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# FIELDWORK AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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## INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism is a difficult subject to research, and it is equally challenging to conduct fieldwork in areas affected by violent extremist ideologies. The reasons for this are numerous; this policy paper will address some of the most serious, based on the author's personal experience with research and fieldwork in violent and dangerous environments.

Unfortunately there is no one-size-fits-all recipe for safe, ethical and successful fieldwork; nor can we prepare for all the eventualities that might occur when conducting fieldwork in areas affected by violent extremist ideas or among actors who have taken such ideas onboard. While all types of research - fieldwork-based or not - confront us with questions of ethics or risk in one way or another, working in violent contexts where extremist ideas are present throw them into much sharper relief. Research in violent and dangerous places is complicated and the accompanying fieldwork often involves confusion, failures and mistakes - while demanding creativity, flexibility and reflexivity on the part of researchers. There are several tough questions we should ask ourselves before, during and after fieldwork in violent and politically volatile places. In this paper I will speak as honestly as possible about how I have grappled with the practical and ethical challenges of conducting fieldwork in insecure places in the past, and how this has had an impact on my work in Sahel countries such as Mali, where extremist religious ideas in the form of Salafi-Jihadism is a source of inspiration for several insurgencies. I will address issues concerning the personal safety of researchers and respondents in the field - including informant anonymity, the positionality of the researcher, and how we can design and generate fieldwork research methods that provide safety for researchers as well as respondents, without compromising data quality and ethical standards.

This paper is, therefore, not yet another discussion about the technical specificities of certain research methods or whether the objectives of research are best reached through a qualitative or quantitative approach. Rather my focus is on the messy realities of fieldwork in violent places. It is simply not possible to present a single template for safe, ethical and successful fieldwork - but we can learn from experiences and particularly from the mistakes we make. As such this is an attempt to reflect on some of the mistakes that I have made during fieldwork, and to define some of the dilemmas that arise doing this type of research on violent extremist ideologies and the actors supporting them – dilemmas that we can prepare to face, but that irrespective of what some ethics research boards seems to believe, we cannot simply resolve once and for all. This means that while I will spend some time on the dos and don'ts, I will mostly focus on the 'question marks' since this is where the most difficult challenges lie, while noting that it is not so easy to be aware of where the dilemmas are located.

## **RESEARCHING VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

While all fieldwork-based research that is carried out in violent environments can be dangerous and comes with a set of ethical challenges and security risks, carrying out such research into violent extremist ideas and actors is particularly challenging. The reason for this is that violent extremism is not codified in International Law, and even the United Nations Secretary-General Plan of Action (see UNGS 2016) states that it is a diverse phenomenon without clear definitions. Indeed, despite widespread use in security discourses, the concept of violent extremism lacks a precise definition in international codifications - just as was the case with 'radicalisation' and 'terrorism', which violent extremism as a concept was supposed to replace/enrich. This means that researchers need to practice due diligence with the utmost care, since the absence of a clear definition of violent extremism paves the way for human rights abuses, and given how authoritarian regimes can potentially exploit this ambiguity to delegitimise political adversaries.

Recent scholarship has also highlighted that narratives, framings and policies referring to either radicalisation or violent extremism remain ill-defined and imprecise (Schmid 2013), since they fluctuate between cognitive (Kepel 2005) and behaviouralist (Neumann 2006; UNDP 2017) epistemologies. In practice, this ambivalence has contributed to sweeping policies that have led to the criminalisation of non-violent groups and the stigmatisation of entire communities considered 'at risk' (Kundnani 2012; Heath-Kelly 2017). For example, the current popular discourse in Mali regarding young Fulani herdsmen of the Sahel being particularly prone to getting involved with armed Jihadist movements shows all too well how counterproductive this can be, in this case leading to a heavy-handed, indiscriminate state response (see Ba and Bøås 2017). Moreover, most theories of violent extremism have been built on abstract Western-based models (Macaluso 2016), and their lack of context-sensitivity means they are unable to capture local specificities (Coolsaet 2016). Making certain that the research done is context-sensitive is therefore a key to it being ethically sound, but it is not a guarantee.

