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The Pen and the Sword: Reporting ISIS

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May 2013: The kidnapping started slowly.¹ At first, it did not feel like a kidnapping at all. Daniel Rye delivered himself to the hostage-takers quite willingly. He was 24 years old, a freelance photographer from Denmark, and he had gone to the small town of Azaz in northern Syria. His translator, a local woman, said they should get permission to work. So on the morning of his second day in Azaz, only his second ever in Syria, they went to see one of the town's rebel groups. He knocked at the metal gate to a compound. It was opened by a boy of 11 or 12 with a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder. "We've come to see the *emir*," said his translator, using the word – "prince" – that Islamist groups have for their commanders. The boy nodded at them to wait. Daniel was tall, with crew-cut blonde hair. His translator, a woman in her 20s with a *hijab*, looked small next to him. The emir came with some of his men. He spoke to Daniel and the translator, watched by the boy with the Kalashnikov.

The emir looked through the pictures on Daniel's camera, squinting. There were images of children playing on the burnt-out carcass of a tank. It was half buried under rubble from a collapsed mosque, huge square blocks of stone like a giant child's toy. This was the most famous sight in Azaz. There were photographs of the market and of people in the streets. All these were pictures from the day before. The emir and the translator began a rapid exchange in Arabic. She became silent and looked at the ground. The emir spoke more loudly and quickly, pointing at Daniel, who felt an urge to vomit. "Come with us," said the emir. They went to sit in a large room, armchairs and sofas around the walls. Armed men crowded into the doorway as the emir asked questions.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a photographer from Denmark."

"You are a spy."

"No, no, I came to report on the human cost of this war."

"You are putting electronics in our cars so the drones find us."

"But there aren't any drones in this part of Syria."

"Why are you really here?"

Daniel handed over his passport, his press card, whatever he had to show he was a journalist. "All lies. You are a spy," said the emir. The judgement seemed final but then, for no apparent reason, the atmosphere changed, the tension breaking. The emir called for tea. Someone came in with a tray of small glasses. Daniel had a sip. It was scalding hot and very sweet. The emir and his fighters joked amongst themselves. The translator looked relaxed for the first time since they had sat down. Daniel took another small sip of tea; it was still too hot to drink. "Oh," said the translator, as if remembering something, "they want you to stand up." Most of his tea was left but Daniel stood. "Don't worry," the translator said, "they say this is just procedure." Someone pulled his arms behind his back and put on handcuffs. They took his glasses and put a hood over his head. He was led out and down some stairs, stumbling blindly. The hood was pulled off. He was in a

basement. He sat on a mattress on the floor, barely able to breath. “I have been kidnapped,” he thought.²

More than a year earlier, in February 2012, we were in the Syrian city of Homs. (The “we” was me, a cameraman, a translator and a “security advisor” who was the team’s medic – TV news does not travel light.) Like Daniel, we had come to cover “the human cost of the war” or as we told people, since we were working on the rebel side, “to show what the regime is doing.” We were smuggled through a sewer into a part of the city controlled by the rebels...90 percent of the job of covering a war is getting to the right place.³ In Syria, in early 2012, the right place was a suburb of Homs called Baba Amr.⁴ It was the first territory the Syrian opposition could really call their own. Its survival against the odds was one reason Homs was known as “the cradle of the revolution.” It was about to be attacked. The regime had brought up tanks and heavy artillery. Shelling had already begun of a neighboring area, a place with far fewer rebel forces.

Everyone was thinking of Hama, though no one dared say it. The town of Hama was pounded into rubble by the old President Assad in 1982 after an uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood. Ten thousand or even 20,000 people died there – no one knows the true number – and, in the time before YouTube and camera phones, not a single image of the destruction was published. In Baba Amr, after we emerged from the sewer, there was a debate over what to do with us. “We’re wasting our time with them,” said one of the rebels, a defector from the regime’s special forces. I had first met him the year before. Then, he had been eager to help, offering to attack a government checkpoint so we could film it. (We declined.) Then, the rebels believed foreign journalists would bring a Western intervention, as in Libya. Now, people were losing hope that help was coming.

At 6am, I was woken by a mortar impact a few streets away. We were sleeping on the floor of an apartment being used as Baba Amr’s media center. It was cold and I didn’t want to get out from under my blanket. “Perhaps it’s just one,” I thought. There were more, one every five or six seconds, a dozen by the time I had reluctantly pulled my boots on. We went to a makeshift hospital to see the results of what was by then continuous shelling. As the morning wore on, it seemed that the hospitals themselves – there were two in Baba Amr – were being targeted. We heard that the other had been hit and I could hear impacts in the streets near us. Casualties arrived steadily. “Look!” a man shouted, pointing to the floppy body of an unconscious boy being carried inside. “Aren’t we human too? Damn the Russians! Damn the Russians!” People were furious at Russia for using its veto at the UN Security Council the night before.⁵ There was still electricity so everyone had seen the voting on television, watching their fate being discussed as the tanks rumbled into position. They were bitter at the West, too, especially the United

States. President Obama had said Assad should go. If he meant it, why was the Syrian dictator still there? The U.S. was responsible, they thought.

