

**STATEMENT BY JAMIE BOWDEN, DEPUTY HEAD OF MISSION, BRITISH EMBASSY, BAGHDAD
SEPTEMBER 2004-FEBRUARY 2005, ON THE KEN BIGLEY AND MARGARET HASSAN KIDNAP AND
MURDERS**

I was Deputy Head of Mission (DHM) at the British Embassy, Baghdad between the beginning of September (possibly the end of August) 2004 and the middle of February 2005. I was the Crisis Manager for the Ken Bigley kidnap between 16 September and approximately 5 October, when I departed Baghdad on a decompression break (Ken was murdered soon afterwards). I was Crisis Manager for the Margaret Hassan kidnap between 19 and 22 October, when a full time Crisis Manager was deployed from the FCO in London.

I have read papers dealing with both kidnaps covering the period from the seizing of the victims to my final departure from Baghdad. These consist mainly of COBR records and reports by police officers attached to the Embassy to provide expert assistance. Together they do not paint a complete picture and I have also relied on my memory. Over seven years after the events I cannot be certain that my memory is completely accurate. I doubt that I have covered every aspect of the Embassy's handling of the cases.

THE KEN BIGLEY KIDNAP

The Embassy was notified of the kidnap on the 16 September. I believe we received the news in the early afternoon. I do not recall who told us. Our assumption was that Ken had been kidnapped by criminals who would plan to sell him on to Al Qaeda.

My immediate action was to convene a crisis management group. I think the first meeting was only for people inside the Embassy: me (as Chair); officers from the Political, Press and Public Affairs (PPA), Defence, Management and Security Sections, and probably police officers. Subsequently the group was expanded to include the Headquarters of UK forces in Baghdad, UK Special Forces, and police officers deployed from the United Kingdom.

We joined the at least daily VTCs with COBR. I represented Baghdad at these, sometimes accompanied by military

The visiting police officers played a key role. They came from the Specialist Operations Branch of the Metropolitan Police. They arrived on 21 or 22 September. They gave expert advice on technical issues, incident handling and negotiation. Also central to our work was a UK Ministry of Defence police officer working from the US Embassy. He maintained a detailed overview of kidnaps in Baghdad and was our liaison with the Iraqi police.

The areas of activity that we focussed on were:

- The location of the hostages.
the police also contributed, for example by analysing videos of the hostages issued by the kidnappers.
- Media handling. This was central to our effort. I would assess that the proactive work of our PPA staff was more important than their reactive work of responding to press enquiries. They implemented a policy of careful public messaging about the victims, personalising them as much as possible to create public sympathy locally. Messages were also calibrated to create, in a way compatible with HMG's policies on dealing with terrorists, the most favourable environment for any contacts with the kidnappers. The PPA Section sought to exploit local and regional paper and electronic media and arranged leaflet distributions. They disseminated appeals by the victim's family and appeals and statements by third parties who might influence the kidnappers. The Embassy paid for some of this activity, eg the leaflet drops.
- Setting up a hot line for members of the public to call. This produced some apparent leads, but I don't think any of them proved to be valuable. I believe that in parallel there was a permanently established Iraqi police hot line.
- Speaking to other Embassies whose nationals had been kidnapped to seek out any similarities or lessons from which we could learn. I recall meeting Ambassadors in the Italian, Turkish and Jordanian Embassies and the DHM in the French Embassy.
- Liaising with the Americans. This was critical as they played the lead role in the early stages, while the US citizens who were kidnapped with Ken were still alive. Thereafter our links with them remained important given their security role in Baghdad and central Iraq and their own links with the Iraqi police.
- Maintaining contingency plans for getting an immediate decision from a Secretary of State in case a military operation was planned.
- Contingency planning for the reception of Ken should he be released and for recovering his body if he was murdered (on the assumption that it would be found).

An early demand of the kidnappers was the release of women prisoners. Our analysis at the time was that this was a red herring. No women were being held by UK forces and there were none in the detention facilities at Abu Gharaib or Umm Qasr. There were two female high value detainees, former officials in Saddam Hussein's regime. I cannot recall whether they were held by the Americans or Iraqis but we understood that the Iraqi authorities were reluctant to release them/sanction their release as a concession to terrorists. The possibility of their release coincident with a traditional Ramadan pardon was discussed.