## **Context-sensitivity**

Context-sensitive research will depend upon a number of factors, including a thorough review of the situation on the ground based on desk research that draws on all available literatures. In addition, a useful point of departure is to focus on the micro-dynamics of mobilisation and demobilisation in political activism and political violence (Della-Porta and LaFree 2013). That is, the use of violence inspired or justified by an ideological or religious discourse, in pursuit of a political agenda. This means that we should understand violent extremism as violence that has a political and/or religious agenda. This entails that, while agents of violent extremism can be involved in criminal activity locally, nationally or transnationally, this involvement is not their sole motivation. Regarding radicalisation, one should make a distinction between leader cadres and rank-and-file support for groups arguing such ideas (see Utas and Vigh 2017). An understanding of radicalisation needs to be anchored not only in religious ideas or another ideology, but in relation to the livelihoods and political possibilities afforded the people in question. This also means taking a clear stance against the work on violent extremism and radicalisation that

is based on mental transformation theories (see Silber and Bhatt 2007; Horgan 2008; Borum 2011) by which some sort of pre-existing disgruntlement or grievance leads to increased contact with and inclusion into a radicalised environment, resulting in complete commitment to the objectives of the violent extremist group (see Silber and Bhatt 2007). The potential radical persona is subsequently seen as becoming totally absorbed by and committed to the radical idea and thereby transformed from a discontented to a dangerous individual.

A more constructive focus for research on violent extremism is that, in an environment of social and political tension, rapid social change, and real or perceived precarious livelihoods, many people may experience a strong sense of bewilderment, confusion and uncertainty. Under certain circumstances – in the decisive moment – this state of uncertainty, bordering on social existential anxiety, may be replaced by a 'dead certainty': a conviction that the current state of confusion, uncertainty and precarity is caused by something or someone, and if only this something or someone could be controlled, removed, expelled or exterminated, social order and well-being will re-emerge (see Bøås and Dunn 2013). Understanding what causes this in some cases and not in others - even if they exist in a relatively similar 'enabling environment' for extremism - should be a key task of fieldwork-based research on violent extremism.

## FIELDWORK IN AREAS WHERE VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS ARE PRESENT

Researching violence as it unfolds is challenging everywhere, and particularly abroad since it usually necessitates the reliance on local contacts, researchers, and fixers. As a member of the community of globally mobile conflict researchers - those who mostly live in Europe or North America - I depend a lot on these persons. This is particularly true for my research in the Sahel, where independent access to conflict-affected areas has become almost impossible due to high levels of insecurity, which turn the question of trust in local brokers into an essential one that relates not only to academic careers but importantly also to personal security (Bøås, Jennings and Shaw 2006). In a highly insecure context, who can we trust regarding data and information? Who can we trust for sound security advice? And how does money influence our research relationships?

These questions are a constant part of the daily negotiation of fieldwork-based conflict and intervention research, and I also grappled with them in earlier research in insecure places, such as the Mano River Basin, Northern Uganda, and the DR Congo. Yet they have never felt as acute as when I started working in Mali and the Sahel in 2007. The reasons for this rest in the deep uncertainties and fears that are brought about by a combination of insecurity and the near impossibility of accessing the most research-relevant parts of these territories. While the research situation was also highly insecure at times in the other conflict zones I worked in, my research teams and I were never the direct target of attacks. This is different in the Sahel, where jihadist insurgencies attack hotels to create spectacular dramas for international media coverage, and international hostages are much sought after, leading to a severe decrease of fieldwork-based research in these areas. This situation is concerning because we are in danger of losing a grounded understanding of the social landscape of these areas based on independent third-party empirical observations in the field. Some of the security concerns causing this retreat from the field are very real, while others are motivated by risk-averse universities and funders. While we can possibly do something to address these institutional attitudes, conducting research in high-risk contexts is something we need to become better at dealing with.

In the Sahel, the research that does take place is often conducted under a certain degree of suspense and suspicion, if not outright paranoia. Field visits are infrequent and usually short, making the development of a systematic dataset based on first-hand data collection nearly impossible. This leads to an increased reliance upon a combination of a) more anecdotal evidence and b) data collected by sources (such as journalists or intelligence officers) whose reliability is uncertain - not because the data is bad or biased, but because often we cannot know either its quality nor the original purpose for which it was collected, analysed and framed in a certain way. Aspects of this problem can be tackled by triangulating as much data as possible (see also McNeil, in this volume). The other strategy often employed by Northern researchers is to work with a local partner, be it an individual researcher or a research organisation, who will do the data collection in the risky areas while the international researcher remains in the capital or another relatively safe area of the country, if not attempting to entirely control the research process remotely 'from home'.

