

HOSTAGES TO FORTUNE



I had just done two interviews for BBC's lunchtime news in the space of 15 minutes. The first was in response to the Iraqi government's decision to release 3 prisoners, including one of the women whose release was a precondition of the release of Kenneth Bigley. The decision was made by their justice system, on grounds unrelated to Bigley's kidnapping. It gave rounds for hope, though, that Ken Bigley might be released; something at least for his family to hang on to.

When 'the World at One' came back to me 15 minutes later it was with news that the US Administration had over-ruled the decision. Rihab Taha, whom the US had dubbed 'Dr Germ', was not to be released. The announcement sounded more like a death sentence than a press statement.

Instantly, the standard mantra was repeated; you can't negotiate with terrorists. It is an absurd and stupid line. Throughout history internal wars and liberation struggles are resolved in such ways. Many of those now regarded as important national leaders were once the terrorists we were asked to revile. Nelson Mandela, Jomo Kenyata, Naser and Gandhi all came to respectability after being parts of movements that were denounced in their own, and our, press.

Don't jump to a hasty conclusion on this. Not for one moment do I think Abu Musab al-Zarqawi will ever rise beyond the brutality that has been his whole life. It is just that, in real life, governments do negotiate with the most unsavoury characters. Sometimes they are terrorists, sometimes they are national leaders. Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference. But negotiations take place to save people's lives.

Jack Hensley and his fellow American, Eugene Armstrong were ritually murdered because these negotiations did not take place. They leave behind families that will not forgive their governments for a line that never offered the prospect of safe release. My own line with the BBC was simple. I would rather have 3 free people than 2 prisoners and a dead man.

There is no guarantee that the deal would be honoured. It could have been a ploy; no more than a staged part of al-Zarqawi's cruelty on the road to a kill. But that is no reason to refuse to negotiate over Ken Bigley's release.

When Jack Straw came on television that evening, the Foreign Secretary said Britain was doing everything – everything it could – to secure his release, but that it was difficult to hold out much hope. The one thing he didn't say was whether Britain had asked Bush to release the two women prisoners. Since the war officially ended in Iraq no one even asks about the prisoners being held in detention by British, America or Iraqi authorities. Imprisonment without trial is taken for granted. Arbitrary detention and interrogation have become routine. Only occasionally do the details of torture or death in detention surface in the international press.

It is as though there are parallel universes that relate to kidnapping. Iraqi citizens who oppose the military occupation of their country can be detained by Coalition forces on whatever grounds they like. Obviously this can't be hostage taking because we're doing it. For Iraqi citizens, however, it looks like the same arbitrary hostage taking that we complain of.

Al-Zarqawi, however, is not just a hostage taker. He is brutal, cruel and has a record of arbitrary bombings that claim innocent civilian lives. If in the course of this, he can kill some of his enemies, so much the better. Coalition forces have concluded that al-Zarqawi and his followers are holed up somewhere in Fallujah. So, in return, we are now involved in arbitrary bombings of Fallujah that claim innocent civilian lives. If any of al-Zarqawi's followers are killed in the process, so much the better.

The on-going war in Iraq has become the nightmare many of us had predicted. It has given al-Zarqawi, and other al Qaida associated groups, a platform that they never had. On a daily basis they trade disrespect for human life with Coalition forces. They kidnap and kill our citizens. We bomb and maim theirs. They name the people they kidnap so they can negotiate something out of their release. We can't be bothered to name (or even count) the Iraqis we detain because they count for nothing.

One of the responses to my call to agree to release the 2 women prisoners in exchange for Ken Bigley's life was that, if we were to do so it would effectively declare an open season for hostage taking in Iraq . I couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. Iraq is already an open season for hostage taking. Millions of pounds have already changed hands as governments and companies have paid ransoms for the release of their citizens or employees.

Victims from Kuwait , Jordan , the Philippines , Turkey and the Lebanon have all been released as a result of such negotiations. The terms of release may have been the withdrawal of troops from Iraq or a refusal to trade. They may just have been old fashioned cash. If the Government does not want British civilians exposed to such risks, they must tell people not to go. The trouble is that the companies are all there for the money, and Iraqis know it.

There will come a point in this unfolding nightmare when Britain has to recognise that its presence in Iraq is part of the problem not the solution. January's elections in Iraq probably mark the 'leave by' date on our troop presence in their country. We have to be robust about this. Ayad Alawi may say that the troops are needed forever, but if he said anything else Bush would find him unacceptable as Iraq 's leader.

Removing British troops from Iraq is right in itself, but it may also have a wider significance. Just before starting this article I was contacted by journalists who had picked up on discussions between Bush and Ariel Sharon about the international agenda of a Bush second term. Rumour has it that the two are agreed that a strike against Iran has to be next. Both know that there would be no international support for this and that they would have to go it alone. It would be a disastrous venture, with repercussions well beyond the Middle East .

Britain can make this much harder by taking its troops out of Iraq quickly. First, it would force the US to tie up more of its own military resources in dealing with the mess it had already made. Second, it would allow Britain to sensibly realign itself.

It would not be acceptable for Britain to be neutral in a US–Israeli war on Iran . The real need would be for Britain to commit itself to a European initiative that was not only in opposition to such a war, but which was a pre-emptive 'peace strike' in the Middle East . None of this would please Sharon any more than it would please Bush, but maybe this is the area in which Europe can begin to discover its real role....as a peace broker not a war monger.

A second war in the Middle East would unleash a violence that al-Zarqawi could only dream of. To deny him this pleasure we must deny Bush the platform for another war.

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