

Kidnappings in Iraq

Over the past few days, one of Centurion`s advisors in Iraq had the opportunity to chat informally to a number of people who had been taken hostage by insurgents and subsequently released after varying periods of captivity.

The circumstances were such that only a superficial account of their ordeals could be obtained at this time. All the subjects were willing to talk to him and explained as best they could the circumstances surrounding their capture and subsequent detention.

There were three separate groupings in total involving six persons and he deals with them individually.

Incident no 1

In this incident, two French nationals, Alex, a correspondent, and Ivan, a cameraman, were captured on April 11, 2004, whilst filming a US convoy which had come under attack and was burning fiercely near the city of Falluja.

They were driving towards Falluja when they came across the burning vehicles and they stopped to photograph the incident. A number of US military vehicles were in attendance at this stage and a gun battle was taking place between the troops and insurgents. The Frenchmen moved closer to the action and were so totally engrossed in their own business that they failed to see the US troops leave the scene until it was too late. Finding themselves alone, and realising that the insurgents were still firing in their direction, they made to go back to their vehicle.

As Ivan ran back along the road, the gunfire increased and he jumped down into a gully which ran alongside the road, where he lay in hiding for a short time. Whilst there, a group of masked and heavily armed Mujahadeen approached on foot and took him captive.

Meanwhile, Alex had flung himself behind a mound of sand at the side of the road and lay there sheltering. A very short time later, a car approached and Alex could see it was an Iraqi police car. It stopped and one of the occupants opened the door and called to him to get in. He shouted back that he was fine and that they should go on. The vehicle sped down the road for approximately 300 metres and stopped before reversing back to where he was sheltering. They again called to him and this time he ran and got into the back seat of the car. The vehicle again sped off down the road and straight into a Mujahadeen checkpoint, where the police officers handed Alex into the custody of the Mujahadeen. Once in their custody, Alex was blindfolded and his hands tied behind his back. He was put into a second vehicle and driven a short distance to what he believes was a farm building. He could smell animal smells and hear sheep bleating.

He was taken into a room and pushed to the floor. He stated that he felt there were many people in this room and some came close to him and started to scream and shout at him. Rifles were cocked and a gun put to his head. These particular people didn't actually question him but simply tried to terrorise him with shouts and threats to kill him. He remained blindfolded throughout this period.

The verbal abuse and threats continued for quite a period of time with his captors accusing him of being a spy for Mossad, and then alternatively, an Englishman and an American. Notwithstanding that they had his French passport and press credentials, they continued to make these accusations towards him.

Although unaware of any sort of changeover, he began to realise that he was now being questioned by a different group of people. These questioners concentrated on the differences between Islam and Christianity and asked him many questions about the Bible and Jesus in particular. They became very angry when he said he believed that Jesus was the Son of God. They removed his blindfold and he could see he was seated in a small room, together with five or six men, all with their faces covered.

He was given some paper and a pen and asked to draw a map of France. He was then told to

pinpoint Paris, Lyon and Marseille on this map. An atlas was then produced and a comparison made with his handiwork. A child's French/Arabic text book was given to him with the Arabic words covered over and he was asked to translate the sentences.

The questioning continued over and over for the entire period of his captivity, with only short respites. He had difficulty in sleeping or relaxing.

At one stage, he said that he was questioned by a number of holy men, who again asked him about the Bible. They asked him so many questions and became very angry at his answers, that he became frightened to answer in case it wasn't what they wanted to hear.

Alex was detained for four-and-a-half days before being released. He is suffering from nervous exhaustion and stress. He also had to receive anti-histamine injections to combat the severe swelling of his face and arms due to insect bites.

Whilst in captivity he was fed basic food and given water (not bottled).

He was unaware he was going to be released until the last minute, when he was driven into Baghdad, again blindfolded, and set free.

Returning again to Ivan, the cameraman: He, on the other hand, was blindfolded at the scene and marched a short distance, before being placed into a vehicle and driven around for approx 20 minutes (his guess).

He also stated that he was held in a rural area, as he could hear lots of sheep. He was taken into a room and the occupants all appeared to be shouting at him at once. He too was accused of being an Israeli spy and an American. Ivan was questioned for approx 19 hours by various groups of people including some clerics. As with Alex, he was asked questions about Christianity and also asked what he thought about Islam. They wanted to know was Islam better than Christianity.

Approximately three hours before he was released by his captors, a holy man told him that he was being set free, claiming that Allah would be angry with them if he was killed. He stated that he would have to answer to Allah some day and have to explain his actions in this world.

Ivan was again blindfolded and taken to a point where he was placed into a taxi which brought him back to Baghdad.

It is not known if both persons were actually held in the same place. It is thought unlikely given the disparity in treatment of the two individuals. As stated previously, Alex was held captive for four-and-a-half days while Ivan spent 19 hours in captivity.

Both Alex and Ivan felt that, after the initial capture and period of detention, their captors didn't actually know what to do with them. However, in saying that, they questioned Alex for the entire period of his detention.

Alex also stated that at no time was he ever left unguarded and there was usually four guards present in the room at any time.