What was our responsibility as journalists? That morning at the clinic, I saw one of the most awful things I witnessed in Syria. An 11-year-old boy was brought in. His jaw had been ripped off by a sniper bullet.⁶ He was still conscious, sitting on the edge of a hospital bed. Everything below the nose was gone. There were just bloody shreds hanging down. He stared at me, eyes wide with shock, before a nurse pulled a curtain across. We thought about trying to organize a medical evacuation but the boy died the next day. Of course, the war has killed many children in Syria, but he was conscious and looking straight at me. The story I wrote later about the boy was (I hoped) a simple, factual account, but it still seemed like an argument for intervention. Writing with that intent, you risk becoming a propagandist as much as a reporter. But if our stories were not meant to move the outside world to act, what were we doing? Cynically providing a titillating spectacle for the viewers, a vicarious thrill, the pornography of violence?⁷ TV coverage either facilitates “the internationalization of conscience,” wrote Michael Ignatieff, or it is just “promiscuous voyeurism.”⁸

I worked in Syria for the BBC and the corporation’s critics said its journalists *were* campaigning for a military intervention.⁹ If our reports had been one sided, the critics would have been right. But we showed that there were rebel fighters in Baba Amr, not just unarmed demonstrators. I also reported that a group of rebels had killed their prisoners: not all of the atrocities in Syria were the regime’s. The BBC had a correspondent in Damascus, too. Balance in TV news, especially in coverage of a war, is often literally a matter of perspective. But a TV news report is not good at explaining things: history or even the immediate context of the image on screen. And in a civil war, information, like humanitarian aid, is rarely neutral. ISIS understood that. They did not want Western journalists in Syria, even if those journalists were reporting on regime war crimes. Such coverage would encourage Western intervention – and that would make it more difficult to build the Caliphate.

In May of 2013, Daniel did not even know who had him. He remains unsure to this day: there were so many different rebel “brigades” in Syria. It seems, though – from what we know about who was in Azaz in 2013, and from what happened to Daniel later – that he was in the hands of the most hardline Islamists fighting in Syria. His captors belonged to *al Muhajireen*, “the Emigrants” in Arabic, named after the first Muslims, who followed Mohammed on his retreat from Mecca to Medina. Their leader, Omar al Chechani – “the Chechen” – had sworn allegiance to a new group, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. ISIS, as the world came to know it, had formed only the month before. The leadership appointed an Iraqi emir, or commander, to work with al Chechani in Azaz, arranging the pipeline into Syria for thousands of foreign fighters. They were sent on to join military

units or to “special duties,” that is, suicide bombing. Daniel had delivered himself right into the heart of ISIS. Al Chechani himself was later named commander for northern Syria.¹⁰ Daniel was to spend the next 13 months in captivity bitterly regretting his ignorance of who-was-who in Azaz. But the jihadis were relatively new in Syria. Journalists had disappeared but everyone thought the regime had taken them.

Daniel was kept for a week in the basement. Every day, the same questions: Who are you? What are you doing here? He gave the same answers. After a week, they moved him to a makeshift cell in the abandoned Children’s Hospital in Aleppo. The Children’s Hospital was later to become notorious but his detention there started well. “Are you OK?” one of the guards asked. They gave him bread, olives and water. It turned out that this would be his only food for many days. He was taken to an office and pushed to the floor in front of a grey metal desk. Behind it sat a man wearing a black ski mask. Daniel could tell he was young, but that was all. It started as before. Who are you? Where are you from? What are you doing here? Daniel gave the same answers. “Don’t tell me the same again. We know who you are. We know what you are doing here. Tell us the truth and all this will be over quickly.” Daniel repeated what he had been saying for the past ten days.

Guards came in and helped the man in the ski mask to tie Daniel’s legs. They told him to lie on his stomach. They slid a stick under his shins and tied his wrists to the stick so that his knees were bent and his feet were in the air. They beat him on the soles of his feet.¹¹ It was agonizing. It went on and on, the pain building, a method of interrogation from regime prisons. This and other forms of torture – hanging by the wrists, electric shocks – were copied by the jihadis. The interrogators had fun. “Bark like a dog,” they said. He barked like a dog. Crawl around on your hands and knees.” He did it. “Snort like a pig.” He did whatever they demanded. “I was completely destroyed,” Daniel told me later. “I stopped believing in myself. I thought I was an animal. I had no personality left. I was nothing.”

After four days, he decided to kill himself. Often, following a round of questions, they left him standing in his cell, handcuffed to a chain hung from the ceiling. He hooked one foot around the leg of a table in the corner and pulled it towards him. He was weak – it was the fourth day without food or water – but he managed to climb up. He wrapped the chain around his neck and jumped. The suicide attempt failed. The noise brought the guards running. They chained him to a radiator instead and left him alone again. He sat there for a while before something occurred to him. There was a lampshade on the floor a few yards away. He dragged it over with a toe. He broke off a small piece of metal, bent the end, and tried to open the handcuffs. Nothing. He kept at it. Two or three hours later, the handcuffs clicked open. “Holy shit,” he said to himself. The room had an empty window frame, the hole covered only in cardboard. He used the table again to reach the ledge. He was going to escape.