The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) volunteered to help. They courageously came to Baghdad and met a number of leaders of the Sunni community inside the Green Zone. But they were unable to meet the key Muslim Ulema Council. The latter had insisted on any meeting happening in the Umm al Maarik mosque, which we assessed to be too dangerous to visit. The MCB were disappointed with this. They expressed considerable satisfaction with the role of the Embassy in their visit when they returned to the UK.

I can find little detail of contacts with him on the files and do not recall them myself.

The Iraq Institute for Peace (IIP), headed by the British Anglican cleric Canon Andrew White, volunteered to help.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE BIGLEY KIDNAPPING

Soon after the murder the Embassy and London conducted a lessons learned exercise. I contributed to this (and to the similar exercise after the Hassan kidnap). The conclusions:

1. Early reinforcement of the Embassy is essential. There needs to be a dedicated Crisis Management Team (CMT) leader. Police expertise is invaluable. It is better to deploy too many people too soon than the opposite.
2. Establish a properly resourced hot line early on. There is likely to be a high volume of calls. Those manning the line need to be able to cope with abuse. As well as people to answer the calls there needs to be a 24/7 capability to analyse the significance of calls. We considered that the minimum requirement was one Arabic speaking staff member and one UK based staff member on a 24/7 basis.
3. The media strategy should be aimed at influencing opinions of the wider population amongst whom the kidnappers operated. Early contact should be established with key media outlets.
4. Close liaison with the Americans was critical.
5. It was essential to work closely with the Iraqi police, despite their limited capacity. They could go to places that UK personnel could not.
6. Reliable secure communications were essential, both voice and video.

THE MARGARET HASSAN KIDNAP

There were a number of key differences between the Hassan and Bigley kidnaps:

- Margaret was a tri-national: British, Irish and Iraqi
- She was a long time resident, married to an Iraqi
- She had for many years been a humanitarian worker in Iraq and was well known locally
- In our response we had to co-ordinate closely with her employer, CARE International, and subsequently with Corporate Risk International (CRI), a private firm that CARE contracted to

advise them. I have a recollection also of meeting Kroll during the crisis, but I can find no reference to this in the written record.

The background to the kidnap was also particularly difficult. While Margaret was being held the Black Watch were redeployed from southern Iraq to Al Anbar, with much publicity, and in early November the Americans launched an assault on Fallujah.

I cannot recall our immediate action on receiving the news of Margaret's kidnap on 19 October but I assume I formed a CMT and convened a meeting. I was the Chargé d'Affaires at that time.

At the first COBR meeting we agreed that London would deploy a Crisis Manager, a consular officer and three officers from the Metropolitan Police. We also agreed that the British Government would adopt a low public profile.

Early in the kidnap we agreed that CARE would lead with advice and support from HMG. We would strive to present the kidnap as non-political and to localise and personalise the case as far as possible. I spoke to Jon Mitchell, CARE's regional director based in Amman, Jordan, and to Robert Glasser of CARE Australia (Margaret's employer) on 20 October.

Amongst our initial advice to CARE was:

- To establish a hot line in Iraq. DFID agreed to fund this. The IIP offered to man it.
- To mount a leafleting campaign. The Embassy PPA Section prepared the leaflets.
- To engage with Iraqi NGOs and religious figures.
- To highlight CARE's aid work.

Early on the Embassy established a close relationship with Margaret's husband, Tahsiin Hussein, and gave him advice on media handling. We also made contingency plans for Margaret's release.

For a relatively long period there were no lines of communication of any kind between HMG and the kidnappers. Nor did they make any specific demands. On 19 October Al Jazeera TV received a video of Margaret, but it had no sound. On 22 October they broadcast a second video demanding the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and specifically of UK troops from Al Anbar province (presumably a reference to the Black Watch). No deadlines were set and no channels of communication were offered.

In the absence of knowing who was holding Margaret it was difficult to judge which third parties' statements might make the most impact. Similarly we could not judge if MCB involvement would be helpful. I believe we advised the MCB not to become involved until things were clearer. We did approach the intermediary who was involved in the Bigley kidnap in case he could help.

