

# CONFESSIONS OF A TERRORIST

'EXTRAORDINARILY INTENSE ...  
A BOOK THAT'S TOO IMPORTANT NOT TO READ.'

MORNING STAR

A photograph of a person's hands against a rough, textured wall. The left hand is in a metal handcuff, and the right hand is pressed against the wall, with fingers spread. The lighting is dramatic, casting shadows. The wall has a mottled appearance with shades of tan, brown, and green.

RICHARD JACKSON

‘On a breathtaking journey through the intricacies of a counter-terrorism interrogation, Richard Jackson asks us to confront one of the most difficult truths of our time: that to identify “the terrorist” is to look in the mirror and see oneself.’

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‘Goes beyond the prevailing narratives of terrorist behaviour and delves into the thought processes of a terrorist, giving us unique insights into the “mind” of a terrorist.’

*PAMBAZUKA NEWS*

‘*Confessions of a Terrorist* offers an outstanding contribution to the academic and fictional literature on terrorism.’

*JOURNAL OF INTERVENTION AND STATEBUILDING*

### **About the Author**

Richard Jackson is one of the world's leading experts on terrorism and professor of peace studies at the University of Otago. He is a regular media commentator and maintains a popular blog at <https://richardjacksonterrorismblog.wordpress.com>. This is his first novel.

# confessions of a terrorist

RICHARD JACKSON



Zed Books  
LONDON

*Confessions of a Terrorist* was first published in 2014 by Zed Books Ltd, Unit 2.8, The Foundry, 17 Oval Way, London SE11 5RR, UK.

This edition published in 2015

[www.zedbooks.co.uk](http://www.zedbooks.co.uk)

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Typeset in American Typewriter by [seagulls.net](http://seagulls.net)

Cover designed by [www.stevenmarsden.com](http://www.stevenmarsden.com)

Cover photo by Steve Wells

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-78360-002-1 pb

ISBN 978-1-78360-004-5 pdf

ISBN 978-1-78360-005-2 epub

ISBN 978-1-78360-006-9 mobi

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# preface

When I originally wrote this novel, I could not predict just how closely it would reflect and speak to subsequent events in the area of terrorism, security and counter-terrorism. It is only a small exaggeration to suggest that the primary conceit of the novel – exploring why an individual would choose to join a terrorist group and launch attacks against the West – has become the preeminent question of our society at this moment in history. From the intense concern about the hundreds of Western recruits travelling to join the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS) in late 2014, to the Sydney hostage crisis on 15 and 16 December 2014, the *Charlie Hebdo* attack on 7 January 2015, and the revelation on 26 February 2015 that British-raised-and-educated Mohammed Emwazi was the notorious ‘Jihadi John’ of the ISIS beheading videos, there has been a cacophony of public commentary and discussion about what would compel seemingly ordinary young people to become cold-blooded killers in the cause of ‘jihad’. With few exceptions, the blame has been laid squarely on ‘radical Islam’ or what is euphemistically referred to as ‘violent extremism’. Inherent to this narrative is the argument that the roots of such deviant behaviour lie in the combination of individual alienation and psychological vulnerability,



lack of social integration and the infectious power of an extreme religious ideology.

As I have tried to make clear in the novel through the arguments articulated by Youssef in his response to the charge made by the counter-terrorist officer Michael that he is acting out of religious fanaticism, such an argument is both unconvincing and functions to deflect responsibility. The reality is that ISIS (or the other violent individuals and groups who plot to commit murder in Western states) is no more religiously ‘Islamic’ than the Democratic Republic of Korea is politically ‘democratic’. Instead, it is clear that the violence of ISIS has political origins and follows a rational strategic logic suited to its capabilities as an armed group, as does that of other groups such as the *Charlie Hebdo* attackers. Just as the fictional terrorist in the novel – the Professor – was in a sense created by, and motivated by, the shock and horror of the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, so too has ISIS emerged out of the brutality of more than ten years of invasion, occupation, torture, rendition, drone strikes, depleted uranium shells, corruption, sectarian violence and death squads. And, as Youssef explains, if militants possessed the same capabilities as state militaries, namely, airpower and heavy weaponry, they would have no need to employ terror tactics.