The details of Daniel's detention are sordid – *bark like a dog, crawl around* – why write about this? How far should we go in revealing such details? In the summer of 2013, we were given video of a rebel commander abusing prisoners.¹² It was filmed in a dark basement by a “citizen journalist” who later fled Syria, sickened by how the revolution had degenerated. Five men are seen sitting rigid with fear. Their hands are bound; they are blindfolded, naked from the waist up, badly bruised. One was a secondary school headmaster arrested for spying – the usual charge. In an unpleasantly intimate gesture, the commander flattens down the wisps of the headmaster's comb-over and asks him: “Haven't we treated you well?” The man shrinks away in terror. The editor of our main TV news bulletin thought we could show the prisoners being hit but not the commander stroking the headmaster's hair.¹³

“I know these things are subjective,” the editor wrote to me in an email, “but I think that is too much and constitutes demonstrating torture in a way that goes too far for a BBC audience – even after the watershed [the time, 9pm, after which British TV has more license to broadcast material unsuitable for children].” I could understand his concern. The commander's action was deeply creepy, sadistic, a show of the dominance of torturer over victim. It robbed the headmaster of any last shred of dignity. But we had to show it, I thought, precisely because it was so sordid. That word seemed to me increasingly to sum up the Syrian civil war. Most wars, probably, are *sordid*, from the French meaning dirty, squalid or dishonorable.¹⁴

I had thought the head-stroking gesture would convey the awfulness of the prisoners' situation while not showing graphic violence. On mainstream TV news, we cannot show bodies, blood and guts, close-ups of violent acts, or catastrophic injuries. There are good reasons for these rules – no one wants young children to see such things – but the result is that coverage of war is sanitized, or even “prettified” as the celebrated war reporter Martin Bell wrote.¹⁵ War ends up looking like a video game or a Hollywood movie. There are exciting gun battles but no injuries. Bell also said that TV diminishes reality by “framing it in the modest rectangle in the corner of the living room. Something... will always be missing in the compressed world of the tube: the sense of the surrounding reality... the sights and sounds and smells of actually being there.” Arriving back from covering a suicide bombing in Kabul, I noticed that there were small flaps of skin stuck to the soles of my boots with blood; the remains of the bomber had been spread across the street where we were filming. We hosed off our boots before we went into the house. How do you convey such a detail in a TV news report? You don't. Nor do you show the remains of the bomber or the innocent dead.

Journalists were restrained by “taste and decency” rules when ISIS published videos of Western hostages being beheaded. Most mainstream broadcasters used

a single still image of hostage and executioner. Most did not use video; and there were no pictures – still or moving – of a knife at the throat, or a body and severed head. This was different from censoring bloody pictures of combat because the executions were staged by ISIS to produce a certain image. To use the whole video would have involved something close to complicity in the act, exploiting a victim who has no say in how they are portrayed. The BBC would not even show “Jihadi John” holding a captive by the scruff of the neck. It was another image speaking of dominance and humiliation. In making all these decisions, we did indeed soften or sanitize – that is censor – the horror of the event. The main problem, though, with showing the execution videos was not one of taste and decency but that they were ISIS propaganda. What if our reports helped ISIS?¹⁶

Daniel struggled through the window, and found he was on a first floor balcony. He crawled to the edge and jumped down into a pile of branches. It was morning. He used the sun to calculate which way was north and started walking. The border with Turkey was to the north. He did not knock on any doors for help. He was afraid that anyone he met would be loyal to his captors or afraid of them. He avoided roads, buildings, people. Eventually, he saw a cornfield, walked into the tall rows of green stalks, and began to crawl so no one would see him. The stillness was broken by distant voices. Armed men were advancing in a line across the cornfield. When one stopped right next to him, Daniel stood, shakily, and ran as fast as his weakened legs would go. There was yelling and then above his head the gentle whap-whap of bullets. He threw himself to the ground. It was over. He was handcuffed, put in the trunk of a car, and taken to another cellar. There, though, they freed his hands, let him wash and gave him something to eat and drink. “Don’t worry,” they said. “Everything will be OK.”

Time passed. He began to believe they would let him go home. They were just locals rounding up a strange man seen in a cornfield. He would go to the border. He would see his mother. He was thinking all this when the man Daniel had come to think of as the “torturer-in-chief” arrived. “Hello Daniel,” he said. “We’ve missed you.” The torturer-in-chief now told him to stand. “Put your hands behind your back.” The handcuffs dug into skin and bone, drawing blood. They would not come off – not once – for another week. They went back to the Children’s Hospital, where the beatings continued. The interrogators no longer bothered with the questions. “Yes, I’m a spy,” Daniel told them. “What do you want to hear? I put things on cars so the drones know where to bomb. I’ll tell you everything.” They laughed. “Okay,” said one of the men beating him. “He’s definitely not telling the truth now.” They were no longer interested in a confession. “Just kill me,” Daniel told them.

After two weeks, they stopped. “They broke me, completely,” Daniel said later. They took him to a bathroom. “When you get beaten badly you smell disgusting. I

had pissed my pants and shit my pants. I smelled of beatings. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw just a skeleton. I was standing there like a stick. I looked at my hands and it was like I had put on ski gloves; they were double sized, full of water. I thought: 'Is that me?'" They moved him to another cell. One day, he heard English voices in the corridor outside. A guard said loudly, "What's your name?" Someone answered: "My name is James Foley." No one had heard from James Foley in more than eight months. So that's what happened to him, Daniel thought. The roll call continued: My name is John. My name is David. My name is Federico." He was not alone. ISIS was in the hostage business.

The outside world did not yet know what Daniel knew. Those of us reporting on Syria began to suspect that jihadis were kidnapping Westerners. As we learned more, we kept secrets. We did not say that when James Foley was taken he was with a British photographer, John Cantlie. John had been kidnapped before by jihadists and was supposed to testify against Britons in the group. That story, it was feared, would endanger James. When it came to other hostages, we did not say that Steven Sotloff was Jewish or that Peter Kassig had been a soldier. We were silent about Kayla Mueller's abduction. We did all this at the request of the families, who were terrified that publicity would threaten the hostages' lives. The kidnappers had said as much.

