

When it Mattered

Episode 47: Anne Speckhard

Chitra Ragavan:

Anne Speckhard was thriving in her private counseling and research practice in the Washington D.C. area, when her husband was named US ambassador to Belarus. It threw a curve ball into her clinical work and career trajectory. Speckhard got involved in a variety of security related research projects, and she suddenly found herself in the unusual position of talking to terrorists.

Chitra Ragavan:

Hello everyone, I'm Chitra Ragavan, and this is When it Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory, an advisory firm helping technology startups find their narrative.

Chitra Ragavan:

I'm joined now by Anne Speckhard, Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism or ICSVE. Speckhard is one of the few American national security scholars with substantive access to terrorist groups. She has interviewed and debriefed more than 700 terrorists and their family members and supporters, including in Western Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East.

Chitra Ragavan:

Speckhard has used many of those interviews to build the Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project. This unique project consists of counter narrative videos that have been used in more than 125 Facebook antiterrorism campaigns globally, with the goal of deterring terrorist recruiting.

Chitra Ragavan:

Anne, welcome to the podcast.

Anne Speckhard:

Thank you, Chitra. Glad to be here.

Chitra Ragavan:

What was it like to uproot yourself from your practice and to go off to Belarus with your husband, Dan, as he launched his diplomatic career?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, Daniel and I decided to see it as an adventure, but it was very disorienting because I'm someone that puts my roots down deeply and we had three kids. So I had to close my practice and become entirely dependent upon him and that was not something I'd ever done before.

Chitra Ragavan:

You're fiercely independent, so that must have been even more difficult.

Anne Speckhard:

It was difficult. And also we were moving on the other side of what I thought of as the Iron Curtain. I'm old enough that I remember the Iron Curtain. And it was strange to think, when we had the Cold War, we had all these targets and Minsk was one of them. Well, we were going to live in a city that would be targeted by our missiles if there ever was an outbreak of nuclear war. Which actually came back to haunt me when 9/11 happened. Because when I saw the Twin Towers being attacked, I thought that's exactly what was happening.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you know, most people don't accompany their husbands on diplomatic missions and end up talking to terrorists. Tell me how that first began to evolve in Belarus.

Anne Speckhard:

Well, it didn't happen in Belarus. In Belarus I was doing research, so I talked to Chernobyl liquidators about the trauma and post-traumatic stress that they had, which was an interesting variant because it was an invisible stressor, a lot like Coronavirus is now, and I also worked with Holocaust survivors. So I was building myself much more as a researcher than a therapist, but then we moved to Brussels and that's when I became involved in talking to terrorists. Because I was asked by NATO if I would look at the intersection between religion and terrorism. And this is pre 9/11. So at that time you could read all the books and articles about religion and terrorism. It was a very small body of literature.

Chitra Ragavan:

And so, how did that evolve into talking to terrorists, that work that you were doing on religion and terrorism?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, first, 9/11 happened and at first the embassy told all of us to stay home and then they militarized all the workplaces. And Al-Qaeda named NATO as its next target. They even said it would happen in October, which was only a month away. So a lot of the diplomats were having stress reactions and the expats were having stress reactions. So the embassy asked me if I would run stress debriefings, which I did. And then I studied the reactions of people and how they did in response to the stress debriefings.

Anne Speckhard:

So when a year later Nord-Ost happened in Russia, I contacted my colleague, a Russian speaker who was the top person on post-traumatic stress and volunteered to help her as well. So I ended up going to Moscow. And that started this whole thing of, we ended up looking at the suicide bombers' families, the bombers that had gone into the theatre, and talking to the hostages who had sat right next to them and talk to them while they were in an activated state.

Anne Speckhard:

And think about it, no other researcher has ever studied a terrorist that's wearing a bomb belt. You know, sat down and asked him research questions. But these hostages had spent three days side by side with them and asked them all kinds of questions. So we captured secondary interviews from that. And it took off from there.

Chitra Ragavan:

For people who don't remember the Moscow theatre hostage crisis, tell us just a little bit about that and who these terrorists were and who the hostages were.

Anne Speckhard:

They were 800 theatregoers. They were families. Because in Russia, theatre is often attended by parents and children. And the hostage-takers were from the Chechen rebel terrorists. And they took over the theatre and they threatened to kill everyone. And they put bombs all around. They had guns. But what ultimately happened was the Russians pumped gas into the theatre and they didn't tell the authorities, the health authorities, what the gas was, so most of the hostages died from the rescue, which was really sad.

Anne Speckhard:

But anyway, that kicked off my talking to terrorists. Because we got a Chechen colleague involved. She went back to Chechnya and talked to the family members. I talked to the hostages. And then when I went back to Brussels, I was teaching at the university and I have a student who admitted to the whole class that he had been in Jerusalem when the bombing of Hebrew U happened.

Anne Speckhard:

He was there for lunch and had a nice lunch, argued with an Israeli soldier, agreed to disagree, walked out, and the place exploded. And he processed this the whole semester in class. I offered to see him privately, but he didn't want to. And then he ended up talking me into going into Palestine to talk to Palestinians. And it just kept growing and growing. And at this point I've talked to about 800 terrorists.

Chitra Ragavan:

Wow! And so, you ended up taking a bunch of trips to the West Bank and Gaza.

