

## THE CTAP INTERVIEW

## Vera Mironova, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs

*Interviewed by Dr. Doug Borer,  
US Naval Postgraduate School*

THIS INTERVIEW IS TAKEN FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE COMBATING Terrorism Archive Project (CTAP).<sup>1</sup> On 22 May 2016, Dr. Doug Borer, US Naval Postgraduate School, talked with Vera Mironova, a PhD candidate in political science at the University of Maryland and a fellow with the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. They discussed Mironova's research into how terrorists organize themselves and manage their divisions of labor.<sup>2</sup> She has spent many months on the ground in a number of countries that are dealing with insurgencies and currently is observing the battle to retake the city of Mosul, Iraq, from ISIS.<sup>3</sup> CTX editor Elizabeth Skinner sat in on their discussion.

**DOUG BORER:** Please begin by giving us an overview of your present work.

**VERA MIRONOVA:** I am earning my doctoral degree in political science, and I also study economics. So I am trying to merge those two disciplines together by looking at the internal organizations of terrorist groups—not what they are doing in the field, but how they operate inside. Imagine, for example, what a nightmare human resources [HR] is for these organizations. They have even a harder job than other kinds of organizations because they don't have a budget every year, but also have to look for their funding. And then, being a terrorist organization, they have everyone trying to kill them, which makes their job even harder. I am studying this because although it's hard, ISIS has been fairly successful at it. A lot of brigades are successful, but actually far more are not. So I am trying to see where other brigades made mistakes that caused them to be less successful.

**BORER:** Are you doing a comparative study or looking at a specific country?

**MIRONOVA:** I am trying to do both. I am looking at different organizations, mostly at the labor market for rebel fighters in civil wars. My three main case studies are Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen, and I also have done a little work in Congo. I conducted the same survey with fighters in all of those front lines. By studying the Ukrainian paramilitary groups in Europe, the Houthis in Yemen, and Sunni groups in Syria, it will be easier to generalize from my work, because if something works in all of those really diverse places, I could assume it works everywhere.

**BORER:** Could you tell us a little bit about your method? Do you actually talk with the HR people of non-state armed groups?

**MIRONOVA:** Yes, I do talk to exactly those people. I interviewed them on the front lines. Otherwise, how would we know about their decision making? The second question we need to think about is whether or not we believe them. But first, let's talk to them. Those questions that I am asking about the labor market are not considered to be intelligence gathering, so it's not hard to ask them. I am not asking where the groups' finances are coming from or who they want to

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I AM LOOKING  
MOSTLY AT THE  
LABOR MARKET  
FOR REBEL  
FIGHTERS IN  
CIVIL WARS.

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The Islamic State welcomes you...



...but not for long. Operation is going very well.



After an attack



Life in a Humvee

bomb tomorrow; I'm asking, why did you join? They talk about that with each other all the time. They talk on Facebook. They don't consider this anything hard to understand. So that's why it's possible to do this research by directly talking to them.

**BORER:** If you had to summarize maybe the top two or three reasons why people join these groups, what would they be?

**MIRONOVA:** The first reason some people join terrorist organizations is because they are hard-core supporters of the goal. Then some people join for a job—just for money. The third group is people who are forced to join.<sup>4</sup> So, think about the first two reasons. It may be hard to understand these motives when talking about terrorist organizations, but I think any organization is like that. There are people who, from the day they were born, wanted to go into the military. Good. Other people think, Well, I didn't go to school, so maybe the military is a good idea because it pays. So, the same thing with armed groups. Like any organization, armed groups have a very hard time joining those two types of members together because each has different objectives.

**BORER:** Does that make a difference in the jobs that they do? If they join because of their dedication to the goal, do they become suicide bombers, or if they join for money, do they do a different task? Is there a connection between these things?

**MIRONOVA:** Yes, and I think this is the biggest problem HR is trying to solve. Because while it's okay to have the people who join for money, the organization cannot not give them something important to do. Imagine people who join the US military. You will take people who want to join for the GI bill.<sup>5</sup> That's fine; you need people on the ground level. But can you imagine promoting a person who is not interested in the goals of the organization? If you did that, then the whole organization below him would know he doesn't care about the mission.

So, the biggest problem those guys in the terrorist HR have is to ensure that the people who are promoted are the most motivated people. Look at ISIS. In the beginning, when it had just started, it was taking only very dedicated fighters. It was a small brigade, and its members had to take a lot of risks. They were very motivated people. Then when ISIS was holding more territory and it had to govern it, it brought in a lot of people who were interested only in material benefits. It had to bring in people who pretended that they were pro-ISIS, but the only thing they had to do was stamp a paper, like a traffic violation. Did ISIS leaders care if these people believed in the ISIS idea? No, not as long as they could stamp papers. But at the top levels, they needed to ensure that they had people who were actually dedicated to the goals of the group. Those things actually change with time, however. When ISIS ran out of people who wanted to join even just for money, or when it ran out of money to convince those people to join, it went to conscription. Now, for example, I believe that in some ISIS-held territory, everyone who is older than 12 has to serve in ISIS.