The consensus among scholars and journalists who have talked with ISIS fighters and home-grown terrorists is that, just as with Youssef, religion plays a secondary, legitimating role in the decision to fight. It is not that religion compels people to be violent, but that religion is sometimes used to justify and explain the decision to employ violence in a particular context. In the context of the Middle East, where all political activity is expressed and discussed in the language and idioms of the local culture – namely, the language and social-political-cultural system of Islam – it would be surprising if the

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politics and strategy of ISIS were *not* expressed primarily in Islamic language. This does not mean that religious belief is what primarily drives ISIS's violent actions. Political conflict and deep-rooted grievances, especially the suffering of millions of ordinary people which is the direct result of Western intervention and interference, and which is visibly displayed on television, is at the root of conflict and political violence in the Middle East today. As with Youssef, it is easy to imagine that under these conditions, militants could emerge who are not really very religious at all, but who see their violence as a legitimate course of action in the struggle against invasion, repression and Western imperialism.

From this vantage point, it seems clear that the oft-repeated mantra of the religious causes of terrorism is an exercise in the evasion of responsibility. Western leaders, and Western opinion more generally, do not want to face up to the consequences of, or take responsibility for, the deaths and suffering of millions of ordinary people in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere. It would be too shameful, and it might have political and legal consequences; some Western leaders could even end up facing charges in a forum like the International Criminal Court. In fact, the deflection of blame is a long-standing practice within Western foreign policy, used to elide and obscure the role of Western states in colonial violence, invasions, coups, bombings, assassinations, support for dictators, dodgy arms deals, and the constant self-interested shifting of alliances and double-dealing. As Youssef explains to Michael, however, the sordid history of Western intervention overseas, and its indifference to human rights and the suffering it causes in the relentless pursuit of geostrategic advantage, is not unknown, especially among its victims, even if it is largely unknown among Western publics. It is out of this historical context that militant groups and individuals

emerge to violently challenge the Western-dominated world order and its hypocritical actions.

This observation – that individuals do not become terrorists by being somehow infected with the virus of religious extremism, but that they emerge out of a particular social-historical context of violence and political grievance – also serves to remind us of the symbiotic, dynamic and interdependent relationship between terrorism and counter-terrorism. In the novel, Youssef explains how he was moved to direct action by the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the suffering and indifference towards the lives of ordinary Iraqis he saw, and the torture, brutality and death squad murders that he came into contact with, including the murder of his relatives by US-trained Iraqi government death squads. These kinds of violent actions came to typify the war on terror as it was practised in Iraq, and they are the context out of which ISIS has emerged. Many of the fighters within ISIS have experienced these things since they were children. More broadly, it is now widely accepted among scholars and Western military and security organisations that the invasion of Iraq was the single factor most responsible for radicalising the current generation of terrorists.

In other words, Western and Western-supported counter-terrorist violence has co-produced the terrorist violence of ISIS and other insurgent groups in a mimetic, self-perpetuating, deadly cycle: every act of terrorist or counter-terrorist violence has generated the same or worse. For every detainee tortured to death in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo (the US military has recorded more than a hundred homicides in custody during the period of the occupation of Iraq), ISIS and other insurgent groups have executed hostages dressed in orange jumpsuits. For every drone strike on a wedding party or group of workers in Afghanistan or Pakistan, terrorists have attempted to attack a train station or a supermarket in a Western city.