Anne Speckhard:

I went all through the West Bank. I talked to people that were sending suicide bombers, people that wanted to be sent to suicide bombers, family members of people who had bombed themselves, terrorist leaders. It was amazing. And I also went in Gaza just once, but all through Gaza, and did the same thing.

Anne Speckhard:

The Israelis finally made it quite clear to me that they didn't want me to continue this research, but I continued in other places. I went into the Casablanca slums and talked to the friends of the suicide bombers there about... And I was always looking for literally what makes a suicide bomber tick? Why do they get into it? How do they get on the terrorist trajectory? And since I'm a psychologist, I wanted to know, could it have been prevented or can we take them back off of it?

Chitra Ragavan:

And what's it like to... You make it sound almost casual or like, "Oh, I went to Casablanca, I went to the West Bank, I went to Gaza, while the Israeli said, 'Stop your research.'" But were you ever in danger? What's it like to actually just wander around and talk to people that most people can't imagine talking to? How do you do it?

Anne Speckhard:

It is kind of strange. When I went into Palestine was the first time I went in and just announced myself. I was very honest about what I wanted. And people told me would be suicide, terrorists are never going to talk to you. But then the first day that I got interviews with kids that had been in prison, a lot of Palestinian youths are imprisoned during their late high school, college years, for doing some kind of dissident activity.

Anne Speckhard:

And I ended up talking to a group of kids and interviewing them. And one of them told me about a riot in the prison. And he showed me his necklace, which was a martyr's necklace, of his friend who had been killed. And I asked him, "Do you ever think of revenging? Have you ever thought of joining up as a suicide bomber?" And it just was, I'm a therapist, I just go to the next question as it proceeds. And that just seemed like the natural question to ask. I wasn't suggesting anything.

Anne Speckhard:

And he very quickly answered, "I prefer not to answer." And I answered as quick as him, "Well, you just did." And then we stared at each other in horror. And I was really horrified to have in front of me someone that was thinking about doing a suicide mission, but at the same time I was really curious. So I said, "This is why I'm here. This is what I'm trying to understand. Can you explain to me your thought process? I understand some of it, but can you explain why you would give your life in such a horrific way?"

Anne Speckhard:

And he opened up and told me everything. But then I had this terrible dilemma and I decided never again of, if you interview someone out in the field, if you interview them in prison, okay, but out in the field, then what is your moral obligation? You've opened this person up to admit to you a crime that's about to happen, is your obligation to the potential victims or to confidentiality? So I decided that I wasn't going to proceed that way anymore. And thankfully, he was arrested, not because I turned him in, but by others. And the people that were going to send him were also arrested. So that was a good thing.

Anne Speckhard:

So there were moral dilemmas in the work and there were also two times, in West Bank once and in Gaza once, where it was discussed whether I would be held as a hostage. Palestinians up to then had not kept Americans hostage. So I wasn't real worried about that, but I had been in places where they were shooting. Well, honestly, when I was in West Bank, I was more afraid of the Israeli soldiers because they generally viewed me as a Palestinian. And I saw how the Palestinians were treated. And they had no idea that I was an American. As soon as they realized it, they always backed off.

Anne Speckhard:

But many times on small vehicles and so on, I'd be dragged off of them and told to sit here and treated pretty disrespectfully until I showed my American passport. But two times when I was in interviews, once I was in a safe house in Gaza and these big bearded guys, they were eating chicken at the time because we were taking a lunch break, and the chicken fat was dripping in their beards. And they were looking at me and they said, "Why did you wear a headscarf? Are you Muslim?" And I said, "No, I wore it out of respect for you. I was told that that would be the right thing to do. But no, I'm Christian." And then they said, "Oh, well, that was good." And then they said, "Did you consider that we might keep you? No one knows where you are." Because I had agreed to go to their safe house. They drove me.

Anne Speckhard:

And I felt a moment of horror. And this, Ken Reidy, the student that was with me, who had been in the suicide bombing, said he was thinking, "How many of these guys can I take?" And they were big strong guys and they had guns. And I just felt horror, but I answered quickly, "No, I didn't think you'd ever do that because I know your ethic of hospitality and your brother sent me to you from Brussels. So no, I didn't think you would ever violate something like that." And again, it kind of grunted out approval, like, "Oh, oh, oh, good answer." And I saw something switch. Like they were considering it and then they decided not to do it.

Anne Speckhard:

And in the other situation, when I was in West Bank, I was with... The PFLP, their leader was in prison and they were discussing when I went to the bathroom, my colleague told me that they were discussing, "Why don't we take her as hostage and try to break him out of jail by trading her?" So when I came back my colleague told me that and I just

laughed. And I said, "Oh, well, then I can stay and do more interviews. Well, you'll see if this works or not." But my mind was kind of racing to think, "Is this serious?" And my colleague said, "They're serious. Stop laughing."

Anne Speckhard:

And then I said, "Come on guys, your leader is so important and I'm a woman. Do you think that Israelis would ever trade your leader for me? It's just going to be a bloodbath." And they sat and thought about it for a few minutes. And then I was lucky. The discrimination against women worked on my behalf in that instance. They were like, "Yeah, you're right. You're right. Nobody would ever trade you for our leader."

