

Reporting Undercover in Syria

Susan Dabbous

Journalist; Author, *How Would You Like To Die? Diary of a Kidnapping in Syria*

Chair: Ruth Sherlock

Middle East Correspondent, *The Telegraph*

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Ruth Sherlock

Hi, everyone. We're here today to talk about the kidnap threat that's emerged in the Middle East, about the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the dramatic sweep, as you all know, through Iraq and through Syria in recent months. This group is now the sort of predominant threat to the West, the main threat in our time, if you like. Of course, the major problem is how do we deal with this problem. However, very few people actually know much about the organization. Who are ISIS? What motivates these fighters? What are these people like? So that's what we're hoping to address with Susan.

I'd like to introduce Susan Dabbous, she's the author of a book called *How Would You Like To Die?* Susan was kidnapped in Syria in April 2013. Her story is, I have to say, also a very personal one for both of us. Susan is a close friend of mine and we lived together in Beirut. I'm a reporter for *The Daily Telegraph*, I should say. Just before Susan was kidnapped, in the two weeks before she was kidnapped, my partner, who's another journalist, was also kidnapped in Syria. Susan nursed me through that terrible event, and so then you can imagine the nightmare when a week after he was released, we heard that Susan had disappeared in Syria.

She's one of the few people who has come into contact with these jihadists and has come out and has sort of known these jihadists intimately. So she can give a very rare insight into who these people are. So I'd like to start by saying, Susan: tell us a bit about how you were kidnapped. What happened?

Susan Dabbous

I was working as a freelancer for Italian media, usually as a writer/journalist, not TV. For the first time I entered Syria illegally from the Turkish border, with an Italian TV team. I was concerned, honestly, because I knew that as a woman, also with Syrian origins, covering with proper clothes, I was entering Syria very easily and not having problems – but with a TV team it's different, because you are working with a much higher profile and lots of people. We were four journalists and five Syrians who were working with us as a fixer, driver and translators.

So when we entered into Syria from the Turkish border, we wanted to cover the story of the civil society. We didn't go to the front line because we were not interested in that story. At that time the front line was Aleppo more than the region where we have been, which is on the west of Syria. We went to a small village called Ghassanieh, which is a Christian village. We were looking for stories about the integration between the Muslim and Christian communities under the war. We found a completely deserted village – no people, no civilians – only the priest was there, the priest and the FSA group. FSA is the Free Syrian Army, which we trust because as a journalist we used to deal with the Free Syrian Army very often to get in, to have protection.

So in the first hours in that village I felt okay because I found the FSA group and then the priest, but the priest was strange. He didn't want to talk with us. He spoke fluent Italian because he studied in Rome. He said, why should I talk with you, Italian media or whatever media – because he gave interviews to other media before. Maybe, I think, also English and British media. He said: I don't want to talk to you. If you want to know what is happening here, I will bring you to the church.

So he brought us to the church and we found a very terrible desecration, a recent desecration. We saw that it was recent because lots of signs were there, like a slaughtered dog, for example, who was still alive.

When we found that, I understood that we were in danger. I said, okay, something happened very recently and we're still here. But I didn't have enough time to realize what was happening because at that point I felt like in a sort of movie, but it was my real life that was becoming a nightmare slowly. I asked the priest: Father, who did this? He pointed a finger out of the door of the church and said: those guys. Those guys were a Jabhat al-Nusra group.

Ruth Sherlock

Jabhat al-Nusra was a branch of Al Qaeda in Syria. We should say that a large group of those people – in fact, in Susan's case, the people from Jabhat al-Nusra who kidnapped her then, whilst she was still inside, defected to ISIS, to join ISIS, when ISIS announced itself as an organization.

Susan Dabbous

Yes, we had been lucky enough to be kidnapped by Jabhat al-Nusra and unlucky enough to see how ISIS was born, because we were there. It was, I think, the 9th of April when they announced that we are not Jabhat al-Nusra anymore, we are the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. When I've been told this, I said: wow, this is such terrible news. Since the beginning when we have been kept, I thought they will move us to Iraq, because I was obsessed with the idea to be moved to Iraq. This was for a very reasonable reason, which was that Jabhat al-Nusra was born in Iraq with an Iraqi leader, who was al-Baghdadi –

Ruth Sherlock

ISIS was born in Iraq.

Susan Dabbous

Exactly, ISIS. Also Jabhat al-Nusra was born in Iraq, but then in Syria had a different leader called al-Joulani. That's why Nusra and ISIS now are split. But I knew that they were from Iraq because al-Nusra was the first group that introduced the suicide bombing attacks and all these things that were absolutely new in the Syrian riots and in the Syrian opposition.

