



THE INVESTIGATIVE JOURNAL

TRUTH IN JOURNALISM

**KIDNAPPED BY
AL-QAEDA, JAILED
BY TURKEY:
JOURNALIST
LINDSEY SNELL
TELLS IT ALL**

—
Lindsey Snell

2019

Introduction

In July 2016, American video journalist Lindsey Snell was on one of her many trips to film in war-torn Syria when she was kidnapped and held hostage by al-Qaeda militants from within the increasingly dominant Nusra faction (now known as Hay'at Tahir al-Sham, or HTS). With the help of a militant from a different faction, she managed to escape across the border to Turkey. Here is her firsthand account and a look at HTS's proliferation in opposition-held Syria since then.

Ziad Ibrahim never expected to spend years in Kafr Halab, a quiet farming village on the Western outskirts of Aleppo. He considered himself a city dweller, having spent his life in a bustling quarter of Aleppo city before the country descended into civil war. A university student, he was one of many arrested by the Assad regime after attending a demonstration in 2012. He decided to

join the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with his brother once he was released.

In the early years of the war, Aleppo was the city most frequently bombed by the Assad regime. Seeking safety, Ibrahim moved to the Western countryside and joined an FSA faction called Jaish al-Mujahideen. "I wanted to come to this farming area with my family because it was safer. There was bombing, but not as much as in Aleppo," he said.

Kafr Halab wasn't safe for Ibrahim for long. In addition to intermittent bombings by the Assad regime, ISIS captured the area in 2013 and arrested him. When he was released days later, he returned to his faction, shaken but determined to fight both ISIS and the regime.

Jaish al-Mujahideen succeeded in forcing ISIS out of Kafr Halab in January 2014. The faction had help from the local al-Qaeda affiliate, then known as Jabhat al-Nusra. When Nusra formed in 2012, the group was welcomed by fledging FSA factions. "They were much more organized. They had better weapons. They seemed very good to us," Ibrahim recalls. "Many of my friends joined them... even some of my relatives. But they were too strict for me."

Nusra didn't become an official al-Qaeda branch until late 2013, but they were proponents of Sharia law from their inception, forbidding members to smoke or listen to secular music, two things Ibrahim was, and still is, particularly fond of.



They [HTS] seemed very good to us — many of my friends even joined them. But when they started attacking Free Syrian Army factions, it was horrible... we were supposed to be fighting the [Assad] regime together, but instead they were attacking us"

—Ziad Ibrahim, pictured (face obscured for security reasons)





FIGHTING SPIRIT: An FSA fighter near Aleppo city, April 2015; below right, stockpiled munitions self-made by the FSA



When I met Ibrahim while embedded with his faction in Kafr Halab in 2014, his commander introduced him as the “best shot in the group.” He was particularly skilled in the operation of the DShK, a Soviet heavy machine gun mounted on the back of a pickup truck.

I’ve made seven trips to Syria since, embedding with various FSA factions, the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units (YPG), and most recently (and involuntarily), Jabhat al-Nusra (now taken over by HTS). Of the dozens of FSA fighters I became acquainted with on my first trip, Ibrahim is one of few who hasn’t died, fled Syria or defected to al-Qaeda.

Since his arrest by the Assad regime and ISIS, Ibrahim says he has been arrested by HTS five times. The most recent arrest was in late January of this year. The arrest came just after HTS attacked Ibrahim’s last faction, Nour al-Din al-Zenki, virtually obliterating them, and gained

control of their territories in al-Atareb and Kafr Halab.

HTS held Ibrahim and a few other members of Nour al-Din al-Zenki for a few days. They kept his laptop when they released him. Even now, he is moving between the homes of various friends and relatives from day to day in an attempt to avoid being found and re-arrested.

Factions... and yet more factions

At one point, every group Ibrahim was a member of was closely allied with HTS. “But we started to realize [HTS] was bad as they became more powerful,” he explained. In March 2015, HTS and allied FSA factions stormed and captured Idlib, a city of great strategic importance, from Syrian Army forces. Idlib became the central base of operations for HTS, as it remains now.

But while HTS fought

alongside FSA factions when it was beneficial for them, they’d been strategically attacking other FSA groups for their own gains. “When they started attacking Free Syrian Army factions... it was horrible. We were supposed to be fighting the [Assad] regime together... but instead they were fighting us,” Ibrahim recalls.

The impetus for the attacks, according to HTS, was the support given by the US coalition to select FSA factions. Accepting Western aid made these groups *de facto* “agents of America,” and thus in opposition to al-Qaeda’s stated goal of ending secular, US-supported



REUTERS

UNDER HTS CONTROL: White Helmets workers selflessly struggle to rescue wounded people trapped under rubble — yet sadly, they are increasingly ruled by HTS

governments in the Middle East.

One of the first factions targeted by HTS was Harakat Hazm, a group based in al-Atareb, a town between Aleppo and Idlib. Hazm was given vehicles and heavy weapons by the US coalition, including TOW anti-tank missiles. HTS attempted to assassinate Hazm's commander in late 2014, gravely wounding him. The group looted Hazm's weapons stores and took their vehicles.

Hazm ultimately crumbled under HTS' attacks. Many of the Hazm militants defected to HTS. HTS has employed this strategy against many factions since. In January 2017, HTS succeeded in destroying the Jaish al-Mujahideen faction, previously an ally.