Chitra Ragavan:

Oh, that's funny. Were you ever worried or was your husband, Daniel, ever worried that after all he was a US diplomat and if something happened to you or they could hold you if they figured out that you were married to him? I remember talking to Daniel once about it and he says, "Anne does what Anne does." But I wonder what were the sensitivities and how did you all deal with it?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, I think from Dan's point of view, he was really busy with his own career and just happy that I was doing something that I was happy with. Because he had uprooted me and I think he was a bit oblivious to be honest, but the embassy wasn't. So he had the title of US ambassador when we were posted to NATO. And when I went into Gaza, the Israeli stopped me on the way out, because that's the one place at that time where they registered you by your passport when you went in. And when I came out the next day, I think it was about 48 hours, they said, "We understand that you've been talking to terrorists and we want to know everyone you've talked to. And you can't go into the West Bank or Gaza admitting that you're going for those purposes."

Anne Speckhard:

So when I landed in Israel, I always said I was a Holocaust scholar, which was true. I am a Holocaust scholar. And I just didn't mention the rest. So I stuck with my line and I said, "I'm a Holocaust scholar. We just took a break. Ken wanted to see Gaza." which was true, Ken wanted to see Gaza. And they kept insisting and we stayed there for about six hours. But what happened that I didn't know and I found out from Daniel because he told me when I finally got out of that checkpoint, we missed our plane to go home the next day because the Israelis held us and they said, "We're putting you up in a hotel. So no prison or anything like that." And they were very velvet gloves.

Anne Speckhard:

But when I called Daniel to tell him, "I'm not coming home, I'm in a hotel, I'm on the beach and I'm not really sure what's happening, but I think I'll be home tomorrow," he said, "Oh, well, the flatfooters were here this morning." And I said, "What?" And he said, "FBI and someone else." And he said, "They were asking did I know where you were?"

Anne Speckhard:

And I actually started my book, *Talking to Terrorists*, with this question, "Mr. Ambassador, do you know where your wife is?" And he said, "Yes, she's in Israel." And they laughed. And they said, "No, she's not in Israel. She was in Gaza and she was talking to Hamas." And he said, "Oh, yes, yes." And they said, "Is she pulling a Patty Hearst?" And for your listeners who don't know who Patty Hearst is, she was kidnapped by terrorists and eventually joined their movement but after being raped and drugged and other things. And Dan said, "No, no, no."

Anne Speckhard:

And he ran upstairs and got a paper and my business card from Georgetown and he said, "My wife studies terrorists. This is what she does." And they said, "Well, have her come into the embassy when she gets back." So I did and the diplomatic security asked me to stop doing my work. And I found that very sexist, honestly. You know, why can't spouses have careers? And I said, "No, I wasn't going to stop my work." And they said, "Well, you'd make a perfect hostage being married to Daniel." And I said, "Well, I'm going places where I don't think that I will be held hostage." Although, as I told you, it had been discussed. And we came to an agreement that I would tell them where I was going, but they would not interfere.

Chitra Ragavan:

And did that work?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, it was funny because the diplomatic security guy said, "Here's the deal I want to have," then we argued and argued about it, "I just want to know that you're safe. So I can't tell you classified information but I can tell you if you tell me about an upcoming trip," like I told them when I was going to Casablanca, "I can tell you if we're getting signals that they know a US ambassador's wife is coming and they're waiting for you. So I can tell you don't go, but I can't tell you why. So you just have to trust me if I ever tell you don't go."

Anne Speckhard:

But the funny thing was, we did have some trouble in Casablanca. I don't remember exactly what it was. And I asked the embassy in Rabat, did they know that I was going to be there? And they said, "We've never heard of you." So the diplomatic security guy hadn't reached out. So it was kind of crazy. I don't know. But I have been stopped.

Anne Speckhard:

I was stopped, when Dan was the ambassador in Greece, I was stopped from going to Lebanon, which I found very irritating, by the regional security officer. And I decided to respect it because I didn't want to get in a big power struggle with Dan's position at that time.

Chitra Ragavan:

But did you realize the sensitivity of it? I know you were irritated by it, but did you ever sort of wonder, well, maybe I shouldn't be doing what I'm doing?

Anne Speckhard:

Of course, but I also think all of us have our careers and if our spouses become ambassadors, congressmen, whatever they become, does that mean we end our careers? I don't think so.

Chitra Ragavan:

So where did you go from there? From the West Bank and Gaza. What was your next step in your evolution as a student of terrorists?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, I went and interviewed the friends of the Casablanca bombers. I also went in Lebanon and talked to Hezbollah. And interestingly, when I talked to Hezbollah, they told me, at that point Dan was in Iraq, and they said, "We need to know your husband's full name and we need to know his career." And I shared it with them and I knew they were planning to come and pick me up and I didn't sleep real well the night before because I had heard stories of people having bags put over their head and put in the trunk of the car when they get picked up by Hezbollah. But My host in Lebanon said, he was a Christian and he was well known in the area, and he said, "They won't mess with you because of me, because of our village. Because they would be taking on a whole local area if they did, but you should think really carefully about this."