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In effect, Western counter-terrorism has become a self-fulfilling prophecy: it now produces, regularly and effectively, the terrorists and acts of terrorism it purports to counter. The case of Mohammed Emwazi – ‘Jihadi John’ – is illustrative of how the counter-terrorism practices of the security services often have an effect opposite to their stated intentions. In the same way that Michael tries to recruit Youssef to become an agent for British intelligence, MI5 tried on numerous occasions to recruit Mohammed Emwazi as an informer. When they failed, however, they resorted to a campaign of harassment, surveillance and suppression, which in turn provided Mohammed with a bitter personal experience of Western oppression and added to his perceptions of the injustice and anti-Islamic prejudice of Western societies. Sadly, as the novel tries to show, Western counter-terrorism seems unable to escape from its chosen path: it is trapped within a self-perpetuating cycle of violence and counter-violence, even when it knows that this simply fuels the production of more terrorists and more acts of terrorism.

In the end, the novel can be read as both explanation and warning. As explanation, it tells us that we need to understand the effects of our own actions in the production of violent resistance around the world, and that we are looking in the wrong places when we try to lay the blame on religion or ideology or individual pathology – or any source outside of the interventions by Western states in the Middle East and other parts of the world, or its domestic programmes of counter-terrorism. This is not to suggest that Western policy is the sole cause of anti-Western terrorism or violence in the Middle East. All violence has complex origins. Rather, it is to suggest that any explanation for this particular form of violence which does not take proper account of the consequences and context of Western actions

will be a gross distortion and entirely inadequate for thinking about how to respond.

Since the novel was published in May 2014, I have been asked more than once if the Professor really exists, or rather, if people like that really do exist. The real question is not whether they do exist, but *could* someone like that plausibly exist? The clear answer to that is a resounding yes. Given that Youssef's citation of Western crimes and atrocities is factually correct, and given that it can be plausibly narrated as being part of a long-running, violent imperialism, and given that Youssef articulates a legitimate set of reasons for violently resisting Western policies, it is entirely possible that a terrorist like the Professor could exist and undertake an attack like the one described in the novel.

Finally, as warning, the novel speaks to the necessity of breaking down the taboo on talking to terrorists and engaging honestly with the real grievances and political agency of those who choose to violently resist Western foreign policy. Until we understand why they fight us, there is no hope that we can persuade them to lay down their arms and work collaboratively to create a more peaceful world. It also speaks to the need for an honest and critical reflection on the nature and effects of Western foreign policy, the millions of victims and widespread destruction it leaves in its wake, the quality of our commitment to human rights, and the real failures and consequences of employing violence as the primary means by which we secure our interests overseas. Unless our actions match our words, the world – and those who struggle violently against us – will not be persuaded that Western states are truly committed to human rights, the rule of law, justice, democracy and peace. And, as long as we reserve the right to solve our conflicts with violence, so too will there be those who reserve the right to resist us violently. In short, the novel

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provides a warning that violence begets violence. Therefore, if we want to live in a world without terrorism, we must make a conscious effort to stop practising it and actively generating it ourselves.

*Richard Jackson*  
*March 2015*  
*Dunedin, New Zealand*



confessions of a  
**terrorist**





# TOP SECRET

## MI5 RECONNAISSANCE UNIT

*\* Annotated by GH for JM 22/7/11.*

*Broad assessment: I know the spooks have blacked out anything related to national security, but we have a different responsibility now. How much of the following is really in the public interest, in your view, or will substantially help the LS inquiry? Apart from the legal issues highlighted below, I fear that parts of the text could provide grist for the anti-Western radical fringe, the RO, protestors, jihadists, etc. Given that our prime responsibility is to protect the reputation of HMG and shape the public narrative of what happened to its most important elements, I suggest a few more 'recording interruptions' - as annotated. As my previous correspondence noted, accompanying documentation will need to make clear that 'recording interruptions' were technical problems in the field (I assume the techies can provide explanations of electrical disturbances) - and not authorised record alterations. The PR kids will also need to brief the Home Sec to answer numerous criticisms of foreign and domestic policy when the transcript is released. And we have to keep every digit crossed that the original video never surfaces, otherwise there'll be egg on everyone's faces.*

*PS: Do NOT forget to shred this annotated copy.*

*It doesn't bear thinking about what would happen if it leaked.*

File Number: MI5/200311.2256-0613.

File Type: Digital Audio File, MP3.