HTS and the White Helmets

HTS's growing power was incrementally obvious on each of my trips into opposition-held Syria. The group had always been a concern for having kidnapped several foreign journalists, but they were generally avoidable as recently as late 2015.

Then, in early 2016, HTS sent hundreds of militants to Aleppo city, purportedly to bolster opposition forces there as the Assad regime continued to close in on them.

On a trip to Aleppo city in late January 2016, it was clear it was no longer possible to report in the area without passing through HTS checkpoints.

I traveled from neighborhood to neighborhood in the backseat of my fixer's sedan, hiding my camera underneath my billowing black burka. I would hold my breath each time we approached an outpost with HTS's black flags flying.

Luckily, because I am a woman, looking at me for any length of time was considered forbidden by the Sharia law the group subscribed to, and my fixer was able to claim I was a female relative without arousing suspicion among the militants manning the checkpoints.

On my last trip to Syria in July 2016, the group had grown even more, particularly in the Western countryside of Aleppo, where I planned to travel. It was no longer enough to try to hide. The faction I was going to embed with, Thuwar al-Sham, sought and received HTS's permission for me to come and film — though not in any HTS official territory — before I arrived.

My first days in the country were no more harrowing than usual, with the exception of a night of heavy cluster bombing by the Russian Air Force on Kafr Halab. I filmed with the White Helmet rescue workers in Kafr Halab, although I was only allowed to conduct interviews with them at their station. The station's captain told me I would have to get HTS's permission to go on a rescue mission with them.

Even in Kafr Halab, technically the territory of an FSA faction, HTS was already the ultimate authority to the White Helmets. The White Helmets have sparked much controversy in the West,

flying

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I traveled in the back seat of my fixer's sedan, hiding my camera under my billowing black burka. I held my breath each time we approached an outpost with HTS's black flags flying”

illustrating the intense division present in most coverage of Syria. Journalists and outlets skewing supportive of the Syrian opposition generally praise the White Helmets as a wholly legitimate NGO and say they can't be held responsible for the bad actions of the armed groups in the areas they operate in. Journalists and outlets who tend to favor the Assad regime say the White Helmets are al Qaeda-aligned and that they fabricate rescues to film them and bilk gullible Westerners out of donations.

As one of the few foreign journalists able to spend time with various White Helmets groups as recently as 2016, I believe the reality is less black and white. The White Helmets are brave, devoted



UNDERCOVER: Lindsey — center, clad in a burka — filming in Aleppo, January 2016



TOOLS OF WAR: Militants near Kafr Halab; below left, the Nusra militant Lindsey interviewed in Kafr Halab, July 2016; below right, Thuwar al-Sham militants point out what they believe to be a Russian bomb



and selfless rescuers. They save lives, often at the cost of their own. However, as a group, they are completely under the control of whatever faction controls the areas in which they operate. Increasingly, this means they are under the control of HTS.

In early 2016, a White Helmet rescuer from Aleppo city told me that he was worried about the future of the group as a result of HTS's proliferation.

He said, "I'm scared it will be like it was in al-Bab, when ISIS took control. ISIS went to the White Helmets, and said, 'You can leave, or you can be with us.

You will move with us and do as we say.' HTS could do the same, and if they do, I will leave."

I decided not to pursue further permissions and got on with my work filming at a school and local hospitals.

I also filmed an interview with a member of HTS, a family friend of my fixer. He covered his face during the interview, afraid that HTS would punish him for speaking to an American journalist without permission. I asked if he had any qualms about joining an al-Qaeda affiliate. "No, not at all," he said.

When I asked about suicide

bombers — a method al-Qaeda is known for using — he bristled.

"They're not suicide bombers, that is not how we look at it. They are martyrs for the jihad. Not everyone can do it, even if they want to, the leadership has to agree. And they do not always die. I have a friend who has gone with a car bomb three times and he is still alive!"

I asked if it was true HTS had forbidden wedding parties and secular music. He said it was. "This is how people here want to live. You can talk to some civilians and find out how they feel living under HTS."

My kidnap and captivity

I didn't have the opportunity to interview any civilians, however, as a day later, I was kidnapped by a group of armed HTS militants. My captors made sure to grab my phone, my laptop and my cameras. The apparent leader of my capture — who was wearing a balaclava and smelled strongly of a flowery perfume — handed me a HTS balaclava and told me to use it to blindfold myself, since contact between unmarried men and women is forbidden by Sharia law. Of course, I placed the mask in such a way as to allow myself to see a bit.

The first house I was taken to was very simple and sparse. A few mattresses were scattered on the floor of the main room. A shelf held rocket-propelled grenades, and an HTS flag hung on the stone wall. I was told the group suspected I was a CIA agent and wanted to investigate me. I was assured then by my captors — as I would be several more times over the course of my abduction — that I would be released “in about three days.” My fixer and translator were allowed to stay at the house that first night, provided they slept outside.

A Tunisian HTS *emir* (leader) visited me the first night, apologizing profusely and promising I'd be released soon. He cited the other journalists who had been allowed to film in HTS-controlled areas before asking if I would like to come and have

dinner with him and his wife once I was released.

The next morning, one of the militants guarding me tried to escort me to the basement of the house. It had been converted into a makeshift prison cell, dark and dank with a steel door. I refused, and the man relented. The restrictions of Sharia law made my captivity in this house difficult for the men. They couldn't occupy the same space as me, which meant they were forced to spend all their time outside.