Anne Speckhard:

And when I talked to them, they said, "Listen, we'll allow you, we respect what you're doing, we'll allow you to talk to all our would be suicide bombers, but we can't protect you from Al-Qaeda." And they called Al-Qaeda terrorists. They said, "We're not terrorists," which I always found ironic. But given that Dan was in Iraq at that point, I did think it was too sensitive and that I could very easily end up on a beheading video because of his position.

Anne Speckhard:

So then it was a serious safety concern. Before that, I hadn't felt like it was. So I stopped with Hezbollah, but then the USDOD invited me to come into Iraq. And I think I shocked the military a little bit when they were asking me, they said, "Do you understand what a Deradicalization Program is?" And I said, "Yeah, I've studied them." And they said, "Could you help us put one together?" And they knew at that point that I'd interviewed about 400 terrorists at that point. And I said, "Yes, I'd be happy to do that. And I guess if I come to Baghdad, I could see my lover." And I was just teasing. I thought they for sure knew who Daniel was, they had no idea.

Anne Speckhard:

So they invited me on my own merits, which was a nice thing. And I ended up working in Camp Cropper and Camp Bucca putting together what became the detainee rehabilitation program. And my part was the psychological and Islamic challenge parts.

Chitra Ragavan:

What did you have to do? What was it about? And were you visiting the prisons too or...

Anne Speckhard:

Yeah, definitely. The whole idea was the US forces had 23,000 prisoners and they were understanding that the Al-Qaeda guys mainly, were teaching anybody that they were imprisoned with, how to make bombs, how to make IEDs, convincing them on the martyrdom and jihad ideology. And by picking people up and throwing them in prisons, they were actually creating a training camp for the terrorists. Which terrorists had told me all along. They told me the same thing in Palestine that prison was the best training grounds, especially for youth.

Anne Speckhard:

So General Garner and then later General Stone decided that they wanted to have some kind of deradicalization program, but they didn't know how to do it. So I helped design it for them. But what happened was, and I interviewed actual terrorists in the prison to make sure that it would fit and I was confident that it would and I also trained the Islamic scholars that were going to speak against the Al-Qaeda ideology and the psychologists and social workers who were going to work and created this whole protocol, but at the time the politics shifted quite dramatically in Iraq and we had the Awakening Movement. So things turned out a little bit different than what I had expected. But it was an interesting job, that's for sure.

Chitra Ragavan:

And was there a moment when you were visiting the prison that it kind of struck home to you where you were and what you were doing?

Anne Speckhard:

To be honest, I was very afraid to go into Iraq. I tried not to watch the news when Daniel was there. The family stayed in Brussels and he went and ended up spending two years in Iraq, running the reconstruction and then becoming the deputy ambassador to Zal Khalilzad. And they were shooting down helicopters and Dan was traveling in helicopters all the time, there were IEDs everywhere, and I just didn't watch the news. I just blanked it out because I didn't want to be in a fear state all the time about him.

Anne Speckhard:

So when the military asked me to come, I told them I didn't want to travel by roads because I was really worried about the IEDs although then they started shooting the helicopters too. But when I was taken to both the Cropper prison and the Bucca prison, the prison administrators showed me this huge wall of knives, shanks, I guess, they call them, which are pieces of metal that the prisoners had taken and sharpened to be

knives. And there must have been 100, 200 of them fixed on this wall. And it was a demonstration of even don't think you're safe in here.

Anne Speckhard:

So I was interviewing prisoners face-to-face and there was always a guard standing there and he had a stun gun. But really if a prisoner had a shank, I think he could cut my throat or stab me in my organs in a way that would kill me quite quickly, stun gun or no stun gun. So I was very aware of that. And every time I traveled into Iraq, I went back and forth, I didn't live in Iraq because we had three kids that were still in Brussels, but every time I went to do my work, I wondered if I'd be in an IED attack, if I'd lose my legs or my arms or my eyesight.

Anne Speckhard:

But what gave me the courage to do it was to look at my kids and think if somebody doesn't rehabilitate these terrorists, there's too many of them and they're going to spread a movement and it's going to come back to places like where I'm living right now, Brussels. And my kids could be killed. This is work that has to be done. And, boy, was I right? Because that's exactly what happened and we had ISIS later.

Chitra Ragavan:

So then how did you begin to study ISIS?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, at the point when I studied ISIS, I'd been out of it for a little while, I had stopped doing interviews out in the field, but I ended up talking to State Department and they asked me, "The interviews that you've done, could you get them on video? Could you go back and interview the same people or could you get terrorists to tell their story? And then together, could we shape it into something that we could use to counter-message against terrorists?" And this is in the height of when ISIS was drawing... Well, they ended up drawing 45,000 people into Syria and Iraq from a hundred different countries.

Anne Speckhard:

So I said, "I think the most effective thing would be to get ISIS on video, but I really doubt that I could do that. And I'll be the one that ends up on a video and it will be a beheading video. But I'm sure I could get other terrorists." And I sat and thought about it for a long time. They pulled the funding together, and I just got lucky.

