

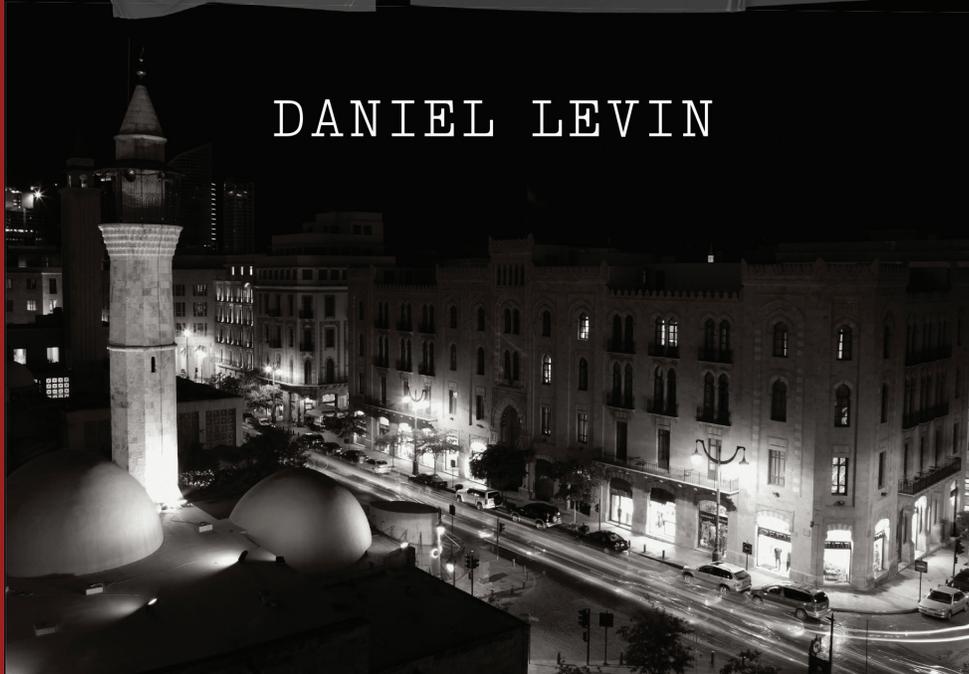
A
BOOK CLUB KIT

"Truly thrilling." —Daniel Kahneman, bestselling author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

TWENTY DAYS ON THE
HUNT FOR A MISSING PERSON
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

PROOF
OF LIFE

DANIEL LEVIN



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

When I received a cryptic request from an acquaintance in late 2014, asking me for an urgent meeting in Paris, my first instinct was to decline. I assumed that if it had been about something uplifting, he would have spelled it out. But I showed up, more out of curiosity than a sense of duty. And then, when I learned what was behind his request, I instantly knew that I should have listened to my initial instinct: My acquaintance asked me to find a young man who had gone missing in Syria. He had heard that I had been involved in other hostage negotiations in Syria and hoped that I could help. Thus started the twenty most harrowing days of my life.

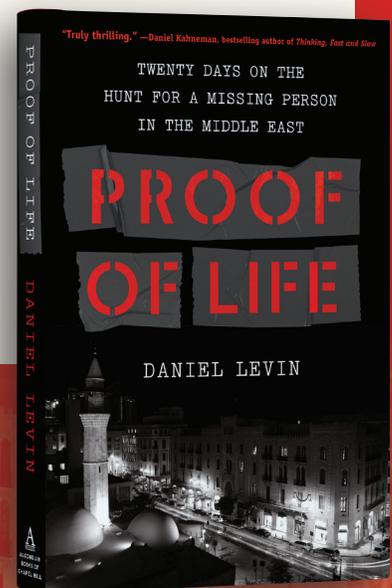
My hunt throughout the Middle East forced me to deal, face to face, with militia leaders, drug lords, and human traffickers, and to navigate intricate networks of favors and counterfavors, as I chased the one individual who held the vital information about the missing person. Over the course of these days, I encountered two teenage sisters, who had been taken from their villages in Syria and trafficked into the Gulf, and helped them escape to new lives with new identities in Europe.

Please come with me on this journey. I promise you, it will touch you and change your life in ways you cannot imagine, just as it changed mine forever.

