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Into the Lions' Den

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Standing over the cell where American Roy Hallums was rescued Sept. 7, 2005 south of Baghdad, Iraq.

Your religion, nationality, politics, profession, fellowship with the local people or opinion on the war will not protect you from the threat of kidnapping in Iraq.

The safe recovery of American journalist Jill Carroll is the headline from Baghdad, and, for once, it's a good news story for once involving a kidnapping in Iraq. Kidnapping, however, most often has been one of the leading 'bad' news stories coming out of Iraq since the invasion and the media focus has been primarily on journalists and Westerners who have fallen victim to this terror.

American Nick Berg, an independent contractor who came to help in the reconstruction effort, was kidnapped and beheaded. Kidnappers executed Margaret Hassan, who was the director of an aid organization and had spent 25 years of her life helping impoverished Iraqis. Kidnappers also murdered Italian freelance journalist and Red Cross volunteer Enzo Baldoni. Guliana Sgrena, the Italian journalist whose vehicle was shot up on the way to the Baghdad airport after her release.

Even the most recent news involving the Coalition Forces' rescue of the three surviving members of the Christian Peacemaker Team, Briton Norman Kemper and Canadians

James Loney and Harmeet Sooden, was tempered by the roadside murder of their peer, Tom Fox, whose body was found only two weeks prior to their rescue.

Amid the narrow media focus on Westerners kidnapped in Iraq, the larger story is not being told. Exponentially more Iraqis and Arab Muslims have been kidnapped in Iraq than Westerners. Most of the foreigners taken hostage have been workers from neighboring countries assisting in Iraq's reconstruction. The vast majority of reported kidnappings in Iraq have been Arab Muslims, as many as 10-20 per day. As bad as it sounds, it was markedly worse during Saddam reign of terror from 1979 to 2003.

Between 350,000 and 500,000 people disappeared, equaling 40 to nearly 60 every day, but there was no free press to cover that story in Iraq unlike today.

Hostage takers in Iraq, like kidnapers elsewhere in the world, are motivated primarily by monetary gain. But in Iraq, ransoms are often used to finance the bloody insurgency that victimizes Iraqi civilians more than anyone else. Yet media outlets often implicitly, if not explicitly, portray kidnapers as freedom fighters struggling to "liberate" their country. They are nothing of the sort. The kidnapers are ruthless thugs who are destroying the lives of hundreds of families, Iraqi and foreign alike.

Saddam Hussein's amnesty decree signed in Oct 2002 just months prior to Coalition invasion, released 100,000 common-law criminals resulting in the surge of criminality, looting, carjacking and kidnapping for ransom following the military conflict.

Criminal and terrorist groups, not altruistic ideologues, spearhead the kidnapping industry in Iraq. The hostage takers often publicly make political demands in exchange for the release of Western hostages, such as *"the release of all the Iraqi prisoners or the withdrawal of Coalition troops from Iraq."*

The crippling flaw that many of the Western kidnap victims share is that they do not recognize that some men are more evil than others. They blame the war, the US or the Coalition for their kidnapping, not the fact that they put themselves in danger without taking appropriate steps to mitigate the risk.

Fox was against the invasion of Iraq and here to investigate the allegations of detainee abuse by US Soldiers. The representatives of CPT repeatedly told officials of the US Embassy that Fox would defend his kidnapers if *"soldiers with guns"* came to rescue him. His captors killed him by the time 'soldiers' rescued his peers.

Baldoni called himself a *"convinced pacifist."* But a spokesman for the Islamic Army of Iraq who claimed responsibility for his death recently said, "The Italian? He was a spy. It was clear to us from the beginning."

Hassan, was married to an Iraqi and a convert to Islam; she spent 25 years of her life helping impoverished Iraqis yet was shown no mercy by her kidnapers.

Sgrena alleged after her recovery that the "Americans" were trying to kill her order to prevent her from revealing information she claimed to have about U.S. conduct in Fallujah. Her claims continued even after a joint US-Italian investigation of the shooting absolved US soldiers at the checkpoint and found their use of force justifiable and appropriate.

On the day following the rescue, the CPT website described the hostages' rescue as a "release" and laid blame for the kidnapping on the Coalition, saying *"We believe the illegal occupation of Iraq by multinational forces is the root cause of the insecurity which led to this kidnapping and so much pain and suffering in Iraq today. The occupation must end."*

Many non-government organizations (NGOs) have been critical of the military "occupation," and the media has repeatedly lambasted the U.S. Administration for failing to provide troops with body armor and adequately armored vehicles as they patrol Iraq's dangerous streets. Ironically, many NGOs and bureau chiefs send their staff into the same lion's den with no more security than a local driver and translator in an unarmored vehicle on a hope and a prayer they won't be kidnapped or suffer a worse fate.

In every hostile environment, the enemy will single out soft targets. Kidnappers in Iraq are no different - they operate on the maxim *"When you are hungry, it is foolish to hunt a lion when there are plenty of sheep to be had."* No one is immune to the threat, and no one can afford not taking this grave security environment seriously.

Faith alone will not protect you here in Iraq as in the days of Babylon as it did for Daniel in the Old Testament. Individuals who do not take prudent and necessary steps to mitigate the risk will suffer the same fate of previous kidnap victims; yet, they do not pay the consequences when more lives must be put at-risk in harm's way to attempt rescue operations.

Dan O'Shea served as the Coordinator for the US Embassy Hostage Working Group (HWG) since the organization's founding in July of 2004. He departed Iraq the beginning of April after nearly two years of service.