Anne Speckhard:

I met a police chief from Urfa in Turkey who told me that he probably could get me access to ISIS defectors in the south of Turkey. So we started with that. We got our first 32 ISIS interviews from people that had run away from ISIS. They were all Syrians. And they told amazing stories. Like one of them, he was just a kid and he was about ready to be sent on a suicide mission and he was allowed to leave to go see his family. And he very proudly told his parents that he was next in line to drive a suicide vehicle. And

they said, "No, you'll be going to your uncle in Turkey." And he said it took him a year to get out of the mindset.

Anne Speckhard:

And we talked to all kinds of people like this, but then it continued. And I ended up getting into the prisons in Iraq, the prisons in Albania, prisons in Kosovo and prisons in SDF territory. And also talking to defectors and returnees in Europe and the Balkans who had just come back on their own. Some of them that spent prison time and others that didn't. And our sample is now 239, almost all of them are on video, and all of them are long interviews. I take a long time.

Anne Speckhard:

I ask them about their previous history, who they were before they even heard of ISIS, how they heard of ISIS, what motivated them to travel, how they traveled, what happened when they got there? What were their experiences in ISIS, did they take military training, did they take Sharia training? What did they like? What did they hate? If they got disillusioned, did they try to escape? What happened? What was their job? And what ultimately happened to them, were they a returnee, a defector? Am I interviewing them in prison? And how do they feel about ISIS now, which is actually the crux of our project.

Anne Speckhard:

Because the ones that are willing to denounce ISIS, I ask them, "Would you give advice for someone else? Is this group Islamic?" And then they'll say all kinds of things like how it doesn't follow Islam, how it's corrupt, how it's brutal. And I ask their permission at the end of the interview and at the beginning, of course, "Can I use pieces of your video to create a counter narrative, to counter message, against ISIS?" And the ones that hate ISIS are like, "Sure, of course." And some of them allow me to use their face and their real name and others say, "Please blur my face and disguise my identity." But at this point, we've made 180 short video clips from these ISIS insiders denouncing the group.

Chitra Ragavan:

And what do these videos look like and where do they air? What's the impact?

Anne Speckhard:

Okay, well, a lot of them are on our website, which is International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, ICSVE, and they're also on our ICSVE YouTube channel. And I should say, they're also subtitled in the 27 languages that ISIS recruits in. So they're not just limited to English subtitles. And our first vision was just to put them on YouTube and see what happens and also did other people pick them up and campaign with them, but later we decided to campaign with them ourselves on Facebook. And I think we've run 130 campaigns on Facebook now. Facebook has partnered with us.

Anne Speckhard:

So sometimes we can identify what we call a special audience and hyper target, and these are people that have been influenced by an ISIS propagandist. So we go to the same people with our videos and hope they watch it. And we're able by the Facebook metrics to see if they watched it, how long they watched it and also to read all their comments, and if they shared it with others. And sometimes we find our videos start a whole discussion among Facebook and Instagram users.

Anne Speckhard:

And so, we keep learning more and more about how to campaign with these and how to send them out. But we're basically aiming for the same audience that ISIS is aiming for. And our goal just like Silicon Valley is to be a disruptor, to disrupt ISIS's online and face-to-face recruitment.

Chitra Ragavan:

And I guess Facebook cares because its platform, both its Facebook platform and Instagram platform is being used for this purpose.

Anne Speckhard:

It's still being used. They have a takedown policy and they also support tech against terrorism. So they've done really good work to try to take terrorist propagandists down, but they still, especially in foreign languages, pop-up. And we found them on Instagram, just very recently, raising money to try to break female prisoners out of our whole terrorist camp in Syria.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you've said that you try to make it look and sound and feel like a radical video to suck people in to watching long enough to get some of that messaging. Right?

Anne Speckhard:

Yeah. When we made our first video, we made it of the kid that I told you about earlier, and we decided that the beginning of the message we would pick the things of why they liked ISIS, why they thought it was good. And we realized, basically we have a talking head and if he says, "Please blur my face," and in this case, he wore a scarf over his face to hide his identity, you don't have a face, so you don't have any facial expressions, you just have a voice.

Anne Speckhard:

And we thought, "Well, what would we use to illustrate what he's talking about?" And we realized, ISIS filmed everything they did. So they had filmed a kid that, the first child that did a beheading, and he was forced to do a beheading. So we used ISIS's film and put it in as our B-roll. So as he's talking, you're seeing this kid getting ready with a knife in his hand to do a beheading. Of course, we don't show the actual beheading, but we show what they filmed of the kid's expression on his face, which looks horrified, and the knife in his hand. So it makes it very real.

Anne Speckhard:

And we go back and forth between different images from ISIS and then the picture of this kid with a scarf on his face talking, so that you know that this is a real person talking. And when we pick the thumbnail, we always pick it from the ISIS material, and we pick a name that's ambiguous. So in this case, we called it the Glorious Cubs of the Caliphate, which could be pro-ISIS, right?

Chitra Ragavan:

Yeah. Either way right, depending on how they want to see it.

Anne Speckhard:

Yeah. Yeah. So we've actually experimented on Facebook where we followed people that were propagandists, this was before they were all taken down, and we friended them with a fake profile. And then we tagged them with this video and another one. And they look so authentically ISIS, that they just shared them with their whole networks. And then later when someone watched it and it got back to them that this was an anti-ISIS one, they apologized. And we thought it was kind of funny that we were getting ISIS themselves to share our videos.