Following the foregoing elaborations, I will now address issues concerning the personal safety of researchers and respondents in the field - including informant anonymity, the positionality of the researcher, and how we can design and generate fieldwork research methods that provide safety for researchers as well as respondents, without compromising data quality and ethical standards. This is certainly not easy, but it is possible to conduct this type of research in a way that is as ethical as possible. This will come in the form of three main considerations - managing risks and research ethics; navigating risks and access; and doing no harm.

## Managing risks and research ethics

The dilemmas emerging from trying to manage risks and research ethics is often a result of our grappling with questions concerning control, confusion and failure in the research process. More often than not, this is a consequence of the tension between the ideal of control in and over fieldwork, and the actual confusion in the research process - a tension that most fieldwork-based researchers will have experienced at one point or another. 'Control' is the normal portrayal of the research process by the field researcher.

With a few noticeable exceptions, we find narratives of control in most guidebooks on field research and fieldwork-based research methods, and in the grant proposals researchers write to convince funders to finance their research. No wonder then that many first-time researchers experience confusion, if not outright feelings of personal failure, when the expectations and (self-)narratives of control over the research process are confronted by the messy reality of fieldwork-based research.

While this reality check does not only concern research on violent extremism, it is in these contexts, with their tense social dynamics, that the perception and reality of loss of control over the research process can be particularly profound - and potentially dangerous for the researcher and those they interact with in different roles as assistants, informants, and participants.

Feelings of alienation and fear for one's personal safety in the field are very normal and happen to everyone. However managing risk means more than the safety of the researcher - who often can return to a more peaceful homestead. It must also include managing the risk of all research participants, including local researchers, assistants, brokers and not least informants. Very often they do not have the opportunity to leave if they start receiving unwanted attention from violent extremist groups or state security agencies. This also strongly suggests that one needs to pay particular attention and sensitivity to material, information and data received in the field. It is not necessarily ethically correct to use all the information retrieved. The researcher could be told things that could incriminate someone or put them in serious danger. If there is a chance that respondents/informants are told things that may later put them in harm's way, such information should not be used.

This is particularly important in violent or conflict-affected places, and especially when dealing with violent extremists. Some other issues must also be addressed here. This is a controversial point, but nonetheless it should also be made explicit when conducting fieldwork on violent extremist groups: irrespective of what we may think about our informants - whether they are violent Salafi-Jihadist, ethno-nationalist or belong to the extreme right - we are researchers. Our task is to understand - to produce knowledge, not to act as detectives or investigative jo-urnalists. These are 'hats' that should not be shared or used in an inter-changeable manner. As researchers we should stick to our role, and the credo of informant anonymity must be upheld irrespective of our personal political beliefs. We have a responsibility to protect our informants when they tell us something that can put them in danger.

The responsibility to protect may seem quite straightforward, but in practice it is more complicated as it inevitably involves some questions concerning who we are in the field. We are researchers, but most of us are more than that. We are not machines but humans and, as humans, we crave respect and friendship and are affected by what we see around us and the histories of violence that we are told. It would be sad if this were different, as this could mean that we do fieldwork for our own careers only. Caring is a good thing - but how we care, and how we show that we care, also has wider implications.

As researchers our role first and foremost is to document, analyse and enable understanding. We are neither journalists nor Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) workers or social activists, and we are certainly not criminal investigators. At the same time, the push for research impact in many countries - as well as our own political convictions and agendas - may prompt us to see ourselves as more than researchers. Wanting to help is thankfully a common urge, especially when working with vulnerable groups, marginalised populations and victims of violence by extremist groups. However, we should be extremely careful not to make promises we cannot keep, and always ask ourselves what responsible empathy can look like short of acting as a social worker.

Establishing friendship during fieldwork is possible but will more often than not involve highly uneven relationships, and there are good reasons to remind ourselves what our main role is. This also means that we as researchers and academics have a responsibility to avoid sensationalism and victimisation of our complex subjects who themselves have agency - both in what we ask our research participants, and how we represent them in our research outputs.