Ruth Sherlock

These kidnapers, when they came to the church, can you tell us a bit about who these people – they came to the church and then they took you. You had little choice. There were a lot of men with guns, I understand, and you realized much more quickly than the rest of your Italian team what was happening.

Susan Dabbous

Yes, the Italian team was quite relaxed because they thought that they were Syrian opposition fighters. I understood they were not, they were Islamists. They had covered faces, for example. They had lots of Islamic symbols on their pickup. They were quiet, so they didn't approach us in a bad way, but the images control – they wanted to check all the images we had in our telephones and camera and tele-cameras – was too slow. It went on for three hours. Then they moved us from the church to their base and I was sure that we were kidnapped, not just temporarily arrested. But they tried to reassure us, saying now the leader will come and we'll release you, don't worry. You have just to stay here. But then they asked our driver to give the key of the car, so I said, this is a very bad sign.

As a woman, I was aware of the fact that my simple hijab, my scarf, was not enough. I was not completely covered with niqab. So I felt embarrassed. For example, also the fact that I was wearing jeans, trousers, was very bad to them, because you can see the shape of the woman. So I started to think how to disappear. Technically I was in the car, trying to hide, not to be there and looking at the shabab, the men.

Ruth Sherlock

You refused to be with the rest of your male colleagues.

Susan Dabbous

Exactly.

Ruth Sherlock

That was a brave thing. You separated yourself. You realized that this was a hardline jihadist group. These were not just Syrians, there was a mix of nationalities in the group.

Susan Dabbous

Yes, exactly. At the beginning the leaders who talked to us were Syrians, I could say from the accent. But it was also very evident that they were not Syrians from the colour of the skin, for example, and also it was very easy to see that most of them were from Northern Africa or Egypt or Gulf countries. This was quite evident. Another very evident thing was that they were very young. The age was between 16 and 20, 24.

Ruth Sherlock

You realized immediately how – could you tell us a bit about how they treated you and your colleagues? What were the strategies you used to survive?

Susan Dabbous

The first 12 hours were terrible. The first 12 hours were, first of all, the anxiety of what will happen, the fact that you have no idea and your life depends on them. You know that you are kidnapped so you are scared of being moved and being sold to other groups. The interrogation was very bad, was very tough. The leader of the group was particularly tough with me because I was born in Syria, so he asked why – you're Syrian, you don't speak good Arabic. I said, because I grew up in Italy and my mom is Italian. He said, is your mom Catholic? I didn't want to lie because my strategy was not to lie, to be sincere as much as I could, because I was very afraid of having to challenge even more problems if I would lie. So I said she didn't convert. I knew that for their culture and ideology a Muslim man like my father who doesn't oblige his wife to convert is a terrible moderate Muslim, and they hate moderate Muslims more than Christians or Jews. They are the first enemy, the moderate Muslims.

So I didn't lie, I said the truth, but he accused me to be a spy. Also the fact that we were Italian and we were with a priest gave them lots of big suspicions about the fact that the priest called the Vatican, the Vatican called the RAI (the Italian national TV), the RAI sent us to the church to film the desecration.

Ruth Sherlock

Which explains why the priest didn't want to talk to you at first, he was obviously terrified.

Susan Dabbous

Exactly. Sadly the priest was killed two months after we have been released. So they were very violent.

Ruth Sherlock

You were alone in a cell initially, you were separate from your male colleagues. You realized that perhaps your only strategy, the best way to keep safe, was to tell them that you wanted to learn more about Islam. Is that right? Tell us a bit about what did you do. Your conversations with Ayman, I think was the name of the leader, the emir – you had some pretty detailed conversations about Islam, about his interpretation and what was required of you as a woman according to this extremist view.

Susan Dabbous

Yes. I was saved by a book I had with me that was full of Arabic exercises that I was doing in school in Lebanon, so I could show that I was learning Arabic and I wanted to learn Arabic in order to learn the religion. The fact that I was a secular Muslim, it was the worst thing ever. So it means that to them I was born right and then I choose the wrong thing. So yes, I asked to learn about Islam, the religion. This was a good strategy for a while because they brought me to a woman, and this was my goal. I wanted to go in a women's environment, with other women, because I said okay, this is my destiny. I have to be in a prison, it's fine, but I want a female prison. I don't want to be with men because in the prison where I was they were torturing other hostages and other prisoners. I was the only woman so this was the most terrible thing to me. Being captured was okay, being a prisoner was okay, but I wanted to be in a safe place. So I've been brought to a woman and she introduced me to Islam – I mean, their superstition Islam they believe.