Chitra Ragavan:

That's very funny. And how many people do you think you've reached and what's been Facebook's response to sort of these efforts?

Anne Speckhard:

Facebook's very proud to be partnered with us and we're proud to be partnered with them as well. And we've reached millions. In one of our campaigns in Iraq, we had, I think it was a million and a quarter, just for one video. So we've done 130 of these campaigns. Some of them get huge numbers, some less. And we're experimenting, trying to figure out why and how to get to people. We do understand now, in Europe, probably we have to work on Instagram, which means that our videos have to be only one minute long. So we've made shortened versions. And in other places, Facebook is more dominant, but it's gone out to millions.

Chitra Ragavan:

And you're also looking at you're working with, I guess, with some foreign governments on repatriation and rehabilitation of ISIS foreign fighters and their wives and children. What's that effort looking like?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, that's really interesting. When I first went into Syria, I got interested. I wasn't planning to step my foot ever into Syria, I thought going into Iraq was scary enough, but I was asked to help on Samantha Elhassani's case. Her sister was trying to get the children back. So there were four American children. Samantha Elhassani is an American that joined ISIS. And she was in Camp Roj and she had two children, one

who had been forced into an ISIS film, Matthew, and two that had been born in Raqqa. And the sister was trying to get the two youngest home. And it was a really interesting case because the State Department's stance on it was to treat it like a divorce case and that she had the right to take her children anywhere.

Anne Speckhard:

My view on it, which the Justice Department later weighed in and agreed with me was that, to take your child to a terrorist group and to take them to Raqqa is the sign of a neglectful, if not abusive, parent. And that the US had the right to temporarily suspend her parental rights and act protectively for the children. Because what I argued was, we sent the Navy Seals to rescue James Foley, why wouldn't we send soldiers that were driving every day past Camp Roj to pick up these four kids and bring them to Erbil and put them on a plane back to their grandparents and their extended family?

Anne Speckhard:

And State Department eventually got on the phone with Justice and me and said, "Oh, yeah, that is another point of view." And she was brought home. I wasn't arguing for Samantha to be brought home at that time. But anyway, with that coloring my view when I first went into Syria and first made interviews in Camp Roj with ISIS mothers, there were all these little kids. And I had this in my mind that the kids needed to go home. They were born into ISIS or they were brought into ISIS, but it wasn't by their own choice and they're certainly not ISIS members, but they're being punished, they're treated as prisoners.

Anne Speckhard:

And so, I asked the detainees that I interviewed at the end of the interview, "Do you want to go home?" Which they all said, "Yes." "Have you spoken with your country authorities yet?" Some said, "No." "And would you like me to share the copy of your notes, because I take verbatim notes, with your country's justice ministry?" And everyone said, "Yes." So I started sharing notes with European justice ministries and it ended up, particularly because there was a German sleeper cell that the Germans got interested in, included it. He was described in one of my interviews and they were very keen to catch him back in Germany, that I worked extensively with the Germans on 21 cases.

Anne Speckhard:

And I think one or two of the women, no, two of the women, that we worked on are now repatriated, but the rest they've prepared well because we've gone through these notes together and of course, they've done all their other work of policing and investigating, that they're readying for if they come home and if the politicians decide that they will repatriate that they can prosecute, put them in prison if need be. And then hopefully, they'll be put in rehabilitation programs at some point and come out not dangerous, we hope.

Chitra Ragavan:

How does the US government feel about your work? You're clearly collecting huge amounts of data and interviews and there's a richness of material there. And you've worked with foreign governments, you work with European governments. How is it being used if at all by the US in terms of security efforts?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, I coordinated with the US State Department, Ambassador Jeffrey's office quite a bit, when we started working in Syria with the SDF and offering to the Europeans to give the notes on behalf of repatriations. And also when I started working with the Germans, the FBI got involved. There's one particular guy that's from the FBI task force that's always present when I'm sharing the notes, and which is nice. It's good to have the US protective in a sense.

Anne Speckhard:

But I went in to talk to Jeffrey's office because I wanted to make sure that what I was working on was in line with the US goals, and if it wasn't, how we could deconflict. But they said, "This is totally in line with what we're doing. And we're pushing really hard for the Europeans to take their ISIS prisoners back from SDF territory. But for the main part, they're refusing because there's all kinds of complications. I mean, they're worried that they won't be able to prosecute. They'll go free on the streets, that they'll propagate in the prisons if they are prosecuted, that they'll get out of prison and still be dangerous, which are all legitimate security concerns."

Anne Speckhard:

So Ambassador Jeffrey's office is very aware of what we do. I believe they're supportive in the main, and I also coordinated with the CVE coordinator for the EU. And the EU doesn't dictate to the member states what they must do, but they're supportive of what we're doing as well. And then we also coordinate with the DOD, the USDOD. All the CENTCOM, PACOM, the rest of them, have counter messaging. So they have huge centers. I mean, we're just a little think tank, but they have huge centers where they have all these operators that all day long follow Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp. It's classified, so I don't know the exact things that they do, but they follow all day long and try to catch terrorists and also counter message to them.