Source: Audio-surveillance, MI5 Counter-terrorism Field Unit.

Date and Operation: 19–20 March, 2011; ‘Operation Moriarty’.

Location: Disused storeroom, former Royal Transport Warehouse, Stockton Industrial Estate, 18–20 Khyber Road, Leeds, UK.

Subjects: Professor Youssef Said, aka, Samir Hamoodi, aka, ‘The Professor’; Captain Michael [REDACTED], MI5 officer; Members of SO19 Armed Response Unit (names and ranks in Appendix 1.1 – NOT FOR PUBLIC RELEASE).

Document Status: In final preparation for submission to the Public Hearings Section, Lord Savage Inquiry into the Leeds Terrorist Plot, 20 March, 2011.

Draft Number: Edited Draft #4, to be confirmed and authorised prior to submission and public release by the Home Office.

Transcription Date: 21 March, 2011, 8:47am.

Transcribed by:



Translation by:



Transcription Notes:

P: Professor Youssef Said, 'The Professor'

M: Captain Michael



*I'm sure you agree that there's nothing in this initial exchange we need to be concerned with. Could we just send this first section and call it quits? Say the rest of the recording was ruined?? GH*

[TRANSCRIPTION BEGINS]

[5.1 seconds silence, occasional scraping sounds]

P: Ahem... so... here we are. Can I assist you with something?

[1.8]

This is very nice, is it not? [laughter] Very salubrious accommodations! Ha! [...] The bare walls... this, ah... concrete floor... that horrible fluorescent light... lack of windows... it has a certain, ah... charm. It is like a

scene from a very bad Hollywood film. And these rusty chairs are making my... ah... well, I am already starting to feel sore, I can tell you.

[2.3]

Do you have any questions for me, or, or... or are you just going to keep staring at me? [...] Put it another way... is there something specific you would like to know... something I can tell you now that you have me here? This is your big chance. I can promise you... right here and now... I will answer any questions you care to ask... within reason, of course. I am not going to tell you what our operational plan is, or name any names... nothing like that...

Actually, in a way... I can honestly say that I have been looking forward to this moment for a very long time. I have imagined it in my mind a thousand times... rehearsed it in my head... meeting you face to face... explaining everything... telling you my reasons. I am ready to, ah... make my confession, if you like.

[1.9]

Come on now, please do not hold back. You must be at least a little bit curious. It cannot be every day you are able to talk to the, the... the, ah... terrorist that you have been looking for, for so long... and he

promises to tell you everything you want to know. Of course, we must get this out of the way right now... I do not for one second accept your description of me as a terrorist. It is not how I see myself at all. I am not that crazy, evil... caricature in your television shows who, who, who... threatens to randomly murder innocent people and blow up everything... and, I must say, you are not the muscular hero... even if you look the part! You [REDACTED] [REDACTED] colleagues.

[2.9]

You know... some might even argue, given the fear your government rains down on millions of innocent people in, in, in... Iraq, and, and... Afghanistan... Pakistan, Libya, Yemen, Somalia... and all those other countries where you drop five-hundred-pound laser-guided bombs or send guided missiles down the chimneys of people's houses like Christmas presents... where you, ah, shoot people from helicopters while they walk down the street... maybe I should call you the terrorist.

No! Please do not make such a look, sir! The fact is your heavily armed soldiers in dark sunglasses shooting people at roadblocks... ah, smashing their doors down in the middle of the night... cause a lot more, ah, terror among a lot more people than

someone like me ever will. [...] Not to mention the fear that every young Muslim man, innocent or not, constantly has of being tortured in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo... or, or, or being picked up and beheaded by one of those death squads your people trained in Iraq... kidnapped off the street... ah, never to be seen again... or when you [REDACTED] and that [REDACTED] village elders [REDACTED]

The point is... it makes you wonder, does it not? Who is the real terrorist here?

[3.9]

M: You—

P: —I am—

[1.8]

M: Oh, I'm sorry—

P: —No, no, I am being quite rude... talking too much, as usual. Please, please... go ahead...