How we deal with the different roles discussed above also has significance for how well we can negotiate our positionality and identity in the field. We represent, and we are misrepresented and misunderstood, in the field. Most often, although not always, this is due to how accurately we present ourselves and how well we are able to read the local context.

Most often we are outsiders who do not belong in our sites of fieldwork, and we should not pretend that we do either. If we are doing anything beyond interviewing expats, representatives of various interventions, and local elites, then it should quickly become clear to us that our background and who we are make us different - a strange sort of personae that isn't always easy for local people to comprehend what we are doing in what may literally be their garden. Particularly in areas of large-scale international intervention, it is very understandable that - even if we may claim the opposite - people will think that we are in some way related to the international intervention.

We are who we are, and we should be honest about it. Taking advantage of local misrepresentation of who we are, in order to gain access to something or somebody that we otherwise would not have had access to, is generally not a good idea. Such manoeuvres are not only ethically wrong, but also have a tendency to come back to us in unpredictable and undesirable ways, leaving us in a nest of lies and compromises with our real identity that in the end may bring danger both to the researcher and those around them (local assistants, interpreters etc.).

# Navigating risk and access

In an ideal world, relationships between the researchers and local assistants would be based on trust, respect and eventual friendship, turning the researcher into what Geertz (1983: 56) calls the 'myth of the chameleon fieldworker, perfectly tuned to his exotic surroundings, a walking miracle of empathy, tact, patience and cosmopolitanism'. My own experience suggests, however, that while relationships with local assistants and researchers, fixers and brokers may eventually evolve into trustful friendship, relationships that work over an extended period mainly function not in spite of, but as a result of their unequal or asymmetrical nature.

We live in a highly uneven world, and money matters. Most often it is the researcher(s) from the Global North who bring funding opportunities, control the research process and spend a considerable amount of the project's resources. Unless one works with well-off intervention projects or other elites, this obviously helps determine research relationship dynamics in the field. Thus while friendship may evolve, this unevenness has an impact on the relationship.

This also means that when money is involved, as it almost always is, concrete contracts should be established upfront. Clearly discussing obligations, tasks, deadlines, and payment amounts and schedules with all parties may help avoid mistrust and establish good working relationships. Starting a relationship in such a business-like manner may seem difficult, but leaving things just hanging can create uneven expectations that may undermine the collaboration. Issues such as the possible co-production of research in the form of joint articles, reports or op-eds can be treated in a similar contractual manner and should also involve the question of whether they are potentially harmful for local researchers. In all cases, researchers need to carefully consider the power they may represent to others in terms of access to money, publications, and jobs - or just as an access point to the outside world - as this perception of power may make people take risks they would otherwise avoid.

My argument is that this general trend is even more salient in highly insecure places where the international community tends to live in garrisons to which local researchers rarely have the same privileged access as researchers from the Global North. There is undoubtedly an element of fear in intervention-related research in highly insecure places. Working in a place where I am a potential target has caused me at times to have second thoughts concerning the loyalty of those I work with, and to have concerns about their security advice. Are they making the right decisions, and to what degree is the fact that I am here influencing these decisions? Are they willing to take more risks than they would otherwise do? Are they setting up risky meetings just in order to serve my research agenda?

These are issues, questions and doubts that I probably should have thought through critically much earlier. I wonder whether the reason I didn't may be that 'we' - that is, researchers like me who have made fieldwork-based conflict research their career and livelihood - have created a social environment where we hardly ever talk about fear, distrust, wrong-doings and paranoia. Do we collectively cultivate an image of an ability to get things done against the odds, in which we become the 'heroes' of our own stories with no room for doubt and fear? I know that I have been guilty of this in my branding of myself and my 'field adventures'.