At the beginning, ISIS wanted to keep its kidnapping secret. That seems incredible now that we associate them with such brutal theatricality. But an email from ISIS to James Foley's family raised a false flag, saying: "We are a unit operating under the umbrella of the FSA (Free Syrian Army)." Quoted exactly here, complete with spelling mistakes, it went on to say:

if you want coperation we have rules. you can not go to media ever about this and if you do we will not negotiate. we want money fast.¹⁷

A later email – again as written – said:

From the conditions of this negotiation is that we demand NO MEDIA EXPOSURE WHATSOEVER. This is because it is highly likely that high publicity will provoke the arrogance of your government to not comply with our demands under the pretext of "we do not negotiate with terrorists"

So the families transmitted those demands to the small group of Syria journalists who knew about the kidnappings and we went along. "The journalist's duty to the truth" sounds a hollow phrase when there are lives in the balance. In this way, we did not treat the Westerners kidnapped by ISIS as a straightforward story. But

keeping secrets has consequences. The former hostage Nicholas Henin told me he was taken because he didn't know how bad the kidnapping had become. At that stage, most of the abductions had not been made public. He went to Raqqa, shortly after ISIS was formed, unaware he was walking into a trap.

Daniel was trying to get used to the strange knowledge that he was not the only one there. "I was happy but I was also scared." They put him in a cell with everyone else. His wrist bones were still poking through his skin; his hands were still bloated. He was terrified of losing his hands to infection – he had diarrhea and no soap. What if the bacteria spread? He slept with his hands outside the rough, military blankets they were given, so he did not get a fiber in the wounds. After three weeks his jailers gave him antibiotics. Two weeks after that, his hands finally healed. He still has the scars on his wrists. "Sometimes I look back and think about it as a movie or a bad dream, you know."

He was introduced to the other hostages. They sat for hours regretting their decisions. Why did I go here and not there? Why did I say this and not that? Why did I open my mouth to show I was a Westerner? "You're not as stupid as you think you are," one of the older captives told Daniel. "All of us are stupid." Daniel remembers: "We all hated ourselves." One day three British jihadis arrived to announce they were taking over as their jailers. "This is very bad," said one of the hostages, David Haines. He and three others – James Foley, John Cantlie, and Federico Motka – had been held by this group before. They had called them "the Beatles" in case they were overheard talking about them. Individually, they were Ringo, George, and John. He would become "*Jihadi John*" in news stories after taking a starring role in the Islamic State's execution videos. The Beatles all used heavy Arab cologne, the kind sold in little shops in every Syrian town. The hostages could smell them even before they opened the cell door. To this day, Daniel's heart races if someone nearby has a strong perfume or cologne.

To the Beatles, the hostages were all guilty of something because of the passports they carried, though there was a hierarchy of guilt. The "worst" hostages had served in the military, like Peter Kassig or David Haines, or had been embedded journalists, like James Foley. Journalists of all types were the enemy, though, their reports part of a Western propaganda war with ISIS. Aid workers served Western imperialism, no matter that they were in Syria to help Muslims. The first time that the Beatles came into the cell they told everyone: "Kneel. Face the wall. Palms on the wall. Heads down. Don't look up." The hostages learned to do this as soon as they heard the door. A glance meant punishment. One former hostage told me he could not be 100% certain that the Jihadi John in the execution videos was the same man who had tormented them. He was always too afraid to look up. The Beatles walked up and down, cocking a weapon behind someone's head, bringing a knife to someone's face. "Do you know what democracy means?" John

would ask. “It means,” he would go on, “that whatever your governments do, you are responsible.” An American or British hostage would have to defend Guantanamo, a French hostage, the war in Mali, or the banning of the *hijab* in public.

“Ask us about our religion. Ask us: Why don’t you believe in education for women?” Silence. Then someone spoke up, reluctantly. “Why don’t you believe in education for women?”

“Of course we believe in education of women. We teach them the Koran so they can bring our kids up to be pure.”

The Beatles liked to discuss politics, history and religion. They seemed to be in their 20s and they turned the cell into a nightmarish college dorm room. They liked to talk about great battles from the past and why the West was at war with the Muslim world. The hostages had to ask questions or suffer a beating. They had to debate, though a truthful answer was dangerous. By the end of one of these sessions, two of the Beatles might be beating a prisoner each in the center of the cell, while the third continued the ghoulish Socratic dialogue with the others.

Like Daniel’s interrogators, the Beatles had fun. They had made their first four captives – James Foley, John Cantlie, Federico Motka and David Haines – engage in “cage fights.” These were pathetic affairs; the hostages were so starved they could hardly stand, let alone fight. But the losers would get an improvised version of water boarding – head tipped back under a toilet hosepipe – so they tried their best. At the height of the kidnapping, the Beatles had more than 20 Western hostages to play with. Jihadi John liked to arrange them into a choir for a song: “Welcome to Osama’s Lovely Hotel,” sung to the tune of the Eagles’ “Hotel California.” He would bring in different sections of the hostage chorus – soprano, alto, tenor, bass – like a demented choirmaster. “Welcome to Osama’s lovely hotel...Such a lovely place, such a lovely place. / Where you can never leave, where you can never leave. / And if you try, and if you try, you will die / And if you try, you will die, Mr. Bigley style.” Ken Bigley was a Briton beheaded by al Qaeda in Iraq in 2004. “They were very creative. They were very full of hate. They were different from the other jihadists, the local guys,” Daniel said. “They hate the West. They hate what the West stands for. They left Britain because they didn’t fit in British society but now they’ve found their place.” He thought the Beatles knew some hostages would be released and that what was happening in the cells would eventually become public. The Beatles were enjoying themselves but their cruelty was also supposed to send a message.