M: OK... Samir Hamoodi, Iraqi, born 7 December 1965, in Kirkuk... or, should I say, that's what it says on the

passport you used when you entered this country. You arrived here [REDACTED] on the train from [REDACTED] ... before effectively disappearing. We decided to let you in unmolested, as it were, in order to see what you might be up to. But then you evaded our surveillance, Mr Hamoodi... and vanished for a time. How did you do that, by the way? Did you know we were watching you? Did you deliberately try to lose us, or was it just luck?

*We need to prepare a credible story for why we let a known terrorist come into the country without arresting him at the station – and then promptly lost him. I suspect we will get raked over the coals if we claim the Firm had the situation under control. I suggest we claim lack of resources, as well as strategic necessity.*

*This way we might get something out of the upcoming budgetary hearings*  
[1.9] – a small silver lining in a pile of shit! What do you think? GH

OK... in any case... we both know that your real name is Youssef Said, formerly Professor of Economics at Cairo University. Actually, you were born in 1963, in Suez. But then your father moved the family to Cairo. You lived in Shobra. You studied at a private international school in Cairo after your father secured you a special scholarship from the school authorities. He was a maths teacher to all those expats at the school, and they liked him. Next, with no little intercession from your school principal, you went to University College, London to study for your honours degree, before taking a doctorate at the University of Chicago. You were appointed to the Faculty of Economics in Cairo in



1994. Not long afterwards, you started an investment consultancy for the multinationals scouring the Middle East for new opportunities... as a side business. Lecturing doesn't pay all that well in Egypt, does it? But then you resigned from both your posts suddenly in April 2003. [...] That's when you travelled to Iraq.

In Iraq, you joined the insurgents and led a terrorist group which gained quite a reputation among British and American intelligence... as well as the other jihadi groups. As I recall, you acquired your nom de plume, The Professor, at this time. At least, that's what your associates called you. We


[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] London.

[1.2]

What are you doing in Britain, Professor? [...] What exactly is your, ah, confession? Are you here to recruit... resupply... what? Or are you planning an operation? Where've you been these past months? Who've you been meeting with, exactly... in [REDACTED], for example? Who's been looking after you? Those two men I saw you with earlier, or [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] ?

P: Ohhf... well! You are very well informed. Of course, this is not completely surprising to me. I know for a fact that you have been following my, ah... how shall we say... activities... for some time now... almost nine years... since early 2003?



I confess it sounds strange to my ears. I have not had anyone call me the, the, the... Professor for such a long time... that name comes from a different time... a different place. I used to be called that all the time by my students when I actually worked at a university...

Can I tell you something? I miss those days when I worked at the university, I really do... when I was just a scholar with my, my, my books... and my, ah, chalk. We used to have chalk in those days. We would write our formulas and equations on a blackboard. My hands would be covered in dust at the end of the day. It dries the skin... makes it crack. Can you imagine that now? [inaudible]...

Back then, I would sit quietly in my office... looking over the university courtyard where the students would take time out to smoke and the boys would try and flirt with the girls. I think I was quite at peace with myself back then. I was a real person. I had a real life... not like now. I had my books, my, ah, research... all

*Why do so many terrorists come from university?*

*If they haven't got a degree, they're the bloody professor!*

*What the hell are they learning?*

*I hope we have someone in Research looking into this. At least we ought to be watching universities a bit more closely – instead of the mosques.*

*What's your view on this?*

*GH*

those adoring students who looked up to me. Respect from my colleagues. I had a loving wife and family, a community to which I belonged. And I could sit and just think, or read a book... and in those days, I could be still... really still... like a rock, or an old tree. I had a measure of peace... calm...

But look at me now, sir. I cannot control my nerves. I am so full of nervous energy... always moving... twitching all the time... I no longer have a quiet place in my soul. That place has been trampled down by all the noise and violent fury of war. The sound of, of... ah... battle and blood is lodged permanently in my head now...