Ruth Sherlock

She was teaching you prayers and the number of times to pray every day.

Susan Dabbous

Yes, it was not just that. It was the approach they have to Islam, which is completely different compared to the traditional Islam that I knew through my Syrian family or my father who practiced Islam. He taught me lots of wonderful things about the peace, the message of peace, other things that are very far from the extremism.

Ruth Sherlock

The interesting thing about Miriam, the woman that you lived with, she was the wife of one of the fighters, one of the kidnapers. We sometimes, in terms of who are ISIS – this is not just a group of people who are uneducated, who have been somehow brainwashed. Miriam was Tunisian, she spoke fluent French, she'd been to university in Tunisia and she'd made the decision to follow her husband to live in Syria.

Susan Dabbous

Yes, exactly.

Ruth Sherlock

What do you think motivates somebody, somebody who is aware of the world, who studied, who's learned about different cultures – what motivated her to follow her husband to this place?

Susan Dabbous

First of all, Miriam was a Tunisian girl, 22 years old. So she was very young and she was recently married with her husband, who was a Tunisian fighter. I was very surprised at the beginning when we were speaking Arabic, because she couldn't remember her French. But then from one day to another, she remembered the French she learned at school. We started to have very fluent conversations in French because the Arabic was terrible for both, because she spoke Tunisian and I was speaking a sort of Syrian dialect, so we had no communication for a couple of days.

When we started talking, I knew more about her. She was a normal Tunisian girl from a small village very close to the Italian coast, very close to Sicily actually – it was more close to Sicily than Tunis. She attended university for a couple of years but also she told me: I'm concerned about my sister because she wants to go to university too but she wears niqab and she can't, because Tunisia is such a terrible secular country. She was talking about secularism as a terrible thing. She said: one day I hope the jihad will reach the point, and the point is to have an Islamic state where we can be free, we can feel free to be good Muslims. Good Muslims means also let women cover with niqab and not having any restrictions in living the religion their extremist way.

Ruth Sherlock

I think this is a good point perhaps to branch out slightly to look at today, the situation today. That is exactly what ISIS has been pushing for and now they control one-third of Iraq and most of Syria's oil resources. Incredibly powerful organization. We are posed with the problem that journalists and aid workers and Westerners entering these territories are disappearing. We've of course seen the recent killings of David Haines and Steven Sotloff and James Foley. What do you think – one of the major problems we're facing is how do you deal with kidnappings, how do you manage to rescue people. There's a whole strategy out there that is not at the moment clear, of how to manage these problems. One of the major discussions at the moment is should we be having a media blackout, what should the media be doing when one of its own people or Westerners are taken and beheaded in such a brutal fashion, as is happening. There are so many people inside those prisons, Syrians, Iraqis and Westerners, who may still meet that fate. Do you think somebody – when you were inside the prison – what are your thoughts on a media blackout, on how to manage this crisis?

Susan Dabbous

You mean when I was in the prison?

Ruth Sherlock

Yes, and since, now that you've had the opportunity to talk to lots of other people who were kidnapped.

Susan Dabbous

When I was in captivity I was sure that the Italian media were going to talk about our case. Actually I was counting the hours because I said, we have a Skype conference Thursday afternoon at four. We will not be reachable because we are kept and I said, within two or three hours it's going to be public, and this is exactly what happened. So yes, this is the case of the Italian media and I was sure of it.

In general, I think blackout is quite useful for the first, let's say, days or weeks, because it gives enough time for the government or who wants to deal with the kidnappers to reach them, to find a sort of contact or a mediator, which is the most important thing. Sometimes it's impossible to reach them, but with a Syrian mediator or other locals you can reach the kidnappers quite easily. For example, Syria is not a big country so it's quite easy through connections to get in touch with them.

After a while, I don't think media blackout can be particularly useful because it means that the strategy of the kidnappers is something more complicated than ransom or checking the identity of the people, the prisoners. Long media blackout could be very dangerous because they can relax too much, the governments, in case of negotiations.

Ruth Sherlock

There's no pressure on them.

Susan Dabbous

They have no pressure so they can tell the family: oh, trust me, we are doing all we can do, we are trying our best. And then maybe they are not doing enough.

Ruth Sherlock

This is something that I think Steven Sotloff's and also James Foley's parents have said recently, that they feel that they were abandoned. In some cases when the kidnappers actually tried to make contact with them the US government didn't intervene. It's an interesting point, perhaps, for discussions. I'd like to open it up to the floor a bit, if anybody has any questions.