The German captor

The first few days I was guarded part of the time by a militant of Arab descent from Germany. He was the kindest of all my captors. He was holding my laptop, iPhone and cameras until they could be transferred to a leader in Idlib proper for inspection. Thankfully, the German decided to inspect the contents of my phone and computer before he was to pass them off. He brought them into the main room and, using a translation app on his phone, wrote something to the effect of, “How can you be Muslim and have these horrible pictures on your phone and computer?”

Then, with a condemnatory glare, he proceeded to cycle through nude photos exchanged between my then-partner and I of ourselves. I struggled to explain the nuances of a long-distance marriage and failed.

I was amused and horrified in equal measure.



PURSUING EDUCATION AMID DANGER: Lindsey photographed students at a school in Aleppo city, July 2016

UNDERGROUND: Field hospital, nurse and injured militant near al-Altareb, July 2016



On one hand, the image of a bearded al-Qaeda militant pausing on pictures of genitals to glare at me and gesticulate wildly was undeniably funny. But I imagined the eventual consequences of a leader perusing my cache of dick picks would probably be far worse.

“Delete. Now. Fast,” the German wrote to me, dropping my computer and phone on a mattress and shaking his head in disgust. Had he not extended this kindness, I doubt I would have been granted the more lenient conditions later in my captivity that allowed me to eventually escape.

Things go from bad to worse

Things got much worse in the days that followed. The German militant disappeared, replaced by one of Saudi descent. The Saudi militant spent his first day guarding me by hanging large carpets on lines around the outside windows to safeguard against any men accidentally seeing me. Members of the Shura Council (a group of religious advisers called upon to make decisions on behalf of the group) came to see me and brought with them a translator of Chechen descent with fantastic English.

“This is an important time for us,” he told me. “We are about to make a big announcement about our future.” The announcement was the claim that the group had officially split off from al-Qaeda (with, it should be noted, full blessings from al-Qaeda’s umbrella leadership.)

The group renamed themselves Jabhat Fateh al-Sham for a time, and since then have been known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS.)

The translator echoed claims that I’d be released quickly. “And we can help you with your reporting. Of course, there is a protocol. And though you had our permission, your friends did not follow the protocol.”

According to him, all footage filmed in HTS-controlled areas had to be approved by the group’s leadership prior to publication. To enforce this, HTS required journalists to use cameras they provided, and were only allowed to film in areas they dictated. They also had to relinquish their cameras and memory cards immediately after shooting.

I asked the translator if he knew an American journalist who’d been living in HTS’s territory for years at that point. He smiled. “Of course. He is a very good man.”

I asked, “So every video he publishes has been

vetted by you guys?”

He replied, “Of course. There is no other way.” He reached into his pocket and produced my iPhone. Black tape covered the front and back cameras and audio receiver. “I have a couple questions for you,” he said. He pulled up a photo I’d taken at a YPG (Kurdish forces) checkpoint near Afrin, Syria.

“You were with the YPG?” he asked.

“Yes. A few months ago,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said. “It’s fine, you’re a journalist, I know. They just wanted to ask about this.”

The translator promised they’d be back soon, and said he hoped he’d be bearing good news. Unsurprisingly, this was the last time I saw the Shura Council.

On the move...

The next morning, the leader who was present during my initial capture came again, once more balaclava-clad and emanating a flowery perfume. He called a translator and handed the phone to me. The man told me I would be moved to stay with a family. I

begged the translator to ask him to let me stay where I was and to let me see my fixer. The translator told me without even asking the leader that these requests would be denied. “Just be calm,” he said, sounding somewhat apologetic.

A new Ford pickup truck pulled up to collect me. (I assumed it had been pilfered from one of the US-backed factions that HTS had attacked and looted.) Three Turkish militants directed me into the back seat, separating me from the man directly next to me with a couch cushion.

Again, I was made to blindfold myself with the balaclava, and again, I could see. I was so disoriented and exhausted that I couldn’t gauge how much time or distance slipped away on the trip. The Turkish militants blasted HTS *nasbeeds* (Islamic songs) and joked with each other.

As we passed through villages, I was able to identify flags of several different FSA factions posted at checkpoints. I noticed that nearly every FSA faction checkpoint was followed by a HTS outpost. It became clear — and this is even more true today — that the FSA factions controlled the opposition territories where their flags flew in name only. In reality, however, HTS controlled everything.

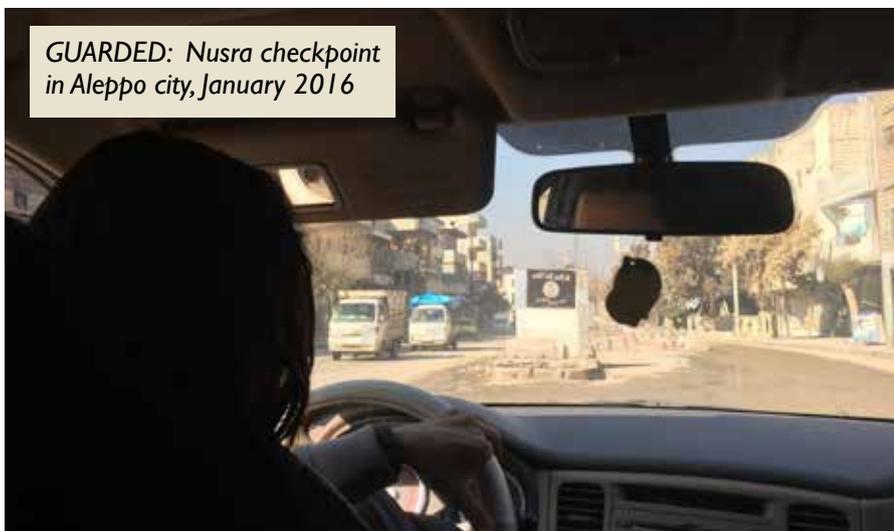


I knew then I wasn’t being taken to a family home... a terrifying scenario entered my mind as I remembered reading about a Japanese journalist who had been in HTS captivity for years ”