**BORER:** Do you think that suggests that they are reaching the end of their recruitment base, or are there still a lot of people they can coerce or force to join?

**MIRONOVA:** I was in Iraq on the front line when the Mosul operation started [in the fall of 2016].<sup>6</sup> I think ISIS is doing very, very badly. Internal motivation is nonexistent. We interviewed some defected security agents—they were not just fighters. It is almost impossible for people who want to defect from ISIS to do so.

There are too many of them, and ISIS is not happy with that, so they are being shot on sight. So it's really hard to defect, and morale is extremely low.

Is this a good thing or a bad thing? That's a different question. I think it's a bad thing because we have all these Syrians and Iraqis who joined ISIS for money, right? Now they don't get paid anything because ISIS is very low on money. It even cut food rations. So all those guys who want to defect will go back to their lives or become refugees. But, what's left is this core group of dedicated people, and particularly foreign fighters who burned their passports and who know they are on all possible terrorist lists. They are all over YouTube. Those guys are going to be stuck. You know what happens when you corner a dog? They are going to have two options. In either case they are going to die, but the question is, are they going to die alone, or are they going to take a lot of people with them? I am not saying it was an easy campaign to push them towards this edge. I am just worried that they are not going to want to die alone. There is no amnesty. They burned their passports, and they don't have an option. There is nowhere they can go.

**BORER:** Well, it seems that, if you were a local person, you might be able to survive if you were to defect. If you were an Iraqi fighter who had joined ISIS because of your sectarian preference, you would just join some part of the Sunni militia, whether it supported ISIS or something else. From your knowledge on the ground, is there a program by the Iraqi government to actually pull these fighters back into the state, or are they at high risk for being put in prison or somehow punished?

**MIRONOVA:** I talked to some government officials in Iraq about what happens when these fighters come back to the village, and by the laws of Iraq, they are going to have to go to prison. We know for sure that the leaders of ISIS in Syria right now are moving their families to Anbar Province to hide them among the local population. But they cannot hide themselves—they are too well-known. So, they are thinking about Libya, because they have to go somewhere. I understand that; they have to go somewhere. The foreigners who defected go to prison for life.

**BORER:** Are you familiar with the ISIS prophecy of the final battle in Dabiq?<sup>7</sup>

**MIRONOVA:** Yes, I am familiar in theory, but I don't think it has any reality, especially in terms of military strategy.

**BORER:** I'm curious: if there is this prophetic moment, would it be a good policy to try to make that happen? Can we take those committed hard-core foreigners who are going to die somewhere—they can't go home, and they are not from the local place—and create a "Dabiq"—that is, purposefully start a "final battle," whether in Dabiq or elsewhere?<sup>8</sup>

**MIRONOVA:** That would be nice, especially if you could go and do it in an unpopulated area. It would help a lot. Otherwise, it would just start another insurgency because civilians are not going to be happy with us bombing them all over the place. There is another option, although I know it's not a very good one, but think about the FARC in Colombia.<sup>9</sup> They were huge, they were very dangerous, and people were terrified of them. Now they control a piece of forest the size of my backyard. Are they bad? Yes, they are rather bad. Are they annoying? Yes, they are rather annoying. Are they a danger to the world? No. But that's



Moving forward on foot (early, cold, and miserable morning)



The car was not lucky, but the people inside were fine.



THEY ARE GOING TO DIE, BUT ARE THEY GOING TO DIE ALONE, OR ARE THEY GOING TO TAKE A LOT OF PEOPLE WITH THEM?



After securing a block, trying to make parking for a Humvee



ISIS marks on the wall indicate that the neighborhood was cleared of satellite dishes.





This street was just retaken from ISIS



Clearing the house where there is/was a sniper. They did not find the sniper but did find his equipment.



Friendly civilians who offered us cover in their house. The first thing they said was “Do not take a picture with this stupid beard.” They then asked if we had cigarettes (smoking was not allowed by ISIS). They haven’t left the house for the past two weeks during the fighting and told us that ISIS fighters who are now fighting against us on their street are Russian speakers – from Tajikistan and Kazakhstan (and one Syrian).

where all the leadership stayed—they are sitting in their forest. I understand this is not going to happen with ISIS because they have too many fighters and they were too loud about killing people on TV.

**ELIZABETH SKINNER:** So, you’re suggesting that we should give ISIS a little town somewhere? Like the Indian Maoists, reduced to living in a forest in eastern India?