Anne Speckhard:

So recently, I went to Tampa and showed them our project and said, "You're welcome to use our videos when you're counter messaging." I'd prefer that they didn't get associated with US military per se, but these are covert guys anyway. And I think they're really important messages from actual ISIS terrorists and Al-Shabaab terrorists, we also do Al-Shabaab, saying, "Don't join this group. Trust me, I've been inside. It's not going to be good for you."

Chitra Ragavan:

Going back to that question that the FBI agent asked Daniel, the Patty Hearst question, "Is your wife going Patty Hearst on us?" Do you ever worry that being in such close

proximity to terrorists and hearing their propaganda day in and day out, that you might be vulnerable?

Anne Speckhard:

Oh, I'm never worried that I'd become a terrorist, but people have asked me, "Are you sympathetic to terrorists?" And I would say, "You cannot do a good psychological interview unless you're empathetic." So I spend an hour and a half to five hours with these people. One guy who was ISIS, Amir, I interviewed him for five hours. And he was from Morocco. So I went into great detail with him about the scene in Morocco and some of the repression there.

Anne Speckhard:

And when people tell me about human rights violations and being imprisoned, being tortured, being victims of discrimination, people in Germany and Belgium have told me, "My wife wears a niqab and I can't tell you how many times we've been spat at," or, "Because of my brown skin or my Muslim religion, I can't get a job." And of course, I feel sympathetic to those things and empathetic with them. They're human beings after all.

Anne Speckhard:

And we have to understand that nobody joins a terrorist group, except it meets their needs somehow. And for a lot of these people, ISIS presented themselves as a dream where Muslims can succeed, where you can get a job, where your housing is free, where you'll be an important person, you'll have dignity, purpose, significance, and you'll be able to live Islam without being harassed. Of course, none of that was true, but that's what they believed.

Anne Speckhard:

So I wouldn't say that I get sucked in, I would just say I get that confirmed over and over and over again in interviews. But at the same time, I'm talking to people that have killed, they have blood on their hands. And do I have any sympathy for that? None whatsoever. And you know, he was a minor, a kid that told me that he was forced to behead. That he was called up and they said, "It's your day to behead."

Anne Speckhard:

And he came and there were five Peshmerga soldiers. The cameras were all set up. They handed a knife to him. And he said, "I knew if I didn't do it, they would kill me." So I guess as a human being, I can feel empathy for him, but I have to say there is a human spirit in all of us that can say, "No." And, yes, you will lose your life if you say, "No," but I don't know. This are all horrible, horrible things. Right?

Chitra Ragavan:

And do you ever worry that you inadvertently might get caught in the crosshairs of the US government's antiterrorism efforts? Because there are so many restrictions on being able to look at terrorist materials, to share terrorist materials. and you're deep in the thicket of all this stuff. Do you ever worry about that?

Anne Speckhard:

I don't worry about it too much. When we lived in Belgium and I was talking to terrorists, there was all the Patriot Act things that came out and President Bush said, "If an American's talking to terrorists, then I want to be able to see your phone calls and your emails." And I thought, "Okay, that's the end of privacy for me." But I generally am a very open person and very honest. So I was like, "Read all my emails, read my phone calls. That's fine with me."

Anne Speckhard:

And actually, I've gotten kind of used to that with Dan being an ambassador. You can pretty much figure that other countries are trying to read your emails and have you under surveillance. So have I lost privacy? Yes. When the FBI got involved on working on the repatriations, I worried that they would try to subpoena all of our interviews, but they assured me that they wouldn't and they haven't. So that's good.

Anne Speckhard:

But, yeah, you always wonder when you're going through airports or when you have data, will someone come and take it, in a government authority position. And you just do your best to encrypt things and lock things behind passwords. We just had a speaking event yesterday where Anthony Loyd, a journalist, told us that he interviewed Shamima Begum and the UK government demanded that he turned over all his files and he refused. And it was fought in the courts and he won.

Chitra Ragavan:

And she is?

Anne Speckhard:

He is a journalist for The Times.

Chitra Ragavan:

And Shamima Begum is?

Anne Speckhard:

She was a 15 year old that went to ISIS. You probably know the picture. There's three girls going through the Istanbul Airport and they look like they're going on a grand adventure, they're on their way to ISIS. And they were girls from a kind of swanky school, Bethnal Green.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's an iconic photo.

Anne Speckhard:

Exactly.

Chitra Ragavan:

And now with COVID, I have two questions. Do terrorists realize, given the vulnerability that the entire globe has revealed to microbes, that potentially, are you hearing anything about biological weapons as sort of the future of terrorism? And I guess the second question is, with all of the distractions of the entire governments of the world, dealing with COVID, does it allow groups like ISIS or new groups to start to surface because our head's turned elsewhere?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, all of the groups, the far-right and the Al-Qaeda, ISIS type groups, started saying when COVID came out, "If you're infected to go and infect the enemy, basically." So the first one I heard of was an Egyptian ideologue who was a jihadist, said, "You should go to the government and infect as many people as you can while you're contagious." But I think that the... I study ISIS much more than the far-right. I mean, I read about it, but I'm not doing interviews with the far-right.

Anne Speckhard:

And I would say, in the leadership, they're pretty smart about these things. And they did warn their followers to be careful because of COVID, because they don't want to be wiped out. But that said, we've made two interviews with scientists that were brought into ISIS. I think, yeah, they were both Iraqis. And ISIS is known for having made a call to scientists, medical people, people with film and media skills, all skilled people, and it's specific skills that they needed, to join.