This must be why I have to be moving every minute of every day... like one of those Energizer rabbits... you know, the ones on the television? Have you seen it? Ha! [...] I know it must be so irritating to those around me. Let me tell you... in Iraq, my comrades would always complain. 'Sit still!' they would say. 'Stop twitching and scratching all the time!' They worried that we would be hiding from the soldiers and I would make too much noise and get us caught!

But really, I do not believe I will ever be still again. There are too many thoughts swirling around inside me, I suppose... not like you, sir! You are like one of those... one of those, ah... street performers. Do you

know who I mean? Those people... buskers... who stand in the street... the ones who dress up like a man blown in the wind and stand perfectly still for hour upon hour. Yes? I can see you know what I am talking about... You need real discipline for that...

So, you know a lot about me... including my name. What should I call you, sir?

[1.8]

M: Please call me Michael.

P: Michael? OK... yes... Michael. You can call me Youssef... or Samir... whichever you prefer. I do not mind... really. No one has called me Professor Said for such a long time now. Phew! That was literally a lifetime ago. No one calls me that any more... seriously... even [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

I am really not sure I even know who Youssef Said is now, if I am honest. He is another person entirely. If you, ah, look at the old photos you no doubt have in my file, you will see that I do not even look like the same man any more... I was quite a smart dresser once upon a time, when I worked in Cairo. Nice clothes... proper shoes... like you. Is that a designer suit? [Are] those silver cufflinks? [...] You look very nice. Very smart...

like a million dollars. Savile Row? No, no, no... you do not have to answer that...

Mmmm... yes... you know I also used to exercise quite a lot... I was a lot trimmer then than I am now. When I was a young man... closer to your age... you look like you are still a man in his thirties... at least a decade younger than me. Anyway... back then I was a pretty good sportsman... even if I say so myself!

Do you play a sport, Michael? You look very fit... very athletic.

M: I used to play rugby—

P: —Ah, rugby! It is a very violent sport. You need great strength for this—

M: — but I don't really play any more. It's been years, actually. These days I mainly swim. It's less bruising.

P: Swim? Yes, yes, yes. [...] Well, in my youth I played football... basketball... cricket... hockey... anything, really. All those games loved by the expatriate students at my school. But not rugby! I think I am too weak for this game... too fat by far, now. But back then, when I was young, I loved all sport... and I used to run... like a gazelle. But now... ohhf... I can tell you, having to live my life underground, as a hunted

fugitive... well... it just means bad food... no exercise... very little sunlight... lying around all day. This belly... [slapping sound]... my bad skin... it is the price for my chosen... ah, occupation...

M: So, if I might ask, why do it? Why not go back to the university then, the life of the mind? [...] Why are you here... now... in this room?

P: Why not, indeed? Well, I guess that is why we are here.  
[tapping sound]

[3.8]

I know I am a mess. You do not have to tell me! I really feel I must, ah... apologise for my, ah... slovenly appearance. I seem to be quite underdressed... especially as we are going to be on video. [...] The camera over there makes me self-conscious, I can tell you. I cannot conceive where they got these terrible clothes for me... one of those charity shops, no doubt... or maybe from the market stalls. Who wears track pants and a dress shirt together... and these trainers... oh my God! They are so, so... so loud! You could light the street walking in these! [...] Ha! Yes, I got a small smile from you...

M: You look perfectly respectable, Professor.

P: You are too kind, for sure. Anyway, I expect you must be rather, ah, disappointed to be here with me in person... to see that, ah, your elusive prey... the great terrorist you have been hunting for so long, is so, so, so unimpressive in person. Not quite Che Guevara, am I... or Carlos the Jackal? In truth, my, ah... occupation, as it were, means I no longer have much concern for outward appearances... except inasmuch as it allows me to do what I have to do. I do not really care what I look like... not at all... it actually helps to look a bit ordinary. I find no one gives me a second glance, which is a real asset in my line.

M: May I call you Professor? It's your formal title after all, even if you no longer work at the university. It's also what we've been calling you for years. I'm used to it, even if you aren't—

P: —Joseph Conrad...