I knew then I wasn’t going to be taken to a family home. I started speculating about where I’d end up. I thought it might be another safe house, a strategic move to ensure that none of my contacts in Syria would know where I was.

A terrifying scenario entered my mind. I remembered reading about a Japanese journalist who had been in HTS captivity for years. As negotiations over his ransom stalled, HTS leadership intimated that they might decide to trade him to ISIS for one of their prisoners.

Based on every experience I had had with al-Qaeda in Syria, I strongly believed they wouldn’t physically harm me. In ISIS captivity, however — as has been



GUARDED: Nusra checkpoint in Aleppo city, January 2016

the case with every foreign woman they've captured — I'd almost certainly be made a sex slave to a sadistic leader.

"No... give me to Daesh?" I asked the militant next to me in bad Arabic. He laughed and repeated my question to the militants in the front seat, who all laughed. I relaxed.

The young fighter in the passenger seat turned around and waved his hands. "No... no Daesh. HTS."

After a while, we were no longer passing villages. We drove toward a giant rock formation next to a lake. A red-headed man on a moped passed the truck, and the militant in the passenger seat pointed and said, "Chechen!" in awe. (This made sense, as Chechens are among the most revered and powerful in the group.)

After climbing the winding road on the rock formation, we pulled up to a prison. I was received by a young man who spoke good English and who escorted me to a solitary confinement cell in a long row of such cells. I could hear men talking in their cells, some

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My cell had a thin mattress lining the floor, a toilet hole, a jug of water, and a wall covered in hashmarks to track the days in captivity... the hashmarks were drawn in blood”

moaning and pleading.

My cell was big enough for the thin mattress lining the floor. There was a toilet hole, a jug of water for said toilet hole, and a wall covered in hashmarks, clearly meant to track days in captivity. The hashmarks were drawn in blood.

Hostage reality

The moment I was in HTS's hands, I tried to force myself

come to terms with the reality of my situation. America doesn't pay ransoms for US citizens kidnapped by designated terrorist groups.

The last American kidnapped by HTS was held for more than two years before Qatar finally paid his ransom. I told myself I could handle languishing for two years in a cement hole and tried to get used to my new home.

A different militant, this one wearing a balaclava, opened the slot on my cell door and passed me a bowl of beans and a slab of flatbread. "Salaam brother," I said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but do you think you could find me a Quran?"

"I will ask for this," he said. Sometime later, the young man who had received me brought a strange packet of papers to my cell. "We don't have a Quran in English," he explained. "But I have asked the brothers to bring it for you. For now, you can read this."

The packet was seemingly a primer geared toward English-speaking recruits, filled with English phrases with Arabic translations underneath. One of them appeared to be a song. The



BORDER FORCES: Shami front militants in A'zaz, January 2016

ENDURING: An FSA militant with his son in an old madarassa (religious school) in Aleppo, 2016. The madarassa is still in use



lyrics were something like, “I don’t want to go back to London town, land of the Kafir (non-Muslims).”

Every time a guard would check on me, they looked surprised. I think they expected I’d be sobbing in my cell, and they seemed taken aback as I sat on my mattress, smiling. I knew I’d fare far better with a tranquil, friendly demeanor.

The next morning, the man who’d received me came to get me from my cell, first passing me a proper blindfold and instructing me to put it on. He led me through the prison using a long stick — he held one end and I the other — to make sure contact was absolutely avoided.

I was then taken to a conference room. “The leader will come today to speak with you,” my captor said before disappearing.

Someone else brought me a tray of food. A tub of halva, juice and bread — niceties I’m certain the average al-Qaeda captive was not afforded.

After several hours, the “sheikh,” as the leader was referred to, appeared. He had two translators with him. One of his translators now had my iPhone. I thought back to the German militant’s favor to me and was flooded with relief.

This relief was short-lived, however, because the sheikh didn’t need nude photos to question my faith and motivations for being in Syria. The translator opened my photos and scrolled to one of me reporting in Aleppo a year earlier. “Trousers!” he said, disgusted. “How can you call yourself a Muslim if you are wearing trousers?”

The line of question continued in this petty, absurd direction, until the translator asked what I would do if they let me go. I told them that I would want to stay in Syria with them, if they would allow it.

This seemed to be the only safe answer, considering the group’s core ideology is essentially that everyone who wasn’t one of them was an apostate. My goal was to get them to trust me as much as possible, so that I would eventually be allowed out of this hellish prison into a less-secure environment where I could find a way to reach out to some of my contacts and plot my escape. This happened much faster than I’d expected.