In the summer of 2014, the family of Peter Kassig tried to send their own message. They went to Nicolas Henin who had been recently freed after a ransom was paid. They asked him to do an interview about Peter's conversion to Islam. Peter was by this time using an Islamic name: "Abdul Rahman." His family hoped the hostage-takers would believe the conversion was genuine if a former cellmate spoke about it. They also hoped the wider Muslim world, the *Ummah*, would pressure ISIS to spare Peter's life. A friend of the family asked me to do the interview. In it, Nicolas said: "Peter told me how important Islam was to him, how much it helped to overcome his situation in captivity." Was this true or just something that might help save Peter's life? I had my doubts but went no further in expressing them than asking the obvious question: wasn't the conversion a strategy for survival or the result of Stockholm syndrome? No, Nicolas said, Peter was "fragile" but also a "dedicated" Muslim.¹⁸

His answers were good enough for me to avoid a dilemma. Holding back information is one thing, conveying a story you think is false is something else. This was the line that most Second World War correspondents on the Allied side would not cross. They withheld facts that could damage the war effort; often the censor gave them no choice. But they would not disseminate information they knew was false. That is the difference between a journalist and a propagandist. A propagandist does not care who won the battle, or even if the battle really took place; all that matters is the effect of the report. Thankfully, I did not have to tell Peter's family there could be no report. We broadcast the interview, though it, and all the family's appeals, did not work. Peter was killed. "The point," Nicolas had said in the interview, "is that the IS are killing Muslims every day."

There was perhaps never any chance that the story would change the minds of Peter's jailers or the ISIS leadership. There was more hope, insofar as the story was seen at all, of winning sympathy among Muslims in areas ruled by ISIS. The jihadis were acutely aware of the power of information. They went to great lengths to control it. Asma was an 18-year-old student in the town of Deir Ezzor. Some of her friends and an older woman, a dentist in her 40s, resisted wearing the full *niqab*. This marked them out as rebels, as much to each other as to the ISIS fighters who stopped them in the street. They decided to take their protest underground, wearing the *niqab* but furtively spraying anti-ISIS graffiti on the walls. The first time Asma tried to do this she was so afraid that all she could paint were a few squiggles, not even words. Her nerve broke and she ran. The next time, though, and regularly after that, she was able to write a slogan. It was a small enough act of rebellion but it infuriated ISIS. Eventually Asma was caught. She was tortured into naming others in her group. After three months, she was released, but the older woman, the dentist, was stoned to death for "fornication."¹⁹ She was a single woman, too old to marry in the view of ISIS, so this was the easiest way to execute her, rather than for her actual "offense."

While ISIS cannot control the Western media, they are brilliantly attuned to what sells, or what will go viral. Jihadi John could have been the figment of a tabloid

sub-editor's fevered imagination. *The Daily Mail* website, one of the world's most popular news sites, treats ISIS like a celebrity. There are always four ISIS stories a day, right next to the day's four stories about the Kardashians. In the sensationalist content of these reports about ISIS, there are echoes of British First World War propaganda about German soldiers eating Belgian babies. In this case, most of the atrocity stories about ISIS are true. Perhaps uniquely in the history of modern conflict, they do not attempt to cover up their war crimes but to trumpet them.

To the leadership of ISIS, the hostages represented money. Word came to the cell from the outside world that some governments wanted to negotiate. The Beatles had a central role in this. Often they arrived in the cells to ask "proof of life" questions sent from hostages' families. "It was a very strange relationship," Daniel said. "Whenever they were inside the room, the air was thick with fear. But they also came with hope because they were the guys negotiating for us."

The first hostage was released, a Spanish journalist called Marc Marginedas. His government had paid a ransom. "Take a really good look at Marc," the Beatles said to James Foley: "This is the closest you will ever come to freedom." They told Marc not to talk publicly when he got home. Next, the Beatles came for a Russian hostage, Sergei Gorbunov. They told him he would be released. Everyone was uneasy. There had been no proof of life questions for Sergei; no one seemed to be negotiating for him. A few days later, the Beatles opened the door to the cell again. They came in wearing masks and gave the hostages an open laptop. "Look at it," they said. There was a picture of Sergei, shot through the face. "Describe what you see. We want to make sure you're really looking." The hostages described Sergei's corpse, covered in dirt, the flesh on his face turning blue-black. "Look at his skin. What kind of blue is that? What does it mean to you?" asked one of the Beatles. Daniel thought of being in an English lesson at school. "You see how big the hole is," he remembers them saying. "We used a dum-dum bullet. We filed down the top." The hostages suffered a day of beating. They called it "Black Friday." The Beatles said they were punishing them because Marc had talked. Marc had not spoken publicly. It was another mind game. "Eeny, meeny, miny, mo," said one of the Beatles, settling on Alan Henning, a British taxi driver who had been kidnapped delivering an ambulance to Syria. "If we release anyone else and they talk to the media, we will torture Alan to death."