Let us for a moment consider a place like Tillabéri in Niger. It is part of the tri-border zone between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, but it is not actually a peripheral region as it is located a mere 50 kilometres from the capital Niamey. Still, it has quickly become so violent and dangerous that it is very hard to access. This means that what is happening here has been almost an enigma: what is the role of the insurgency by the Islamic State Greater Sahara (ISGS)? How do people cope with the new violent social landscape they find themselves facing? What has happened to transhumance? These are just some of the basic questions to which a researcher like me is almost desperate to find the data that could provide the possible answers. This also entails one facing a situation where it is easy to start compromising on the delicate balance between navigating risks and navigating access. This is particularly the case if the very design of the research project involves local researchers. Getting access to data that few others have access to is of course extremely tempting and, as ambition kicks in, it is easy to start compromising and thinking that even if I cannot go - or do not dare to go, which may often be more accurate

- they (i.e. the local partners) can go and harvest the data for the benefit of the research. This is a dilemma that one will often confront, and it is easy to minimise the risk aspects to get the access that we desperately want.

## Do no harm: easy to say, difficult to adhere to

Most of us clearly want to do no harm, but as the example that follows will underline it is much easier to say this than to adhere to it. There are several reasons, however an important one is that we prefer not to talk about the confusion, fears and distancing that we encounter during fieldwork on violent extremism - and when the study is done we quickly dismantle the scaffolding, leaving behind only the polished, published article or book, thus leading students and younger colleagues to think that their senior peers always succeed in the field. This is far from the case, as the very logic of fieldwork means that we make mistakes, but we prefer to be the heroes of our own stories. It is very rare that we - the more well-established researchers - talk about our own confusion, fears and sense of alienation in the field.

Here is an attempt from my side that shows not only confusion and fear, but also that abiding by the maxim of 'do no harm' may easily be brushed aside by interests and ambitions. I have always taken pride in a rule I used while working in the Mano River Basin, the DR Congo and Northern Uganda: that nobody working with me should be allowed to take risks that I was not prepared to take. This meant that if I did not feel comfortable travelling to a certain place or meeting somebody, no one else should either. In fact, I have even written about this and about the danger that the access to funding that people like me represent may lead local researchers and research assistants to take higher risks than they normally would. It is a seemingly easy rule, but not necessarily one I have always abided by. The increased difficulties in accessing the field that I encountered in Mali after 2012 almost inevitably led me to start making some compromises in this regard. As researchers, we want as much accurate data as possible, and to be the ones with the most interesting and novel pieces of information. Thus the temptation will always be to try to push through, thinking 'Hey ho, let's go!' This is precisely what I did one night.

I should confess that I find insurgents like Mokhtar Belmokhtar fascinating (see Bøås 2015). Not only for his role as the man behind the attack against the In Aménas gas plant in Algeria in 2013 that made him the most famous and most wanted jihadi in the Sahel, but by his full life trajectory — how as a young man he left Algeria in the 1980s to fight in Afghanistan, then returned and played a role in the Algerian civil war in the 1990s, followed by his time as a bandit, smuggler and insurgent roaming Northern Mali and other Sahel peripheries, until he cast all his criminal networks aside and became what he is today: the mythical face of Sahel jihadism.

Thus, one morning in Bamako when, during a discussion about which informants to interview in the coming week and where, one trusted broker told me that it could be possible to meet a recently returned Salafi-fighter who had spent some time with Belmokhtar's insurgency, *al-Mourabitoun*, I was thrilled. I told him that if it was possible to set up such a meeting, he should go ahead. He said he would try. A few days later I was told that this former fighter was willing to meet us at a place on the edge of Bamako. I talked this through with the broker who had provided this contact - just the two of us, as I felt that involving others could jeopardise this opportunity or even bring it to the attention of security forces, and then the whole encounter could turn very bad. We talked for a while, debating pros and cons. Was it real? Would it be possible? Would this person show up? Could we verify what he would tell us? We also discussed our own security, and I asked my broker if he felt secure and comfortable going through with this meeting. He said it was fine, that it would not be a problem.

And so on the evening of that same day we prepared to leave. It was just the two of us and a driver who knew only where he was supposed to take us but nothing more. As we started to approach the meeting point at the edge of town it was getting dark, and few people were to be seen. I could sense tension starting to build up in the car but chose to ignore it. We entered through some dark buildings into what seemed like an abandoned small yard between three old shattered houses. As we parked the car but left the lights on and the engine running, my broker started to get restless, and became even more nervous when not one but four persons emerged from the shadows, telling us to stop the engine and turn off the lights. It was abundantly clear that we were somewhere we should not have been. The person we were supposed to meet was not alone. He was together with three other men. Were they friends, former fighters, or something else? We never really understood, but they were aggressive and angry and demanded money. What I had hoped would be an interesting event that would provide novel insights into the inner life of *al-Mourabitoun* ended up in an attempt to navigate ourselves out of this encounter as best we could. After lengthy exchanges that seemed like negotiations, we finally agreed to give two of them a lift to another destination on the outer boundaries of Bamako, and when we got there, they just left the car and disappeared into the shadows of the darkness. We never understood what this was about and never talked much about this thereafter - both of us seemingly happy to brush this aside as just a 'bad day' in the field.