Thank you,

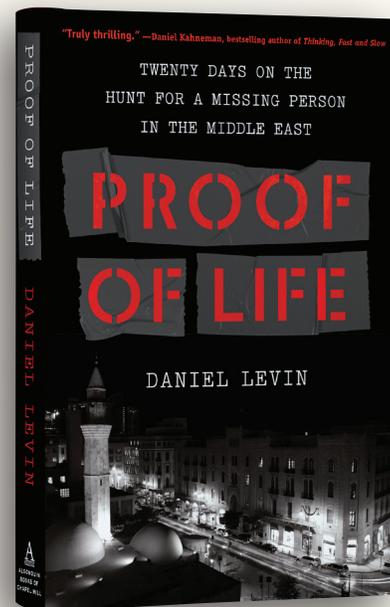


Daniel Levin



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *PROOF OF LIFE*

1. This book is filled with complicated characters with complicated motives. Who do you think acts entirely selflessly? Why? And are those who do act selflessly more likely to be struck down, i.e., is selfishness a prerequisite to survive in a war zone?
2. Paul Blocher's government would not step in to help find him. He clearly made a mistake in entering a dangerous war zone. What, if any, is the obligation of a government to its citizens in these instances? Should it matter if a person entered a war zone without being sent by a government? Should those who were particularly reckless be left to their own devices?
3. The author almost obsessively chronicles everything that happens during these twenty days. How does having this record help him when he negotiates with individuals?
4. The author refuses to take any money for this mission. How does he think that would compromise him? Do you agree?
5. In the book we learn that the war economy thrives on the trafficking of cash, drugs, weapons, and people. What role do global financial institutions play in hiding and laundering the huge war economy profits, and how should they be held responsible?
6. The author wants people to pay attention to the humanitarian disaster in Syria. Why do you think he wrote this book like a thriller? Did the book help you empathize with the war's victims, and did it motivate you to take any specific actions?
7. Do you think that Anas is a product of a failed state, or is he just plain evil? Do you think people can be inherently good or evil, or are most humans somewhere in between? Despite his cruelty, do you think he was clear-eyed about the way the world is run?
8. Were you surprised by the Sheikh's perceptions of U.S. politics and religion? Did you find him a cynic or an idealist?
9. Did the any of characters portrayed in the book alter your understanding of this part of the world? How so?
10. The author writes that this is "a story about loss and sadness, about violence and death, about unspeakable cruelty and greed . . . but it is also a story about courage, strength, and perseverance, about loyalty and wisdom." Where do you see kindness and hope in this book?
11. At the end of the book, we learn that Reem and her sister, Samar, as well as Loubna, made it out of Syria. Can that make us optimistic about the future, or is it too little to make a difference compared to all the suffering?



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IN CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL LEVIN

Why did you write this book?

First, because of a promise I made to a seventeen-year old young woman whose bravery in the face of tragedy was inspirational.

Second, because we have to stop ignoring the suffering caused by these forever wars, have to stop looking away. My goal was not the usual “give voice to the forgotten ones,” because as soon as those stories end, they are forgotten again by most. Instead, I wanted to grab readers by the chin and force them to witness it all. Our societies are breaking apart because we no longer have the capacity to care, unless our own personal comfort or benefit is involved. We are completely detached from the immense pain caused by these wars, and we trivialize the victims’ anguish into light entertainment and assuage our guilt with token philanthropy.

Third, because there can be hope. Despite all the loss and all the agony, this book shows that there are good people everywhere, that the world is still full of light—except where we cast the shadows.

How did you get involved in this particular search?

I had been involved in several hostage and kidnapping searches and negotiations in Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Gaza, and I agreed to help a concerned friend find a young man who had gone missing. The request came on the heels of a recent professional failure that was still fresh and raw, so I was initially reluctant. The search took me to Istanbul, Beirut, Amman, and Dubai.

In the book you meet and have to obtain information from really brutal people—drug dealers, terrorists, money launderers, human traffickers. How did you keep your sanity during this period, and what are the tools of hostage negotiation?

I wrote down everything that happened to me. Both to keep things in my own story straight and to be

able to tell others later. That helped with my mental state.

Hostage negotiations require deep and wide relationship networks with individuals who are willing to engage through a web of favors and counterfavors. Without an effective method of collecting and cashing in such “chips” at opportune moments, it is virtually impossible to gather reliable information on a missing person, to separate the rumors (95-99 percent of the information) from the hard facts (1-5 percent of the information) and follow their trail. As a negotiator I try to enlist the help of a willing captor or guard to obtain proof of life. The ultimate goal is to negotiate the terms of release and secure the handover.

Throughout this story it’s impossible not to get caught up in the suspense, to wonder if you will succeed.

Each step is fraught with danger, and the slightest misstep can not only cause the entire mission to fail, but also have awful consequences for the missing person—anything from an untraceable relocation to execution. At every waking moment during those twenty days I was aware of the fact that any unanticipated or misjudged risk could endanger both me and the person I was looking for. At the same time, I had to avoid being paralyzed by fear and caution.

I was forced to deploy the tools of the trade—secrecy, manipulation, disguise, bluff and double bluff, threats (both vague and concrete), teasing of friendship, baits (both vague and concrete)—while never being able to offer payment or other forms of “tangible” consideration. (The official US policy of no negotiations with terrorists for hostages has created a cottage industry designed to circumvent this restriction).

That’s sounds very tense.

I had to live with the uncertainty of whether I was manipulating (playing) others or whether I was the one being manipulated (played). The worst mistake

I could make was to violate a negotiator's cardinal rule: never play the player.

You were alone, but you had a number of people who helped you along the way, too?