“You would give up your journalism?” he asked, noting that women in al-Qaeda territory were not permitted to work. I nodded.



DEATH TOLL: A young man, 20, mourns his friend, 18, who was killed by a Russian cluster bomb in Kafr Halb, July 2016. A year later, the 20-year-old was himself killed in the same way

He relayed this to the sheikh, who responded with a proposal. He said if I were truly a Muslim, I would want to help the *mujabideen*. They needed money. I could let them kidnap me, and hold me until a ransom

was paid. Then, they would split the money with me, and I could take my share and use it to live in Syria with them. I agreed, on the condition that they move me from the prison to a house with sisters. The sheikh agreed to this, and shortly after, I was moved to house with a group of women and their children.

With the jihadi women

After my eventual release, I spoke with a hostage survival consultant who told me the group offered this same “deal” to a German woman they’d been holding captive. She refused.

I was then taken to a secluded home in an SUV with two women and a few children. There were five women in the house at any time; luckily, one, who called herself Haifa, spoke some English. She was pregnant. There were about a dozen children, the youngest a newborn

and the oldest a 13-year-old boy.

As we spent more time together, the children would come to me to cuddle and play. Only the 13-year-old seemed to realize that I was more than a typical house guest. They were all well-groomed and physically healthy, but much of what I observed was alarming. For example, the older boys would play a game consisting of pelting each other with enormous rocks until one was too injured to go on as their mothers looked on.

I asked Haifa what the 13-year-old boy wanted to be when he grew up. “He will be *mujabideen*,” she said, proudly. She asked the boy in Arabic, and he nodded. I asked about the boy’s younger brother, and Haifa grinned. “Of course, he will also be *mujabideen*. All of our boys will be.” Only the boys are allowed to go to school. The girls of elementary education age stayed home.

One day after the boys left,



Haifa and her sisters were true believers, as devoted to what they considered their ‘holy war’ as their husbands who actually fought in it”



SULTAN OF SWOON: HTS leader Mohammed al-Julani



A few days into my time as a hostage with the women, HTS leader Mohammed al-Julani appeared on camera. The women swooned, gushing about how beautiful and inspiring he was”

I sat with Haifa and her 8- or 9-year-old daughter on the front porch. “Will she learn to read?” I asked.

“Sure,” she said. “But later. And I will teach her. She doesn’t need to go to school.”

Haifa herself was university-educated and had worked as an engineer prior to the revolution. “It’s better this way,” she said, patting her pregnant belly. “Women should be home, and with the children. Men should work. Before, under Assad, we had no choice. We needed the money.”

I was deeply fascinated by Haifa’s trajectory from middle-class professional to wife of an al-Qaeda leader, and spent many hours asking her questions. She told me how her village in Hama celebrated when the Twin Towers fell on 9/11. (I’d heard many iterations of this story in every Middle Eastern country I’ve reported from.)

Haifa and her sisters were true believers, as devoted to what they considered their “holy war” as their husbands who actually fought in it. A few days into my time with them the HTS leader, Mohammed al-Julani, appeared on camera for the first time. The women swooned, gushing about how beautiful they thought he was and how inspiring his words were to them.

I was bored and quite vocal about it. The women seemed to realize it would be easier for them to keep me occupied. They started to trust me more, and negotiated with their husbands, the al-Qaeda leaders, to grant me more privileges.

First, they allowed me to type into the translation app on Haifa’s phone as a means of

communication, but only while she sat next to me. I used the app to try to guilt her into cutting me some more slack.

“I agreed to let you keep me here, and I want to stay. So why can’t I have my phone back? I want to read books.”

This led to the men agreeing to let me use one of the wives’ phones. They stipulated that I remain under their constant supervision, and that all of my messaging apps and GPS should be disabled and password-protected.

Plotting my escape

In a house full of young children, however, keeping a watchful eye on me was not always possible. After using the phone to read news websites several times in the woman’s presence, she had to walk away from me to tend to a child. I quickly created a Gmail account, wrote to my then-partner in New York, and logged out and wiped the browser history before the woman returned to check on me.

Over the next few days, I was able to communicate with my partner this way. I discovered that the FBI had already sent a task force to New York, and they were with him daily. They began to communicate to me through him.

But this wasn’t the first time the agency had taken an interest in my endeavors in the Middle East. After one of my first trips to Syria in 2014, a friend had contacted me to tell me that his friend,

a New York City FBI agent, wanted to know if I'd be willing to meet with them. I reluctantly agreed, subsequently meeting two agents for coffee near my office in Midtown Manhattan.

"Thanks for meeting us," one of them said. "We were interested to talk to you, because you're going places we can't."

The questions they asked were broad and superficial. They wanted to know about the groups I was with and those I'd seen. They asked if I'd encountered Hezbollah, which seemed odd to me, as one with the vaguest overview of the situation in opposition-held Syria would know that it would have been impossible for me to encounter a group fighting in support of the Assad regime.

I mentioned an interview I'd filmed with a Saudi ISIS member captured by the FSA, and agreed to email the agents a transcript of the interview after it was published. But the agents never responded to my email, and I assumed our communication was over.

In March 2015, I decided to move to Istanbul. I was at JFK, trying to calm my dog as we passed through the security checkpoint, when

the two agents I'd met for coffee accosted me.

"Hi Lindsey," one said. "Remember us?"