It was only much later that I started to reflect on this, and came to understand that this was not just a case of a broker making a bad decision, but very much about me. Those who I worked with knew what I was interested in, and on this occasion this knowledge pushed one of them to do something that he clearly otherwise would not have done. I should have seen this. I should have recognised that what drove this decision was an unequal relationship based on the hierarchy of power that I held by controlling funding and representing global connections through co-publishing and other things of interest to a young aspiring researcher like him. I had misunderstood the situation, not realising that - in his attempt to please me and grow closer to me and global connections that I represented - my broker had ended up doing something that he would never have done, had it not been for me.

Field research is always about money, or about capital of some sort. Without money we cannot travel, get accommodation, or hire local researchers. There must be something in it for the local partners. This should be obvious, but it is often the 'elephant in the room' of field research, hardly ever mentioned in books or articles based on field research or in manuals supposed to prepare students and young researchers for the field. We prefer not to talk about it as it would

throw into sharp relief the obvious power hierarchies that exist between 'international' and local researchers. Money has serious implications for research relationships: local researchers in weak and poor states where agents of violent extremism are present need funding for research and for their salaries, and this may very well affect what they are willing to do, the risks they are willing to take. There is no perfect antidote to this problem in this type of setting. The only thing we can do is to become better at talking honestly about it.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The discussion of fieldwork-based research dilemmas in areas where violent extremist ideas or agents are present also links to a broader emergent debate on researcher failure. Perceptions of 'failure' in research are not the exception but the rule. In general, however, failure - once the basis of positivist research in the form of Popper's falsification that leads to progress in science - seems to have been pushed into the shadows of private conversations among friends or close colleagues. The propensity to acknowledge failures (or not) in the research process has less to do with the general approach a researcher is taking - although certain approaches may be more prone to embrace 'failures' as those moments of surprise or 'creative rupture' which spark research in the first place. Rather, the silencing of failures and dilemmas in research is a bigger problem that has to do with research as a career and academia as a competitive marketplace, in which individuals compete for positions, promotions and research funding. Normalising supposed 'failure' in academia would go a long way in addressing some of the dilemmas around control and confusion in fieldwork - as it would reveal that what is deemed failure is the effect of a sanitised and formalised understanding of what social-scientific research entails.

Researchers are humans and as humans we all make mistakes. Everybody has feelings of suspense, fear and distrust during fieldwork, and this should be acknowledged as normal. We are certainly not machines, but people with emotions and attachment to ourselves. The real problem is the silencing around these dilemmas. This paper is an attempt to break this silence, because while we cannot resolve all the ethical dilemmas of fieldwork on violent extremism, we can become much better at talking about this and thus create a more reflexive and open atmosphere for ongoing discussion. This is most likely the only cure that exists. While it is not one that will help us overcome these issues, it will make it easier for us to understand them and treat them as ethically and sensitively as possible.

Fieldwork is never easy, and work on violent extremism is bound to be particularly ethically problematic. However in a world of fragmentation, polarisation, fake news and biased reporting, this type of independent third-party analysis is also very much needed. It can alter wrong impressions, it can facilitate understanding, correct misplaced policies and interventions, and it can give voice to people who otherwise would not be heard. Moreover, it can be of great use for those we work with. The world is certainly not a fair place and our various relationships with participants and colleagues in the field are marked by this. However, this does not mean that we cannot make these relationships work, if we acknowledge our different positions and how they can jointly be used for mutual benefit. Such benefits will not make us equal, nor will they necessarily be equally divided. But it will make working with research partners and participants in the places where we conduct our fieldwork less exploitative and more equitable and fair.

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## **ENDNOTES**

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