Yes, I was constantly reminded that even in the midst of war people act selflessly. I was helped by the wife of a kidnapper, a sheik who understood how the West worked way more astutely than I did, and a young woman, Reem, who had been abused and sold into prostitution and who still found ways to help me in my search. She gave me hope.

How does *Proof of Life* relate to the Syrian war?

During this time I was exposed to the most hideous aspects of the war economy that endlessly fuels these conflicts, such as the trade in cash and goods, including money laundering through global financial institutions; the trade in weapons, including chemical weapons and American-supplied artillery originally earmarked for opposition fighters; the trade in drugs, both those manufactured in Syria (Captagon) and those distributed through it; and most devastatingly, the trade in people—hostages, prisoners, and children, for labor and sex slavery. The young man I was looking for got caught up unknowingly in all of these bad elements.

The astronomical profits from all these illicit activities would not be possible without the willing, often enthusiastic support and participation of outside political and financial powers. If nothing else, the book will hopefully invalidate the excuse of many who profit financially and yet claim that the war economy's spoils are the result of "victimless" crimes ("Who really gets hurt when money is laundered?"). The horrors in these wars do not happen randomly and without reason; in fact, as in all wars, atrocities are fueled by power and greed. These are the core essentials of the war economy.

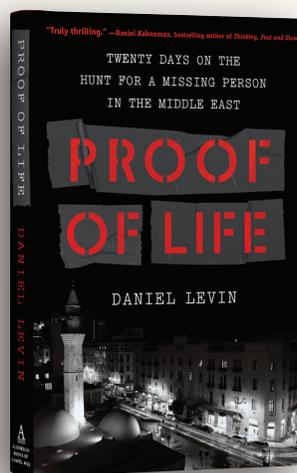
What is your background in the Middle East?

In the early years of the Arab Spring, I was critical of the West's blatant inability to see this tidal wave of social unrest coming, as well as its utter cluelessness in keeping up with these seismic social and political changes in countries that were considered "strategically important"—particularly in the Middle

East. I spoke both publically and privately with US members of Congress as well as officials in the Obama Administration, and published articles about the complete and unconscionable breakdown of development assistance. After I had written a number of articles highlighting the failures of Western diplomacy, I was asked by several governments and multilateral institutions to propose alternative solutions for the development of a new generation of social and political leaders in the war-ravaged countries of the Middle East. Much of this work was done in my capacity as an executive board member of the Liechtenstein Foundation for State Governance (www.lfsg.org), including our engagement in Syria starting in December 2011 following an explosion of violence after the troops of President Bashar al-Assad massacred unarmed protesters, including countless children.

How is Syria different from other Middle East conflicts, and how is it like all wars?

Of all the conflicts since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2010, the Syrian war is the most devastating and gruesome, not just in terms of the horrific number of victims and displaced refugees, but also considering the utter destruction of the country and its people. No other civil war of recent record, in the Middle East or beyond, has seen such systematic, regime-mandated executions, beatings, tortures, and rapes of women and children, often younger than ten years old. That is what I've tried to show by writing about these twenty days in *Proof of Life*. I pay tribute to some victims in the postscript of the book.



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HOW TO HELP

There are dozens of organizations carrying out humanitarian work in the Middle East. If you would like to get involved or learn more, the author recommends the following groups.

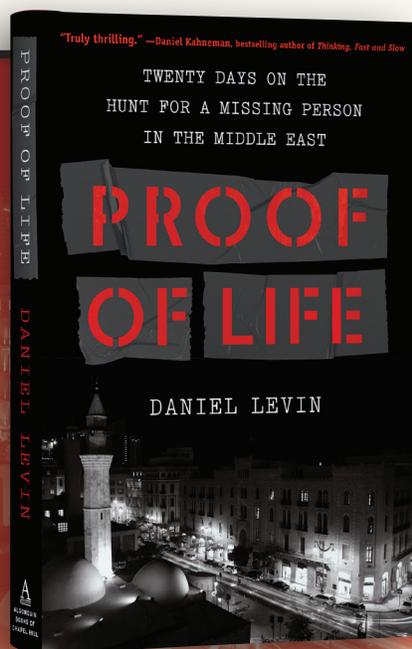
Alkarama (<https://www.alkarama.org/en>)—A Geneva-based, nongovernmental human rights organization that assists people subjected to, or at risk of, extrajudicial execution, enforced disappearance, torture, and arbitrary detention.

ALQST for Human Rights (<https://www.alqst.org/en>)—An independent NGO established by Saudi Arabian human rights defender Yahya Assiri for the purpose of defending and promoting human rights in Saudi Arabia.

Syrian Network for Human Rights (<https://sn4hr.org/>)—An independent human rights organization whose efforts include monitoring human rights violations in Syria, protecting the victim's rights, and raising awareness among Syrians of their civil and political rights.

Reporters Without Borders (<https://rsf.org/en>)—An independent NGO dedicated to the defense and promotion of freedom of information throughout the world.

Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (<https://catwinternational.org/>)—An international organizations working to end the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and girls by advocating for strong laws and policies, raising public awareness, and supporting survivor leadership.



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