Interview Tips from the Middle East
Conducting Elite Interviews in Turkey and Israel

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QUAL Speaker Series
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Research Design

- **Research Question #1**: Why did the decision-making mechanisms in Turkish foreign policy change between 1991 and 2014?

- **Research Question #2**: How did the change affect Turkey-Israel relations in this period?

- **Literature**: Foreign Policy Analysis, Decision-Making, Middle East Politics, International Relations (IR)

- **Methodology**: Semi-structured interview, off-the-record, note-taking

- **Respondent Profile**: Retired/Serving Diplomats, Bureaucrats and High-Ranking Generals, Foreign Policy Experts, Academics, Businesspeople

- **Schedule**: September 2017-February 2018 => İstanbul and Ankara/Turkey
  
  March- May 2018 => Tel Aviv and Jerusalem districts/ Israel
  
  June- September 2018 => London/UK and İstanbul, Bodrum/Turkey
# Respondent Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Turkey</th>
<th>Israel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retired Diplomats</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving Diplomats</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academia</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think Tank</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucrats</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Ranking Generals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesspeople</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>83</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N=83)
Where to start?

- Listing the people whom I would like to talk based on serving term, level of post, countries that they were served, professions, professional relationship between each other
- Thinking about potential liaison people and contacting them before the fieldwork
- Talking about your research and potential respondents
- Scheduling 1 or 2 preliminary interviews (either face-to-face or Skype call)
- Forming the first questionnaire by considering the qualifications of potential respondents and your research question(s)
Excerpt from Questionnaire #1 (Summer 2016)

- 3 categories, 17 questions (too much)
- Detailed questions (too much)
  - How much did security concerns play a role in shaping Turkish foreign policy in the 1990s? (I excluded this question in later versions, but asked it in a brief form when the respondent mentioned security)
  - How did the 2010 Mavi Marmara Flotilla Case affect Turkey’s relations with other Middle Eastern countries? (Analyzing its effect is my job, not the respondent’s)
Questionnaires #2 (October 2017) and #3 (December 2017)

- Questionnaire #2 => 3 categories, 10 questions (still too much)
- How did the AKP reflect its ideology into foreign policy-making? (too academic and boring)
- Questionnaire #3 => No category, 7 questions
  - What are the priorities of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East in the 1990s?
  - How did the role of Ministry of Foreign Affairs evolve after 2002?
  - Is there any specific identity pertaining to “being a member of the Ministry?”
Questionnaire #4 (March 2017)

• Designed for the respondents in Israel
• 6 questions

➢ How do you see Turkey-Israel relations between 1990 and 2002? What dynamics especially played roles in the 1990s?

➢ How do the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other state departments make decisions if the case is about Turkey?
Specific Questionnaires

• For an Israeli retired general => After 2002, how did the cooperation between IDF and Turkish army evolve?

• If the respondent wants to have it before meeting

• Do not offer it unless the respondent asks to have it

• It leaves you very little room for maneuver once the respondent is familiar with the questions

• Some questions/wording might be irrelevant because of the momentum of the interview
How to reach potential respondents?

• Spread the word to your family, friends, colleagues, professors
• Ask the respondents/ Snowball sampling/Purposeful sampling => Useful in building trust
• Schedule some interviews just for reference
• If you research abroad, find an institution to be affiliated with and ask your colleagues there
• Phone in Turkey/ Phone and email in Israel (scheduling interviews before you arrive is a beautiful dream!)
• Mention your home affiliation (UW)
• In your introductory email, inform the respondent about your data privacy policy
• Gender and nationality in the introduction phase
How to prepare for an interview?

- Excel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Contact Details</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-Oct-17</td>
<td>Mark Doe</td>
<td>Prof, JSIS</td>
<td>University of Washington</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mdoe@uw.edu">mdoe@uw.edu</a></td>
<td>INTERVIEWED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-Oct-17</td>
<td>Hannah Doe</td>
<td>Prof, JSIS</td>
<td>University of Washington</td>
<td><a href="mailto:hdoe@uw.edu">hdoe@uw.edu</a></td>
<td>SCHEDULED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-Oct-17</td>
<td>Jane Doe</td>
<td>Former Consul General in Erbil, Iraq (2007-09)</td>
<td>Turkish MFA</td>
<td><a href="mailto:janedoe@gmail.com">janedoe@gmail.com</a></td>
<td>DECLINED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Doe</td>
<td>Former Ambassador to the US (2003-07)</td>
<td>Turkish MFA</td>
<td>0535-xxx-xxxx</td>
<td>WILL BE CONTACTED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Google (First 10 result pages in different languages)
- Zotero (Save&categorize based on chapters)
Interview Day

- Prefer mornings (10am-12pm) and avoid weekends
- Gender/culture/nationality matter
- Think to bring some pastries when you are invited to someone’s home/ Ask someone if it is okay
- Always drink tea/coffee when it is asked/served
- Nodding is not the end of the world, sometimes you have to!
- Do not directly start with your questions, talk about mundane things (or about Google search)
- Let the respondent share his/her experience about your resume (schools, cities, countries)
- Avoid chat about daily politics (People tend to connect past events to today’s conditions)
- Be flexible about re-wording & omitting & changing order of questions (specific questions about the respondent or specify your question for the respondent)
- Out of courtesy, ask to pay the bill
What to do after an interview?

• Type your notes the same day
• Describe the environment, gestures/reactions that you find interesting
• Send follow-up email or SMS a day after the interview
• Consider sending a thank you email a day after the interview
• Contact the referred respondents in a few days
• Fill in/update/color your Excel list
• Back up your data to an external hard drive every month (especially when you travel)
• Update your advisors about your progress
• Talk about your interviews, different perceptions might be helpful to find commonalities (and to avoid overrating your data)
I wish I would

• Not be depressed in the beginning when I hear ‘no’
• Control my anxiety and allow the respondent to think a few minutes rather than explaining the question
• Actively use Twitter to reach respondents
• Write my thoughts before the interview
• Avoid scheduling an immediate interview when someone introduces me to a potential respondent
Thank you!

• Questions?

• Contact: gulenb@uw.edu