The Beatles pushed a new prisoner into the cell, an Arab. This had never happened before; the foreigners were always alone. He was in his 40s, bearded and wearing a long robe. "Get to know him," they said, "he'll be with you for a long time. The cellmates were suspicious. Why is he here? Is he a spy? But they asked him if he wanted anything to eat. "No, no. I'm fine, thank you. But can you tell me the direction of Mecca?" He prayed then said to everyone. "They're not real Muslims [ISIS]." No one wanted to answer him. They thought it could be a

test, a trick. The man knocked on the cell door, banged on it continuously. The hostages were terrified. This was not how you behaved. It could lead to violence. The guards came. The man asked to go to the toilet and the guards took him. There was no violence. He came back, having ritually washed. He resumed prayer and did not stop until hours later the Beatles came once more and took him away. No one knew what to make of it.

After a short time, George came in and gave out pieces of cardboard. "Make signs for your families," he told the Europeans. Daniel had to write: "Go to the Danish government. Please pay the 2 million Euros. I don't want to end like him." What this meant soon became clear. The European hostages were driven out to the desert. The Arab prisoner was there, blindfolded, hands tied behind his back, standing in front of a trench, a grave. Ringo stood some way back, with a video camera. John stood just behind the man with a handgun. He shot him in the back of the head. He continued shooting as others joined in...5,6,7 shots into the mans' body. "Stand in the ditch," someone told the hostages. "Hold up the signs." Ringo filmed it all. The video was emailed to the families.

The video meant that negotiations were going on, at least for the Europeans. (The British and American hostages had stayed behind.) The Danish government, like the U.S. and British governments, would not pay ransoms. But Denmark would allow the families to pay. Daniel's family raised the money somehow, two million Euros. They were not rich. There was a crowd sourcing appeal for the ransom. They got the money in time but the national bank was shut over a long weekend and could not change the money from Kroner into Euros immediately. IS levied a fine of five thousand Euros for every day the money was late. When a Danish security advisor finally handed over a bag of money at the border, it contained two million and forty thousand Euros, the ransom plus the fine.

In the last two weeks of his captivity, Daniel was beaten every day. "I was released with a lot of bruises. I think it was to deliver the message to the American and British governments: This is what your guys are dealing with inside. Negotiate for them." Daniel finally walked across the border into Turkey. Turkish soldiers were watching a World Cup football match. He sat in the corner of their post until it had finished. Then they took him to a phone. He called his mother. "We cried for some time. I had a lot of questions for her: 'Did you sell the house? Is anybody in the family dead? Did my little sister quit school?' Everything was positive. 'No, we, we didn't sell the house. Everything is OK. Just relax. Somebody will pick you up.' Twenty minutes later some security guys picked me up and, yeah, I was on my way to Denmark."

Daniel's account of his detention was drawn out bit by bit over two days of conversations in Denmark. You could still see the scars on his wrists from the

handcuffs. He did not like to talk much about the torture he endured. He got tired easily and sometimes trailed off into silence. Daniel was the last of the European hostages to be released. After that, the U.S. started bombing (to save the Kurds and the Yazidis). Then ISIS beheaded most of the remaining British and American captives.²⁰ There is an awful likelihood that ISIS beheads prisoners so we will show it. Or drowns them, or burns them alive, or uses any of the shocking and inventive methods of killing designed to generate headlines and fulfill what ISIS believes is a Koranic injunction to “strike terror into the enemies of God.”²¹ This is propaganda by deed and journalists will always struggle with that. What if our reports help ISIS? Boost their morale? Encourage recruitment? Our nations are at war. Should we not pin a flag to the lapel and simply ask ourselves what we could broadcast to make victory more likely? This is what some of our politicians would like us to do. As I write, a British Member of Parliament has attacked the BBC for what he called its “bizarre policy” of using the terms “ISIS” or “the so-called Islamic State” rather than Daesh (the Arabic acronym, which annoys ISIS). “We are at war with terrorists,” the MP said. “We have to defeat their ideology and appeal. We have to be united.”²²

If you start calling ISIS *Daesh*, why not go further? Perhaps they should appear in our broadcasts as “this nihilistic death cult” or “these evil terrorists.” In the cut down of an interview I did with a Taliban commander, one of our executives insisted we swap a question about the justice system, which had prompted quite an informative answer, for one about killing civilians, which had produced an entirely predictable denial. This wasn’t just a case of doing challenging journalism – a good thing – but of demonstrating appropriate moral outrage. We had to show which side we were on. The people we are fighting, it seems, are always “terrorists.” This makes me nervous. A shift in tone here, a change of line there, and you are editorializing as much as reporting. This does not mean you have to imply moral equivalence where there is none. It would be absurd to report “two sides” of the question, say, of sex slavery. Rape is rape and murder is murder.

One-sided journalism has its risks. After Paris, much coverage presented a caricature: ISIS was mad or bad. Perhaps ISIS is both but such reporting does not tell you, for instance, why ISIS still has support in Mosul or Ramadi. Many, probably most, Sunnis in those places think ISIS is protecting them from Shiite death squads. A failure to understand and to empathize with “the enemy” – which comes from a lack of honest reporting – leads to terrible mistakes by governments and nations. We need more not fewer voices from the other side of the frontline. Of course, we have values – democracy, freedom of speech, the rule of law – and you hope that truthful reporting advances those values. If the war against ISIS is one of civilization against barbarism, you hope too that the truthful stories that damage the enemy – *ISIS takes slaves* – outweigh the truthful stories that might help them – *airstrikes killed civilians*. And if that calculation is reversed, perhaps it is time to re-evaluate the policy. George Orwell felt no contradiction between going to Spain as a fighter and writing an account of the

war.²³ He did not bend his reporting to any “party line.” He thought the facts supported his position but he would never have dreamed of changing the facts to suit his argument.