Incident no 2

This second incident relates to a middle-aged Greek woman whose family have been privately funding and delivering medical aid to the tune of \$2 million each year for the last 10 years to Iraq. She is the daughter of a wealthy Greek family and her husband and son are both doctors in Greece.

The lady in question, Helen Sotiriou, each year hires a truck, fills it with medical equipment and drugs, employs a driver and single-handedly organises and accompanies each delivery.

On April 11, she visited al-Kindi Hospital to talk with the staff there. This was shortly before 9 a.m. and whilst at the hospital, she was shown a patient with severe internal bleeding. She promptly told the staff that this gentleman needed blood transfusions very quickly or he would

die. She suggested they take some blood from his relatives who were sitting around his bed.

She departed the hospital at this juncture, intending to pay another call in Baghdad and, after having done so, she became concerned about the patient again and instructed the taxi driver to take her back to the hospital. Once there, she found that all the man's relatives had gone but no-one had given blood. At that, she rolled up her sleeve and instructed the medical staff to take her blood for the patient.

Having done so, she again left al-Kindi, intending to go to Baghdad centre. As they crossed Tamose bridge, she noticed a taxi with three men on board pull in behind her vehicle. Although having noticed the other vehicle, she said that it wasn't acting suspiciously in any way. This vehicle then overtook her taxi and sped ahead of them for a short distance before coming to a stop on the crown of the road about 100 metres ahead.

As her vehicle approached it, they had to slow right down and at that, two men armed with assault rifles and unmasked got out and came to her door, roughly dragged her from the back seat and forced her into the rear of their vehicle. Mrs Sotiriou's taxi driver was also put in beside her. They were both told to put their heads on their knees and not to talk.

I should point out at this stage that Helen Sotiriou is a remarkable lady. When she was put into the kidnappers' vehicle, she checked her watch. She said they drove for 25 minutes before travelling down a dirt road. They stopped on this road and a blindfold was placed over her eyes. She stated that she walked eight paces before reaching a metal gate which had to be opened. She then walked a further five paces before entering a room which was full of men, adding that she knew this by the male smell and the cigarette smoke.

Immediately upon entering this room, people started to scream and shout at them. She listened for a brief moment and suddenly shouted at the top of her voice for them to shut up. The room went quiet and she reached up and pulled her blindfold off. She could see up to 12 men in the room and many, many guns stacked around the walls. Her driver was on his knees in the middle of the floor.

When she did this, her captors hurriedly tried to cover their faces and someone grabbed her again and replaced the blindfold. She was put into a chair and her hands were bound.

They again started to shout at her in Arabic and the words "English" and "American" were screamed at her. At this point, she asked if anyone present could speak English but this only served to infuriate them further, with them again accusing her of being English.

As the advisor previously stated, Mrs Sotiriou is a remarkable woman and during her ordeal she displayed an amazing awareness of what was happening around her. She heard all the zips in her shoulder bag being opened and she knew by the sound that each zip made, exactly which pocket in the bag was being examined. (she demonstrated this to me). Consequently, when they again accused her of being English, she rounded on them and told them that they had just opened the pocket in her bag where her passport was and she assumed they had looked at the passport and they now knew she was a Greek national.

For some time, Mrs Sotiriou matched them shout for shout and kept asking that they should fetch someone who could speak English. Eventually, a man was brought to the room and she said that he could speak good English and sounded educated. She outlined again exactly who she was and what she was doing in Iraq and added that she had just given blood that morning in al-Kindi hospital to try to save an Iraqi life.

She asked to have the blindfold and restraints removed and after a short discussion with those in the room, her request was acceded to, by which time the occupants of the room had again covered their faces.

Undaunted, she again rounded on them, accusing them of being old women and suggesting they all should be wearing dresses. She demanded that the person who had taken her from her vehicle and had bruised her arm be brought to her, stating that she was probably old enough to be his mother.

Bearing in mind, that Mrs Sotiriou is a devout Christian, she took the initiative and attacked them verbally, accusing them of betraying Allah and all that was sacred in Islam. She added that Allah had watched their actions on that day and they would all have to answer to him.

Within a short time of making this statement, Mrs Sotiriou was told she was free to leave, to which she replied that she had no intention of going anywhere until they had got her a taxi. Mrs Sotiriou and her taxi driver were subsequently driven back to Baghdad and released. She had been detained for nine hours.

During her period of detention, she indicated to her captors that she was hungry and wished to eat an orange which was in her bag. This request was granted immediately.

Incident no 3

This third incident involved three members of the Czech Republic press. These gentlemen were being driven by an Iraqi driver from Baghdad to Amman on April 11, 2004.

As they were approaching Falluja on the main road, the driver indicated that he would have to make a detour to avoid an unseen checkpoint. He drove them straight into a Mujahadeen road stop, where he handed them over.

It is not known if this was a deliberate action or, when confronted with this predicament, he simply decided to try to save himself.

The three journalists were transferred into another vehicle and driven through the town centre, where people tried to open the car doors and banged on the windows and roof. Eventually they were blindfolded and driven at speed for approximately 40 minutes, on what one journalist described as a first class road/carriageway. He thought they might have been travelling up and down the same stretch of road.