Anne Speckhard:

And with the scientists, they said, "You don't even need to come here, just on our encrypted channels, please help us to figure out how to make weapons of mass destruction and biological weapons." So one of the scientists opened up quite a bit to us about it and told us that he was reading everything he could find in scientific journals. And you know, scientists are very proud to say what they figured out. And then he would write to ISIS and say, "See this article, it tells you this extremely flammable substance and how it works and how to produce it. So you need these supplies, this is how you would produce it, and here's how you could use it."

Anne Speckhard:

So maybe in the scientific journal, it had mentioned that it could be used for warfare, but the article wasn't about warfare, it was about polymers. But the ISIS guy would feed it back to the organization. And there was a lab in Erbil that was exactly for this kind of thing. And Al-Qaeda the same. They experimented with ricin and other biological agents. They poisoned dogs. They had dogs in a lab. I think this was in Afghanistan or Pakistan, I'm not sure.

Anne Speckhard:

And they're willing to use it. Al-Qaeda made this statement, "Anything you use on us, we can use against you." And the Russians had sent poisoned socks to Basayev, he's a

Chechen rebel leader and affiliated with Al-Qaeda, luckily he hung them out where chickens were around and he saw that the chickens died. So he never put them on, it would have killed him. And his deputy, Khattab, was sent a letter that was laced with poison, which did kill him.

Anne Speckhard:

So their view is if you use it on us, we can use it on you. But I do think the ones that are true scientists understand that biological weapons are very hard to control.

Chitra Ragavan:

Looking back on your career, Anne, what would you say to that diplomat's wife who found herself unmoored by his move abroad and his own rising career, about the journey that you've been on and these conversations you've been having with terrorists?

Anne Speckhard:

Well, when I wrote, the first book that I wrote, Talking to Terrorists, I wrote it to my old self. So I tried to think of the reader as the person that I used to be. Because I grew up in the State of Wisconsin. I'd say I was a small town girl. And I went out into the big world and learned things that I never imagined that I would learn.

Anne Speckhard:

And so, I wrote with the idea of, come with me and listen to these people for yourself, because I put a lot of their words into the book, and I'll tell you what I think, but you judge for yourself what you think. And so, I wrote my whole book that way.

Anne Speckhard:

And I would say if I was going to speak to anyone in that position, take life as a series of changes. And Dan and I decided when we went on a vacation that was too expensive for us, when our kids were little, what if it's not perfect and we spent all this money on it? Would we be disappointed? And we decided, let's view it as an adventure, because things are supposed to go wrong on an adventure, right? And if you view it as an adventure, you probably won't be disappointed. So we repeated that when we went off to the former Soviet Union. We said, "Let's view this as an adventure."

Anne Speckhard:

And I think I've kind of taken that as my motto of going through life. And we do tend to hang on to things and think this is me, and this is what I should be doing, but probably we should go through life with our hands open and saying, "This is me right now, but it might change five minutes from now. I might be doing something completely different." And just embrace whatever is.

Chitra Ragavan:

Have you had any, what I call viral insights about your life and work in the wake of COVID-19, that moment of clarity that's often brought upon by a crisis?

Anne Speckhard:

I found rest. I was traveling so much. I was traveling every other month overseas and going into conflict zones. And sometimes I'd be in Syria planning my next trip, booking my tickets with bad internet, while I was on a trip. And I was fine with that. I'm a high energy person and I get a lot of energy from my work. I really enjoy it. And I don't do things that I don't believe in. And I'm my own boss for the most part. So that's very nice.

Anne Speckhard:

But when COVID happened and I started to evaluate, "Should I go on my next trip? Will I get stuck in Syria? If I have a fever, will I not be able to cross the border? If I'm in Erbil and I have a fever, will I not be able to board the plane?" And all these steps that I have to go. And I was also being asked to go other places. And I shut it down first, myself, and then it just got shut down completely by everyone. Kind of at first was disappointed, but now I have just said, "Embrace it." We're at home. My family is here. I cook every night. I am doing a lot of writing, and it's okay. And just be peaceful with what is right now. And I tell myself, "Maybe you won't travel again. Maybe you won't be out there doing what you were doing last year," but either way, I'm okay with it.

Chitra Ragavan:

Anne, thank you so much for all of these amazing stories and insights from your most unique career path.

Anne Speckhard:

You're welcome.

Chitra Ragavan:

Anne Speckhard is the Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, ICSVE. Speckhard is a sought-after counterterrorism expert and has consulted with NATO, the EU Commission and EU parliament, European and other foreign governments, and has advised US Congressional Committees and federal agencies. Speckhard is a frequent media commentator and has written several books, including Talking to Terrorists, Bride of ISIS, Undercover Jihadi, and ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate.

Chitra Ragavan:

This is When It Mattered. I'm Chitra Ragavan.

Chitra Ragavan:

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Chitra Ragavan:

Our producer is Jeremy Corr, founder and CEO of Executive Podcasting Solutions. Our theme song is composed by Jack Yagerline. Join us next week for another edition of When It Mattered. I'll see you then.