I was stunned. The agents spirited me to an empty room in the Air France lounge. "We thought you were dodging us," one told me. "We called you a couple times."

"I never answer my phone," I responded. "But I would've answered an email. Why didn't you just email me?"

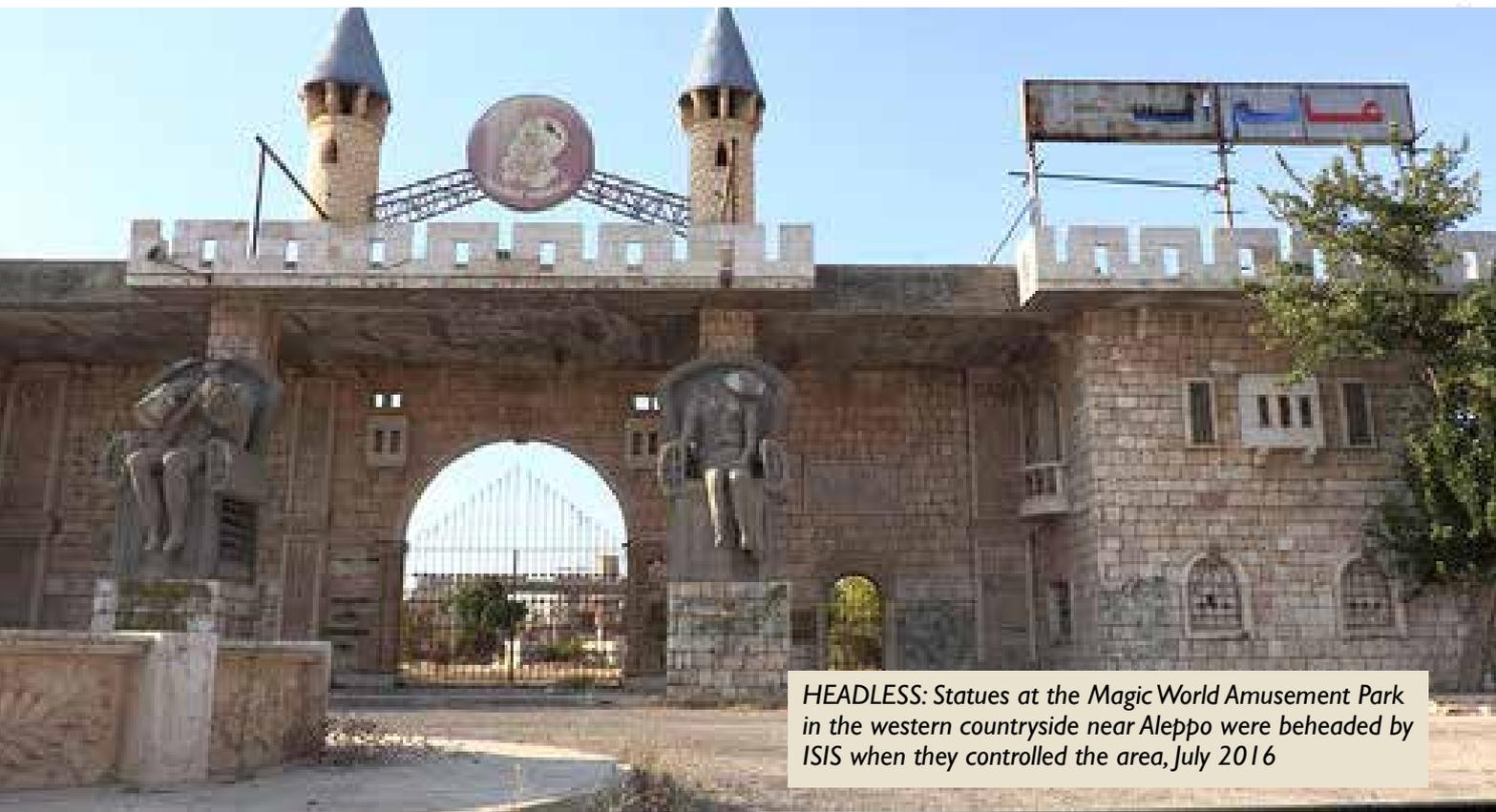
"I guess I didn't think about that," he responded. The line of questioning was the same as it had been previously. I was completely candid and told them I would continue to work in Syria.

As my boarding time drew near, I asked them if I could leave to catch my flight.