Talking about truth securing the right outcome “in the long-run” and “on average” avoids the issue. What if the particular story you are about to publish might help the “terrorists”? You start with the proposition that a journalist’s job is to tell the truth. If you do anything other than that, you’re a propagandist.²⁴ But then you make a number of compromises with that approach of radical truth telling – you hold back news of a kidnapping to save a life, you avoid showing too much of an ISIS propaganda film. Jihadi John told the hostages they were all soldiers in a war, no matter that they had not come to Syria with a gun. There was an information war; journalists were on the other side. The Islamic State does not view journalists as neutral. Faced with evil, should we even try to be?

Endnotes

¹ Daniel Rye Ottosen and other former hostages, interviews with Paul Wood, August 2015.

² This alternating structure was used by Martha Gellhorn writing about the Spanish civil war: Martha Gellhorn, “The Third Winter,” in *The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism*, ed. Kevin Kerrane and Ben Yagoda (New York: Pocket Press, 1998), 422-432.

³ Tyler Hicks, “Why we take the risk: When entire regions are no-go zones for journalists, what do we accept as news?” *Nieman Reports* 68:4 (2014): 27.
<http://niemanreports.org/articles/why-journalists-take-the-risk-to-report-from-dangerous-places/>

⁴ The story of Baba Amr, with the images discussed above, is here: Paul Wood, *Homs: Journey into Hell*, Film, London: BBC Panorama, 2012.
<https://vimeo.com/118496353>

⁵ Failing to intervene: Paul Harris, Martin Chulov, David Batty and Damien Pearse, “Syria resolution vetoed by Russia and China at United Nations,” *The Guardian*, February 4, 2012.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/04/assad-obama-resign-un-resolution>

United Nations, Department of Public Information, *Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China Veto Text Supporting Arab League’s Proposed Peace Plan*. SC/10536, February 4 2012.
<http://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10536.doc.htm>

⁶ More in my report. Paul Wood, “Homs from the frontline: never-ending shelling and a child buried in the night,” *The Guardian*, February 11, 2012.
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/11/syria-homs-frontline-baba-amr>

⁷ Anthony Loyd, *My War Gone By, I Miss It So* (London: September Publishing, 2015): Preface. “By the time the death count from the Syrian war had swamped itself in the blood of more than 200,000 dead, few people in the Muslim world still regarded Western journalists as credible witnesses, but saw us instead as the epitome of cynicism, charting the depths of depravity and suffering knowing full well that our record would neither bring good nor redress.”

⁸ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Holt, 1997): 10-11.

“Television has become the privileged medium through which moral relations between strangers are mediated in the modern world.” He writes further: “TV images cannot assert anything, they can only instantiate it,” while TV coverage of someone else’s civil war could be seen as “the promiscuous voyeurism a visual culture makes possible or as a hopeful example of the internationalisation of conscience... The medium’s gaze... makes us voyeurs of the suffering of others, tourists amid their landscapes of anguish. It brings us face to face with their fate... Heightened self regard is an integral part of the glow of moral empathy with the suffering of others... At its best, television’s morality is the morality of the war correspondent... who learns in the end to pay attention only to the victims... rather than the pieties of political rhetoric, to refuse to make the distinction between good corpses and bad ones... Television has unfortunate strengths as a medium for moral disgust... disgust is a poor substitute for thought.”

⁹ The charges as set out by one of its critics, Peter Hitchens:

Peter Hitchens, “We set Syria ablaze... now we’re hurling in explosives,” *Daily Mail Online*, June 2 2013. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2334411/PETER-HITCHENS-We-set-Syria-ablaze--Now-hurling-explosives.html>

Peter Hitchens, “Syria – some badly needed balance,” *Daily Mail Online*, December 17 2012, <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2012/12/syria-some-badly-needed-balance-.html>

Peter Hitchens, “Before we bomb Syria, shouldn't we seek proof of guilt?” *Daily Mail Online*, August 26 2013. <http://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2013/08/before-we-bomb-syria-shouldnt-we-seek-proof-of-guilt-.html>

¹⁰ Information on the group responsible comes from a briefing with a senior Danish official and with two Syrians who took messages to the group during negotiations for Daniel's freedom.

¹¹ Daniel did not go into detail about his torture, but for an account of what the practice of Falanga, or foot whipping, actually means, see Pericles Korovessis, “The Method: A Personal Account of the Tortures in Greece,” in William F. Schulz, ed., *The Phenomenon of Torture: Readings and Commentary*, 2013, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013): 71-79. “Falanga [foot whipping] is an overwhelmingly powerful force that works on your whole system. You have the impression of sliding down a vast, shining slope, then you’re flung into a hard granite wall...The strokes of the rod are the granite wall. The slope is the interval between each stroke...I started to cry out. I didn’t know till then how loud the human voice can be.”

¹² I first wrote about this incident in the *Spectator* in 2014, after interviewing “Ghadi,” who had fled the revolution. Paul Wood, “The Free Syrian Army is being taken over by groups of jihadist thugs,” *The Spectator*, May 4 2013. <http://new.spectator.co.uk/2013/05/a-corrupted-revolution/>

“One day the local commander led him down into a basement and said: ‘Look at this.’ Ghadi’s video shows five men sitting, all rigid with fear, stripped to the waist, blindfolded, hands bound behind their backs. Ugly bruises cover most of their upper bodies. They had been seized from a suburb loyal to the government. They included a clerk in the foreign ministry, a new recruit to an artillery regiment and a secondary school headmaster. The headmaster’s dignity had long gone, his comb-over pointing in all directions. The commander smoothed the wisps of hair. The man shrank like a beaten dog. ‘Haven’t we treated you well?’ said the commander. Then he kicked him under the chin, snapping his head back. ‘These are all spies,’ he declared.”