In keeping with lesson learned (1) from the Ken Bigley kidnap (see above) from the FCO arrived in Baghdad on 22 October to take over as Crisis Manager. I cannot recall my exact role thereafter but I believe I attended the meetings of the CMT and represented Baghdad at some of the daily VTCs with COBR. As I recall, reported to me as Chargé d'Affaires. I do not remember if he continued to report to me after the Ambassador returned to Post or direct to the Ambassador.

On 27 October Al Jazeera broadcast a video demanding inter alia that CARE should close in Iraq. CARE had already ceased their Iraq operations and we advised them to announce this.

On 28 October an alleged intermediary approached the Embassy claiming that the kidnappers only wanted 'humanitarian support' for themselves and promised that Margaret would be released imminently. He never produced any evidence that he was in touch with the kidnappers.

We sought through the Italian authorities details of the case of two Italian citizens who had recently been released by Iraqi kidnappers. I do not know if we ever obtained them.

On 4 November Tahsiin received a call from the kidnappers saying that they wanted to speak to British or Irish officials. They said that they would call back. The Metropolitan Police gave Tahsiin training and briefing on handling any subsequent call. The following day the kidnappers called again and said that they wished to enter into negotiations. We agreed with CARE and Tahsiin that at the next contact he would ask for proof of life, determine a release date and discover the kidnappers' demands. I don't believe that there were any further calls.

On 10 November the British Ambassador in Qatar was shown a video by Al Jazeera which appeared to show the killing of Margaret. Forensic examination of the video by various UK agencies began soon afterwards.

At about the same time a female corpse was found in Fallujah and there was a consideration that it was Margaret's. The corpse was taken to the US for DNA testing and found not to be hers.

On 19 November the CMT discussed plans for repatriating Margaret's body in the expectation that it would be found. On the same day an individual approached the Embassy and claimed to be in touch with the kidnappers. He said that Margaret was still alive.

On 23 November an [redacted] claimed that a local family had been given a 'CD' showing the execution. However, [redacted] also claimed that Margaret was still alive. He said that the CD asked for \$-3-4,000 for the people of Fallujah. We did not change our assessment that Margaret was dead but did believe that [redacted] had seen the video of Margaret being murdered.

On 6 December I met Tahsiin. He told me that he had been the subject of an apparent kidnap attempt. I advised him to leave Baghdad, but he declined.

From this point we continued to work with the Iraqis in pursuing possible lines of enquiry. We continued to offer support to Tahsiin. The Embassy and Metropolitan Police prepared a sequence of events in the case.

I do not recall that the recovery of Margaret's body was a major focus of the Embassy's work in the period up to my departure in February.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE MARGARET HASSAN KIDNAPPING

1. The Metropolitan Police prepared a check list of information to be gathered during the golden hours (ie the first few hours after the kidnap).

2. An additional press officer and linguist/s should be deployed to the Embassy as quickly as possible.
3. The Embassy should have a system for designating an interim Crisis Manager, pending the arrival of one from London, in the event that the Ambassador is away and the DHM is Chargé d’Affaires.
4. Secure communications were essential. The secure telephone had been unreliable.
5. The Embassy would produce a matrix of which Iraqis might be able to play a helpful role with which groups in the event of another kidnap.
6. Sitreps and other reports needed to be consolidated.
7. The rotation of staff, including police, in theatre was too rapid. But it was noted that during the Bigley kidnapping some staff had come close to burning out.
8. CARE felt that we had not focussed enough on their and CRI’s role.
9. The Embassy needed the ability to contact the Iraqi police Major Crimes unit 24/7.
10. All police involved should be DV cleared .
11. In both the Bigley and Hassan cases the next of kin was not in the UK (Ken’s wife was in Thailand). The FCO should remind UK families that next of kin had primacy.
12. The question was asked whether we were sometimes unduly influenced by input from the victim’s families. For example did we spend too much time in the Bigley case focussing on the release of women prisoners because the family considered it important?
13. It was essential for a press officer to be present at all CMT meetings, given the PPA Section’s central role.

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