, as an early career researcher who, at the time of this incident, was on a comparatively low pay and single carer of a young child with no family in the same country as me, an encounter like this would have come with a whole list of additional factors colleagues with a generous financial cushion and/or no child or sufficient family support would simply not have to deal with.

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