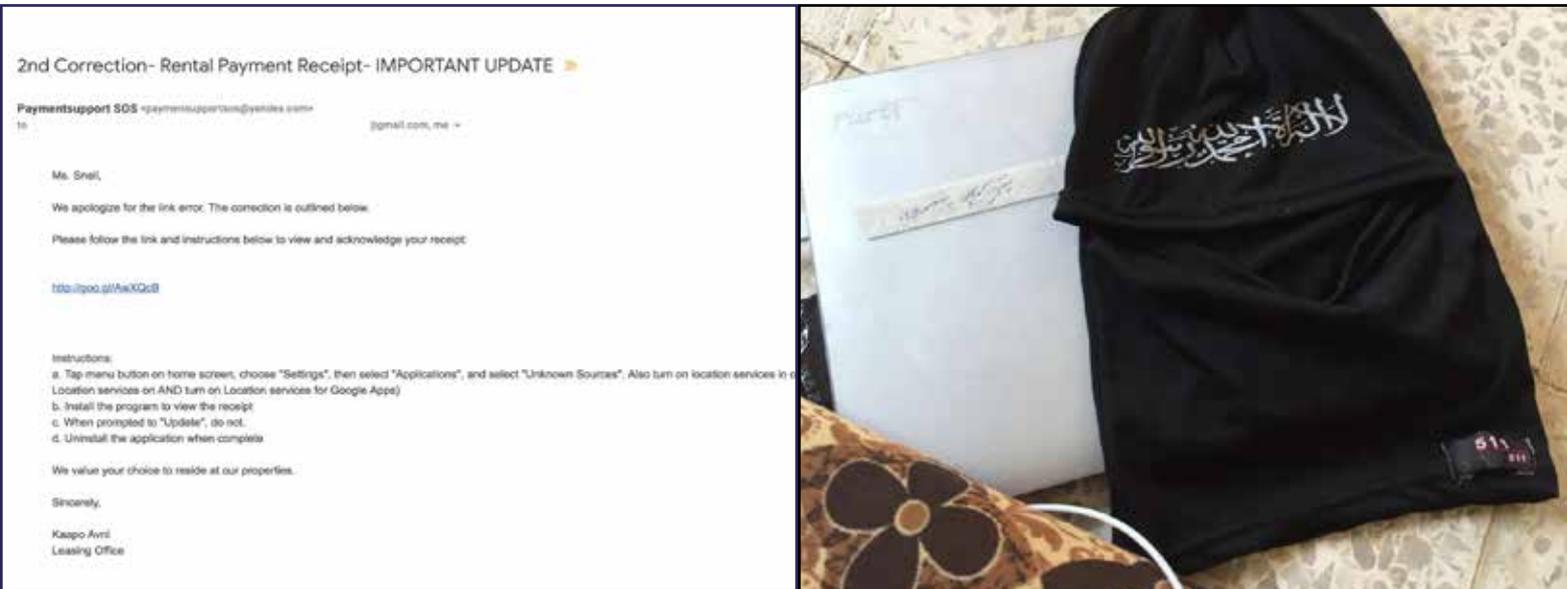
"Don't worry," one agent said. "The flight won't be taking off without you."

When they escorted me to the gate, the airline attendant nodded at them. The level of orchestration infuriated me. I was perfectly willing to communicate with them. Why go to such lengths to blindsides me?

So, kidnapped or not, I wasn't exactly thrilled to be forced to deal with the FBI once again after recalling this experience.



HEADLESS: Statues at the Magic World Amusement Park in the western countryside near Aleppo were beheaded by ISIS when they controlled the area, July 2016



ESCAPE HATCHED: Above left, The Yandex email containing the app; right, the Nusra balaclava used as a blindfold and Lindsey's laptop

Shortly after I'd succeeded in contacting my then-partner, an FBI agent went to my apartment in Istanbul to take my hard drives and computers. My pet-sitter, who was there in the apartment at the time, refused to allow them entry. When I was able to access a phone again and learned of this, I was appalled. The FBI apologized and promised to stay away from my residence, but they told me there was something they needed me to do. They said they would try to rescue me, but they needed to be sure they could track my movements.

They demanded I install an app on the phone I was using. It was sent in an email, disguised as a request for a "rent payment" (because certainly, al-Qaeda would be concerned with me paying my rent on time!).

To my amazement, the email was sent from Yandex, a known Russian cybersecurity firm. It was addressed to several email addresses

I had used at one point, including email addresses attached to former employers. The FBI said the app was necessary to help them track me in the event I was moved again.

"Why?" I had asked. "The men have come twice to swap the phones their wives are using. So you won't even be tracking my movements."

At this point, I'd even managed to enable

GPS on the phone, get the coordinates of my location, and send these to them. The FBI insisted, intimating through my then-partner that they might consider my refusal a belligerent act.

When I was alone with the phone again, I succumbed to the pressure and added the hidden app to the phone according to instructions they'd sent me separately. Almost immediately, the screen froze and the device became noticeably warm. And then, one of the women came to take it back from me. My heart pounded as I watched her try to unlock the screen. When she wasn't able to get it to work, she handed the phone to the 13-year-old and asked him what was wrong with it.

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To my amazement, the email was from Yandex, a known Russian cybersecurity firm, and sent to email addresses I had used at one point. The FBI said the app was necessary to help them track me if I was moved again”

I quickly grabbed the phone from him and flipped it over to try to remove the battery and pretend to fix the issue. “This happens sometimes,” I said, nonchalantly shrugging.

Later, when I relayed this to the FBI, they said they needed to send another app. They promised this one would work. I was desperate and terrified, so again, I installed it. Again, the phone was inoperable.

The FBI said they’d certainly get it right on the third attempt. I told them there was no way in hell I’d be making a third attempt.

“You’re going to get me killed with this amateur-hour bullshit,” I said. “One of the men could come take this phone at any time. What happens to me if someone with technical knowledge finds a f**king spy app on their phone?”

Turkey and the FBI Two-Step

Finally, they relented. I didn’t expect the US to rescue me from Syria. In fact, I correctly suspected

that their interference would only complicate my escape. After a few more days passed, a box containing my camera, computer and phone was brought to me.

“We are trusting you,” one of the women wrote in her translator app. “You must not use this to speak to anyone. You must not disrupt the plan.”