**MIRONOVA:** Exactly. I understand that, from a political perspective, no one could suggest it, but if you take the FARC as an example, the group was down-sized to the most dedicated people, and they are sitting in a forest. It’s not going to kill them off, but it’s really going to decrease the danger.

**BORER:** But the question is whether their ideology is able to make the compromise. The FARC had a certain capacity to accept a deal, if they were able to convince themselves it was in their interest. If you gave them an autonomous zone and said this is FARC land, it seemed that the FARC leaders would be open to that. My question is, do you think that the intensity of the ISIS message and all of their propagandizing has boxed ISIS’s leaders into a place where they really can’t negotiate? Or do you think that they would?

**MIRONOVA:** They would negotiate. Propaganda is nice, and these norms are totally fine when it is not your life on the line. When you’re reduced to survival, forget about ideology. When we talked to this defected security agent, he said that half of ISIS are going to convert to Christianity if it pays well enough.

**SKINNER:** There is the FARC example, but then there is also the Lord’s Resistance Army example. They have been pretty weak for a long time, and all they have been able to do is wreak havoc on villages throughout the border regions of Rwanda and Uganda and Congo for 30 years. But they haven’t been able to promote their ideology; they haven’t been able to do anything but cause pain and suffering to local areas. My question is whether that might be another way for ISIS to continue, as this cancerous sore on the Syria-Iraq border, for decades.

**MIRONOVA:** Don’t forget that a lot of foreign fighters are ex-drug addicts who found religion. A lot of them converted. They are in poor health. It’s going to reduce their life span after the war, even if they survive the war.

**BORER:** Many of these insurgencies have been resolved, or at least partially resolved, by governments offering amnesty or reintegration programs, by basically saying, we will allow you to keep your military units, and then reintegrating them into official security forces in some form. Do you see such an idea as being possible, considering the widely different actors—the Iraqi government, the Syrian government, the Turkish government, the international community—that are involved? Do you see any possibility that there could be a coordinated resolution other than a military resolution?

**MIRONOVA:** I don’t agree with the idea of reintegrating ISIS fighters. Why would you reintegrate them? Why would you make a special unit to integrate them and create a bigger population of jihadis? You’re taking chances doing that because they have the possibility of bringing more people into their command structure. But you could leave them together to do their own thing, while keeping them under control. I am not saying leave ISIS alone to continue fighting, but I am saying that there are cases when that kind of strategy [of isolation] worked before

because there is always the question of what to do with the fighters once the fighting is over.

**BORER:** A number of people have argued that, if somehow the war against ISIS were successful and ISIS were destroyed, a new ISIS would be born, because the fundamental grievances and issues throughout the Middle East region are going to inspire somebody to create a new type of jihadi Islam. Do you agree with that?

**MIRONOVA:** Yes, absolutely. First of all, there is no money coming into this region. The number of kids being born during the war didn't even decrease that much, so even if the war ends, where are people going to get the money and whatever else they need to survive? The governments will not provide that. So, of course there will be more trouble coming. Even now, the Nusra Front is gaining power extremely quickly.<sup>10</sup>

**BORER:** If you were able to give the US president advice on what the United States should do about ISIS, would you have him continue the [Barack] Obama administration's small footprint approach? Would you say this is not a fight the United States should be involved with? Or would you do what many people in Congress, like Senator [John] McCain, have said, that we need more boots on the ground? In other words, escalate, stay the same, or deescalate?

**MIRONOVA:** Unfortunately, it's too late to not do anything. The United States lost the moment when it could do something slowly and carefully, and now Russia is in there. The United States cannot afford to simply stop being involved all of a sudden. But the question is, even with "boots on the ground," who exactly do we bring in there—people who are going to fight this war? No, that's not a great idea. Advisors to advise them on how to fight or maybe how to run the country? In fact, the majority of Syrian brigades have fallen apart, not because of military defeat but because they don't have any training on how to manage budgets, HR, logistics, and so on. Politicians like to say they are going to send in advisors. Advisors on what? We need to make sure we are actually doing something worthwhile.

**BORER:** So, how would you organize your brigade. How would you supply it? How would you discipline your troops? How would you train them on what was the acceptable use of violence?

**MIRONOVA:** Stopping corruption even at the brigade level would help. A lot of militias and fighters left the fight, including Islamist groups, complaining about the corruption. You don't want to work in an organization that has corruption. And after the war is over, corruption is going to be a problem again if the country is not run properly, and it will continue to be a source of grievance.

**BORER:** I like to conclude these interviews with what I call the "king for the day" or "queen for the day" question. If you were in charge of some aspect of these fights and you could get something done—say if you were nominated to be the US Secretary of Defense—what would you try to do?