They eventually arrived at their destination and were bundled into a room filled with people, all screaming and shouting at them and threatening to kill or burn them alive.

They were questioned by a number of men throughout the night, during which time they were fed biscuits and water. Significantly, they were all kept together and weren't separated at any time during their incarceration.

They knew they were in a rural area as each time they needed to use the toilet they were led outside to another building and could see all around them. They knew that they were close to Falluja as they could hear the sounds of battle and could see helicopters flying to and fro.

The following day, they were transferred to another location, where again they underwent intensive questioning. They were asked where they lived, details about family and backgrounds and inevitably, religion and Islam. It was suggested that they might wish to convert to Islam. They were held at this location for a further two days before being transferred to another location.

It was conveyed to them by their captors that the reasons for all the moves was in case the US discovered their whereabouts.

These people were held for six days before being released. During their period of incarceration they were fed biscuits and water, although on one occasion they received rice and meat. During one of the meals, a cleric noticed the guard giving them water and he remonstrated with him for not supplying bottled water.

They were also told by their guards that photographs of them had been shown on television and on another occasion, cigarettes were supplied to one of the captives who smoked and had asked for them.

All three journalists agree that the people guarding them appeared to be professional. They would have the prisoners assemble in the middle of the room, where they could watch them as they entered the room. They were always alert and had their weapons at the ready at all

times. The guards only remained in the room during questioning resulting in the captives being able to support and strengthen each other.

If you look at all three incidents, a number of facts are apparent:

1. They all appear opportune. Even Mrs Sotiriou didn't plan the journey from which she was taken. Her return to the hospital was purely a humanitarian whim.
2. In two of the incidents, there appears to have been collusion of sorts by (a) some Iraqi police and (b) an Iraqi taxi driver.
3. The questioning didn't appear structured in any way. The main thrust seems to have been to frighten and terrify.
4. All documentation was taken from the captives except money and a great play was made of examining and replacing same.
5. In all cases, a major topic of questioning was religion and the differences between Islam and Christianity.
6. They were all detained in rural areas, regardless of where they were captured.
7. The captors were willing to talk and in some cases showed a kindness and generosity.
8. Clerics or holy men were present at all but Mrs Sotiriou's interrogations.
9. All the captives felt that, after an initial period of captivity, those holding them gave the impression that they didn't know what to do with them next.
10. In all cases, the captors accused them of being either Israeli spies, English or American.

What can be learned from these three incidents, and how can personnel best protect themselves and enhance their potential for survival if they ever find themselves in a similar position?

The following actions have been tried and tested in many areas around the globe where hostage taking is prevalent and I feel that they apply to the situation in Iraq now as much as anywhere else in the world.

Conduct during capture

- * **Be aware of what is happening to you and around you at all times but especially during the initial capture.**
- * **Remember that the kidnapers will be high on adrenalin and nervous excitement.**
- * **Use Mrs Sotiriou as an example in remembering details.**
- * **Be the grey person.**
- * **Avoid eye contact unless you are spoken to and then look the questioner in the eye until you have finished talking. Avert your gaze when finished.**
- * **Do not antagonise the captors.**
- * **Answer strongly and if you have a strong local dialect, use it. If they can't make you out they will probably move on to someone else.**
- * **In the case of Iraq, do not declare that you don't believe in God. If asked whether you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, answer truthfully, bearing in mind that this will anger them, but they expect you to say this.**

*** Don't carry extraneous matter in your wallet. It only provides more topics on which to question you. Photographs of loved ones can be used against you.**

*** Do not volunteer information of any kind.**

*** Let them ask the questions.**

*** Never sign anything – no matter what.**

*** Be aware of self-induced pressures, i.e. fear, guilt, worry, failure, mistrust, boredom, loneliness, need for constant alertness.**

*** Be aware of system-induced pressures, i.e. atmosphere of ruthlessness, poor diet, confinement, enforced idleness, lack of sleep, segregation, lack of news, unaccustomed discipline, dislocation of expectations.**

When questioned:

Say nothing - bad idea

Speak freely - bad idea

Invent a lie - bad idea

Feign ignorance - bad idea

Feign forgetfulness - bad idea

Antagonise - bad idea

Argue - bad idea

Lose temper - bad idea

Appear frightened and confused - good idea

Don't show emotions or strengths - good idea

Answer slowly - good idea

Speak firmly, quietly and politely - good idea

Accept comforts if offered (no strings) - good idea

Make yourself as comfortable as possible - good idea

Remember that your captors also suffer from pressures, i.e. fear, strain of the kidnapping, lack of guidance, feeling of guilt, constant need to be alert.

If you suspect a rescue attempt is at hand, e.g. gunfire outside, stay away from windows and doors, go to ground, lie flat and keep hands visible

*** Expect rough treatment, don't fight back**

*** Follow all instructions without question**

*** Do nothing foolish**

In summary:

*** Do not sympathise with captors**

*** Do not antagonise captors**

*** Do not be a victim of self- or system-induced pressures**

*** Do not get frustrated with fellow hostages.**

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