Thus, with my phone and contacts back in my hands, I was able to reach a friend in Turkey who tapped his friend in nearby Kafr Nabl. His friend was a member of Ahrar al-Sham, an Islamist-



WAITING GAME: A young Syrian boy waits to cross the border to Turkey, February 2016. The regime bombarded the northern countryside of Aleppo, causing thousands to flee for Turkey. Turkey sealed the border. Lindsey was trapped for three weeks in the border area with them

leaning FSA faction that, at the time, was closely allied with HTS.

Despite this, the man agreed to help me. They formulated a simple escape plan. I’d have to run out to the road, jump on the back of his motorbike, and ride to safety. The plan worked, but it was the most terrifying thing I’ve ever experienced.

When I was finally away from my captors and hidden in relative safety with my rescuer and his lovely, selfless wife, I caught up with the FBI. I soon learned that the US government sent two helicopters and US special forces to Gaziantep, a Turkish city close to the Syrian border.

Interestingly, the helicopters were only sent after I’d successfully escaped my captors. They had no apparent plan to land said helicopters, and US special forces never actually crossed into Syria.

On my first night away from my captors, the FBI asked me to ask my rescuer where they could land a helicopter. Ahrar al-Sham, and the member who rescued me, are staunchly anti-American; when

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The FBI said they would get the app right on the third attempt. I said, ‘You’re going to get me killed with this amateur bullshit! One of the men could take this phone at any time. What happens if they find a f*ing spy app on their phone?’”**



EN ROUTE: Road signs outside Aleppo, July 2016

I mentioned the FBI's request to him, he laughed, brandished his AK-47, and said he'd go outside and wait for the helicopter himself. By now, I'd grown tired of this back and forth with the FBI, and informed them I'd be getting out on my own.

My rescuer took me to a smuggler. I planned to follow the smuggler's instructions to cross the border to Turkey with him the following morning. But I was now close enough to the Turkish border to get cell reception, and this meant I was getting calls from an unknown American operative across the border in Turkey. He told me he was working with the Turkish government.

The US operative demanded I cross at a certain point. The smuggler understandably wanted no part in this operation, so I was left on my own, walking aimlessly through al-Qaeda territory. At one

point, the US operative realized his map had been inaccurate and he was off by dozens of kilometers. This went on for hours.

Spying accusations

Finally, Turkish soldiers crossed into Syria to escort me into Turkey. I was arrested by Turkish soldiers soon after crossing the border, and thrown into Turkish prison for two months, accused of being a CIA agent.

A few weeks earlier, there had been a violent coup attempt in Turkey, and initially, Turkish president Erdogan blamed the involvement of the CIA on the uprising. Unfortunately for me, I'd crossed into Syria from Turkey mere hours before the coup attempt began. The optics were bad.

Turkey argued that the US wouldn't go to such lengths to

try to rescue a civilian. But when a US consular representative visiting me in a Turkish prison asked me if I'd be willing to let the FBI come and debrief me — while in prison, accused of being a CIA agent — it seemed plausible that the U.S. government was allocating such resources in an attempt to yield intelligence more than to help one of their citizens.

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My rescuer took me to a smuggler, but I was now close enough to the border to get cell reception”

flying

A SHELL OF ITS FORMER SELF:
Aleppo city, April 2015;
Inset: Sadly ironic, posters
proclaim the city's reconstruction
efforts are "On the right track,"
Aleppo, January 2016



Aftermath

In 2019, Ziad Ibrahim has little hope left for Syria. He will continue to fight, he says, but the futility has become apparent. His friend, Mohammad Assah, feels the same way.

Assah is a 28-year-old schoolteacher and gym attendant in al-Atareb. He's watched the control of his town change hands repeatedly, but says recent times are the worst. At his school, he notices fewer and fewer girls attending classes. "And the girls who do come are wearing *niqab* [the full facial veil]. At eight years old, they are wearing *niqab*. It is wrong," he says. In his neighborhood, he never sees a woman out without a *niqab* these days. HTS won't allow it.

"For the ones who want to, it's fine. Some want to. But some were wearing just *hijab* [a head covering] before, and now because HTS is here, they are forced to wear the *niqab*."

At the gym where Assah works, HTS has imposed "taxes" on his and other businesses. He

says: "They come by and demand money from all of us. And we are barely surviving before they do this. No other groups did this to us — it is just them. And they aren't even Syrians."

While the vast majority of HTS militants are Syrian, locals in the areas the group controls say they mostly see foreigners running things. "The ones we see in control, out in the streets, are Turkish, Afghan, Chechen... and many are from North Africa," he says.

Assah has another reason to hate HTS: during one of many civilian demonstrations against HTS's oppressive rule in October 2018, HTS militants shot and killed his brother and his cousin.

Assah says many of the civilians in the areas under HTS's control would prefer the Assad regime regain the territories. "The freedoms are more under Assad," he says. "But to me, they are the same. HTS and Assad are both terrorists. They're both killing the people." [TJ](#)



LINDSEY SNELL

Lindsey Snell (pictured) is a print and video journalist specializing in conflict and humanitarian crises. She has produced documentary-style videos for MSNBC, VICE, Vocativ, ABC News, Ozy, Yahoo News, and Discovery Digital Networks. Her print work has appeared in *Foreign Policy*, the *Daily Beast*, *al Araby* and others. One of her pieces, on Aleppo schools hit by airstrikes, won an Edward R. Murrow award in 2016.

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