

# Embattled linguists

## *An interview with **Maya Hess**, founder of the Red T organization*

### **What led to Red T's foundation?**

Firstly, thank you for this opportunity to talk about a cause so close to my heart. The idea came to me on 10 February 2005, as I sat in a U.S. federal court listening with disbelief to the guilty verdict against an Arabic translator/interpreter (T/I) on charges of aiding and abetting terrorist activity. In this case, the government and the jury construed interpreting at attorney-inmate conversations as material support to terrorism, thereby criminalizing the profession in the United States. To provide a much-needed counter-narrative, I wrote my dissertation about the trial and, while doing the literature review, became aware of other unjust T/I-related prosecutions and the serious threats faced by linguists in theaters of war. I grew increasingly outraged and wanted to do my part in addressing my colleagues' extreme vulnerability. So, in 2010, I established the non-profit organization **Red T** to advocate for translators and interpreters in high-risk settings.

### **Recent violations of translator and interpreter rights in Belarus, for**

### **example, confirm that the targeting of translators and interpreters continues. How does Red T see the future for these professions?**

I am always hopeful that one day we will achieve, or at least come closer to, the Red T vision, which imagines “a world in which translators and interpreters can work free from fear of persecution, prosecution, imprisonment, abduction, torture and assassination.” At this point, however, many challenges remain, originating from both state and non-state actors. For instance, insurgents in war zones hunt T/Is who assist or assisted foreign armies, while authoritarian governments continue to crack down on anyone not toeing the line. That said, it is important to recognize that T/Is may be targeted not for practicing their profession but for exercising their freedom of expression, as is the case with the four Belarus translators who were detained because of their opposition to President Lukashenko's regime. As such, it was not a violation of translator and interpreter rights per se; rather, it was a violation of a fundamental human right as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human



Protecting Translators and Interpreters Worldwide

To learn about Red T's awareness-raising activities, visit [red-t.org](http://red-t.org)  
[facebook.com/TheRedT](https://facebook.com/TheRedT)  
[@TheRedT](https://twitter.com/TheRedT)

Rights. But whatever the context, the world language community must stay vigilant in protecting its members.

### Can you give some examples of what was behind Red T's caption "When translating news lands you in prison"?

T/Is across the world are at risk when they translate/interpret content considered controversial by the powers that be. In China, for example, a Uyghur translator, Mirhemitjan Muzepper, was sentenced in 2009 to 11 years in prison for translating Chinese-language news that the Chinese government viewed as subversive. He was charged with inciting separatism, though the station that employed him and posted the translated news was never prosecuted. Then there is the case of Mohammed Ismael Rasool, an Iraqi interpreter who was detained in 2015 by the Turkish authorities along with two British journalists and charged with aiding an organization the Turkish government considered terrorist. In

reality, Rasool was interpreting for the reporters, who were doing a story on the clashes between pro-Kurdish youth and Turkish security forces. But while the journalists were released after six days, the interpreter spent more than four months in prison. And in Venezuela, a local interpreter was hired in 2013 by an Al Jazeera journalist for an interview with the leader of one of the country's most feared colectivos, a pro-socialist community organization with a paramilitary arm. After the journalist left and the interview was published, the interpreter was stalked with "we are gonna kill you" text messages and had to go into hiding for several weeks.

### How does Red T monitor violations?

We learn about T/I violations primarily from media sources. We are also alerted to specific cases by concerned parties or approached by individual linguists seeking assistance.

### What does Red T do to protect translators and interpreters in high-risk settings?

Red T engages in a variety of initiatives on a macro and micro level. First and foremost, we advocate globally for laws and policies that mitigate the threats to linguists operating in high-risk settings by speaking before governmental and intergovernmental bodies as well as at industry and academic venues. Among other activities, we work with member states of the United Nations and co-organize roundtables in pursuit of a legal instrument that protects civilian T/Is in conflict situations; submit briefs in T/I-related court cases; assist in the resettlement of individual war zone linguists; contribute topical research to the media and documentary filmmakers; and, together with Columbia University in New York, developed a pedagogical module introducing students to the Red T cause, which we plan to circulate at other universities. To scale our efforts, we joined forces with major international T/I associations and academia, as well as with humanitarian organizations. Two key outcomes of these strategic partnerships are the Open Letter Project, which advocates on behalf of embattled linguists by sending [letters of appeal](#) to the relevant authorities, and the [Conflict Zone Field Guide](#) for Civilian T/Is and Users of Their Services.

### Has Red T seen positive outcomes as a result of their activities?

On a general level, our awareness raising has borne fruit: The threats to T/Is in high-risk settings have progressively figured on the world's radar, as evidenced by broader governmental, intergovernmental, media and academic attention. For instance, as a result of

our massive mailing campaign and informational events, UN member states are increasingly conscious of the need for a protection mechanism for civilian T/Is in conflict situations, while individual governments have implemented more linguist-friendly policies and/or admitted T/Is on a case-by-case basis. Of course, other organizations have advocated as well, among them our close collaborator, the Conflict Zone Interpreter Group of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), which started lobbying for better interpreter protection at the Council of Europe around the same time our non-profit was established.

**“While the journalists were released after six days, the interpreter spent more than four months in prison”**

On a more granular level, Red T has been instrumental in resettling interpreters to safety and preventing deportations back to war zones by either working directly with an interpreter or contributing expert opinions/letters of support to asylum and court proceedings. To cite



**Maya Hess** is the founder and CEO of Red T, a US-based non-profit organization that advocates worldwide on behalf of translators and interpreters in high-risk settings. As a forensic linguist, Maya provided language support and expert witness services in major US terrorism trials and experienced firsthand how vulnerable members of this profession can be. She holds an MA in Journalism from New York University, a Graduate Certificate in Terrorism Studies from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, as well as an MPhil and PhD in Criminal Justice from the City University of New York.

**Maya Hess**  
**Photo: Private Archive**

a recent result, our Open Letter to the Australian government – which we wrote on behalf of international and national T/I associations and which was co-signed by Amnesty International, PEN International and the International Refugee Assistance Project – facilitated the visa pathway for Iraqi interpreters seeking asylum. Specifically, the Australian Department of Home Affairs dispensed with the requirement that interpreters must physically travel to out-of-country embassies and now permits interpreters to apply by mail or courier at their embassy in Amman, Jordan. We applauded the decision, since the need to travel through war-torn territory has now been eliminated. Click [here](#) for more information.

### How can people get involved in Red T?

If any of your readers hear of a T/I persecution in their country, they should please [contact us](#). Moreover, we are building a T/I incident database and would welcome volunteers willing to comb through the non-English-language press on an ongoing basis.

Also, to keep abreast of developments in the arena of high-risk translating/interpreting, we invite your readers to follow Red T on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) and, to amplify awareness raising, share our posts.