M: What?

P: Joseph Conrad... The Secret Agent... that anarchist in Conrad's book? He was the Professor... I am not like that, I can assure you.

M: Oh, yes, I see. No, no, we didn't think of that at all. I'd completely forgotten Conrad. Ha! No, I can assure you it's just a... ah, you know, a coincidence. [...]

In any case, can I just say, you speak very good English, Professor. I knew that you studied in the West, and I don't mean to appear, ah... what I mean is, I don't intend to stereotype you or anything... but your English is pretty much perfect, as good as anyone.

P: Thank you, but it is not so hard to understand. My mother would read to me in English when I was a child. She was a strong believer that learning English was the key to success. Sometimes she would say 'What's the point of learning Arabic?' Then she would tell me all those fairy stories... Kipling... The Jungle Book, it was my favourite! These days, I can see that this belief by my parents... that fluency in English was a path to be successful... well, it was the colonial legacy... believing that the language of the Europeans was superior. So in a way, English was my first language. I think if you learn it young enough, you can speak any language perfectly. Also, my father sent me to an English school... an international school... right from elementary. And then after that I went to university in London and America... as you already know.

M: Yes, I see... In any case, I'm impressed. Now, can I just ask you again... why are you here? What exactly have you been doing during your visit to our country? Who've you met with? [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] What is the aim of your operation, exactly?



P: Dear, dear, dear... ohhf [inaudible]... Michael, why are you asking me this? I think you already know why I am here. You know exactly what I am doing! You know everything, it is clear! [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Why do you need me to, to, to... confirm what you already know? Besides, I have already told you I will not answer questions of this nature... no matter how you try to sweet-talk it out of me. It is beyond the limits of what I am prepared to say. I will not reveal anything that will put my, ah, comrades... my friends... in danger... nothing about any ongoing operations. You are clearly a former soldier... I can recognise it. You must understand.

[2.3]

You are very good at holding your silence, I must say. [...] I can tell how good you are at interrogating suspects... making them talk by keeping silent for so long... until the silence becomes tense. [...] Either that or you have something to hide. Is that it, Michael? Is there a dark secret you do not want the world to know... something you do not wish to be forever recorded on that camera over there? [REDACTED]

[2.9]

Oh, do not look so serious, Michael. It is still early. There is plenty of time for serious talking. [...] At times such as this you cannot help thinking about your life... at least for me... what you have lost... those days you have left behind...

I was just remembering a story about my daughter. I do not know if you have this story in your files. Anyway, one time [laughter] my daughter...  
[REDACTED]... she once brought a, a, a... huge rat... and not just any old rat, but one of those massive, ah, cane rats, whose body is the size of a large rabbit... into my wife's dinner party? Can you imagine? [laughter] Pure chaos, Michael! Our dearest friend... she is quite a large, old lady... well, she fell off her chair! She landed on top of my cousin. He told me later he thought she was lungeing at him because she could not control her amorous feelings... which he did not return! When he was pinned under her, he felt he was going to suffocate! [laughter] Another guest, my neighbour's wife, actually threw up on the table! [laughter]... I don't know why I was thinking about that...

M: That's very funny, Professor. Why on earth did she bring a rat into your party?

P: [REDACTED] went out after a rainstorm and saw it drowned in a puddle. I think she had never seen a rat that huge and she just really wanted to show it to her mama. It was like some kind of, ah... fantasy monster to her. So she got some of her little friends... kids from the neighbourhood... they put it on a plank and carried it into the dinner party we were having. [laughter]...

I have to say, my wife took it so well. She did not get angry. She saw what her daughter was trying to do... that she was just expressing her sense of wonder... and she made sure not to upset her... make her feel bad for what she had done. This is a story we used to laugh about as a family all the time... in the days before...

[2.3]

OK... now, I have told you something personal... to break the ice, as it were. What about you? Are you married, Michael? Do you have children? [...] What do you like to do?

M: You know I can't tell you that—

P: —Come on, you can tell me something. Where is the harm?