**MIRONOVA:** I would increase the Fulbright program. It's really not a military thing, but I teach at the American University of Iraq as pro bono staff. I go in there from time to time, and these students are going to be leaders of that nation later on. If people don't know how to run the country, they are going to fail, and then the next time, the voters are going to vote for someone even more far-right because people think that's going to solve the problem. They are going to follow



Shell casings litter the street

THERE IS ALWAYS THE QUESTION OF WHAT TO DO WITH THE FIGHTERS ONCE THE FIGHTING IS OVER.



Looking for the missing head of a suicide bomber

a more hard-core person, like Putin in Russia. There need to be programs that educate the future leaders from those countries—not just for the military, but that educate them in, for example, public policy and economics. Right now, in Iraq, they need people to run the ministry of finance, the central bank, the ministries of transportation, education, and internal security, but they don't have people with the education and experience for those positions—the technical bureaucrats.

**SKINNER:** Before we finish, I have one more question. There have been conflicting stories about the level of involvement of former Ba'athists—former officials of the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein—in ISIS. Some people claim that the Ba'athists are running ISIS, while other people are saying, no, that's overstated. What did you find out about the level of Ba'athist participation, if anything?

**MIRONOVA:** The Ba'athists know how to run an organization, so I think they help in that way. The question is, what is their actual involvement? I think they are very strong on a local, technical level. The leaders of ISIS are hard-core military guys. But people didn't like the way

they were being governed and were protesting, so the leaders changed their policies. That is the definition of democracy, in my opinion. ISIS has the same governance problem that the states do. The bureaucrats are in it for the paycheck, absolutely. Those guys are professionals. So, of course, ISIS is happy: "Oh, my God, good employees. Let's take them before someone else takes them because we are not going to be able to compete with anyone for their services."

ISIS HAS THE SAME GOVERNANCE PROBLEM THAT THE STATES DO. THE BUREAUCRATS ARE IN IT FOR THE PAYCHECK.

**BORER:** This is part of the appeal, as far as I know, because the Shi'a-dominated [Iraqi] government excludes those people [former officials under Saddam Hussein] even though they are technically competent. They are politically unacceptable because they are associated with the old regime along sectarian lines. So, where are they going to go?

**MIRONOVA:** It does not matter whether bringing these bureaucrats into ISIS is politically or ideologically acceptable. If the group needs those people, it will modify its propaganda to include them. Those are just words—who cares? ❖

NOTES

- 1 The Combating Terrorism Archive Project (CTAP) aims to collect and archive knowledge on strategy, operations, and tactics used by military and other security personnel from around the world in the twenty-first-century fight against global terrorism. Collectively, the individual interviews that CTAP conducts will create an oral history archive of knowledge and experience in counterterrorism for the benefit of the CT community now and in the future.
- 2 This interview was edited for length and clarity. Every effort was made to ensure that the meaning and intention of the participants were not altered in any way. The ideas and opinions of all participants are theirs alone and do not represent the official positions of the US Naval Postgraduate School, the US Department of Defense, the US government, or any other official entity.
- 3 For a look at Mironova's recent activities in Mosul, see Eric Schmitt, "Papers Offer a Peek at ISIS' Drones, Lethal and Largely Off-the-Shelf," *New York Times*, 31 January 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/31/world/middleeast/isis-drone-documents.html>
- 4 *Editor's note:* For more about how ISIS organizes its labor needs, see Vera Mironova, "ISIS Prisons: Where Labor Demand Meets Labor Supply," in this issue.
- 5 The "GI Bill of Rights," officially the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, is legislation originally passed by the US

- 6 Congress to provide education, housing, health, and other benefits to World War II veterans. It has since been expanded to cover anyone who has served in the US armed forces.
- 6 What is being called the Battle for Mosul began when Iraqi, US, and coalition forces launched a major operation to force ISIS out of the northern Iraqi city, the last ISIS stronghold in Iraq. The fight is ongoing. For details, see "Battle for Mosul: The Story So Far," BBC World News, updated 21 March 2016: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37702442>
- 7 Dabiq is a small Syrian town that ISIS doctrine declares will be the site of the final battle between Islam and the West, in which the forces of Islam will finally prevail.
- 8 *Editor's note:* To learn more about religious fundamentalism and the role of biblical prophecy in armed religious movements, see Jonathan Nagle, "Fundamentalism: The Branch Davidians and the Islamic State," in this issue.
- 9 The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) waged a vicious insurgent war against the Colombian government for 50 years. The two sides recently negotiated a peace deal.
- 10 Jabhat al-Nusra (now Jabhat Fateh al-Sham) is a splinter of the Islamic State of Iraq, which was the immediate precursor to ISIS. After the two groups had a falling-out over strategy and goals, the members of al-Nusra split off to concentrate on the fight against the Assad regime.