¹³ The editor of the BBC’s main TV news bulletin, e-mail message to author, June 5 2013: “I can live with the blindfolded shot and the hit to side of the head, but not the stroking of the captive’s hair. I know these things are subjective but I think that is too much and constitutes demonstrating torture in a way that is too far for a BBC One audience – even after the watershed.”

¹⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, “Sordid.” *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2014): 1703: “Involving immoral or dishonourable actions and motives; arousing moral distaste and contempt. Origin from French *sordide* or Latin *sordidus*, from *sordere* ‘be dirty’. The current senses date from the early 17th cent.” The original phrase about wars being sordid was John Simpson’s, the BBC World Affairs editor, though neither he nor I can remember where he wrote it.

¹⁵ Martin Bell, *In Harm's Way* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995): 214. "...bodies were found stacked in a room and bound together with wire...These images fell foul of the 'good taste guidelines.' The reports still ran...but all that was left in them was the 'bang bang,' apparently heroic pictures of camouflage-clad figures blazing away amid the ruins...It was about as close to reality as a Hollywood action movie...in our anxiety not to offend and upset people, we were not only sanitizing war but even prettifying it...its victims never bled to death but rather expired gracefully out of sight. How tactful of them, I thought. But war is real and war is terrible. War is a bad taste business." And: "Television by its very nature has an aptitude for illusion. Reality is somehow diminished by being framed in the modest rectangle in the corner of the living room. Images from the front line especially lose something in the transfer...Something will always be missing in the compressed world of the tube: the sense of the surrounding reality, the sharper perceptions of the eye as against the camera, the sights and sounds and smells of actually being there."

¹⁶ The head of AFP issued a manifesto on using material from Syria. See also Aris Messinis and Yana Dlugy, "War in Peace," *Association France-Presse*, November 6 2015. <http://blogs.afp.com/correspondent/?post%2Fwar-in-peace>

¹⁷ E-mail to the Foley family, supplied by those involved, used with permission.

¹⁸ Nicholas Henin talking about Peter Kassig: Paul Wood, interview with Nicholas Henin. *BBC News*, October 8 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-29540201> See also: Paul Wood, "Abdul-Rahman Kassig: US hostage now 'a very dedicated Muslim,'" *BBC News*, October 8 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29544396>

¹⁹ Noorhan Abbas and Eric Atwell, *The University of Leeds: Qurany Tool*, Al-Noor Verse No.2. <https://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/24-2.html> Stoning for adultery or fornication is not a punishment in the Koran. The Koran stipulates whipping for adultery. "The adulteress and the adulterer you shall whip each of them a hundred lashes. Do not be swayed by pity from carrying out God's law, if you truly believe in God and the Last Day. And let a group of believers witness their penalty."

²⁰ Timothy R. Furnish, "Beheading in the name of Islam," *Middle East Quarterly*, 12:2 (2005): 51-57. <http://www.meforum.org/713/beheading-in-the-name-of-islam>

²¹ Maher, Shiraz. "Islamic State: What the Kassig murder video tells us," *BBC News*, November 17, 2014. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30089033> The ISIS interpretation of this passage in the Koran (Chapter 8, Verse 60) is of course controversial. It is quoted by Shiraz Maher, a former Islamist who now studies de-radicalization at Kings College, London. "There is a point to all this

violence. It is not for its own sake. IS believes it is divinely commanded to adopt particularly draconian and savage tactics because there is a verse of the Koran which issues a command to “strike terror into [the hearts of] the enemies of Allah.” Many Muslims say ISIS is taking this quote out of context. My research assistant also points to this passage of the Koran (Chapter 5, Verse 47) which she says is ignored by ISIS. “Now, when you meet in war those who are bent on denying the truth, smite their necks until you overcome them fully, and then tighten their bonds; but thereafter set them free, either by an act of grace or against ransom, so that the burden of war may be lifted. That is the ordinance.”

²² During the Commons debate on bombing Syria: Dan Bloom and Lindsay Watling, “BBC should ditch ISIS impartiality rules because it wasn't neutral in WW2 says top Tory,” *Mirror*, July 2 2015. <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/bbc-should-ditch-isis-impartiality-5990235>

²³ George Orwell, “Looking Back on the Spanish War,” (New Road: London, 1943). Orwell wrote on propaganda versus reporting in “Looking Back on the Spanish War.”

“Early in life I have noticed that no event is ever correctly reported in a newspaper, but in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie. I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed. I saw troops who had fought bravely denounced as cowards and traitors, and others who had never seen a shot fired hailed as the heroes of imaginary victories; and I saw newspapers in London retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that had never happened. I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various ‘party lines’...This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world.”

²⁴ The British columnist Bernard Levin was implored by a government minister to think about the effects of what he wrote, to be “responsible.” He said: “The press has no duty to be responsible at all and it will be an ill day for freedom should it ever acquire one.” In Alexander Cockburn, *Corruptions of Empire: Life Studies & the Reagan Era* (London: Verso, 1988), 211. <http://tinyurl.com/ptl6t65> “Let justice be done though the heavens fall.” Fiat justitia ruat caelum. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiat_justitia_ruat_caelum