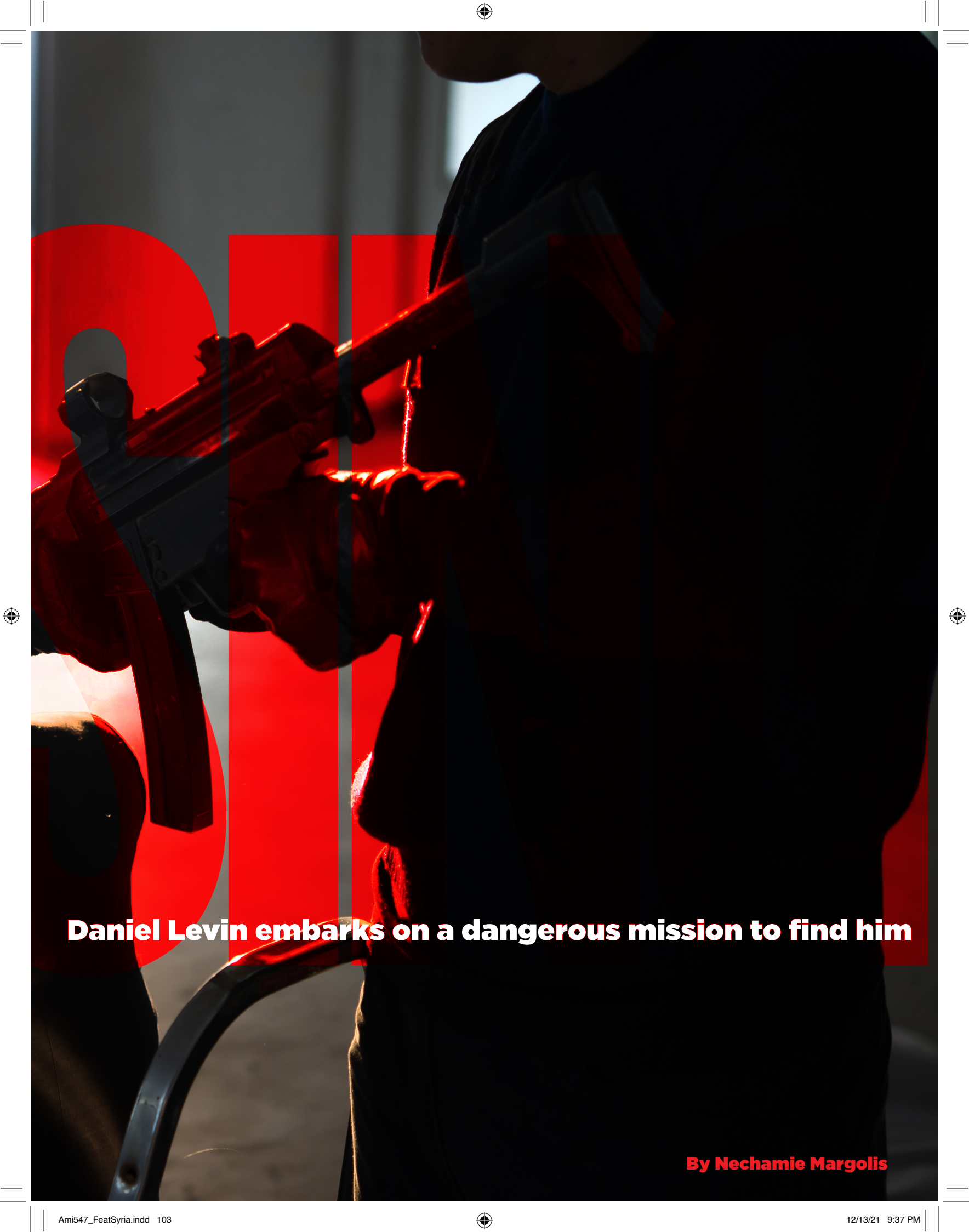


FEATURE

# WAR

**When a young man disappears in Syria,**



**Daniel Levin embarks on a dangerous mission to find him**

**By Nechamie Margolis**



he email slipped into Daniel Levin’s inbox while he slept. It was just one email among hundreds, but this one was different. It was from Huby Mazerius, an acquaintance of a mentor of Daniel’s who had always been kind and supportive.

*Please meet me in Paris. It’s a matter of life and death.*

Huby wasn’t a dramatic person, and Daniel was worried—and intrigued.

“I thought he was ill and wanted my advice about medical treatment, because there are other aspects of my life that deal with medicine,” Daniel said. “I was flying from my home in New York to Europe for work, so I arranged to stop in Paris on the way and meet him for dinner.”

## Disappeared

After dinner in Paris, Daniel and Huby went for a walk, making small talk until they reached the Eiffel Tower.

They sat silently on a bench for a few minutes, the space heavy with unspoken words. The lights on the tower glittered; the sky was inky black.

“I need help,” Huby said. “My friend’s son...” He broke down crying. “His son Paul disappeared. He was last seen crossing into Syria.”

Daniel froze. When people disappeared in Syria, it almost never ended well.

He immediately understood why Huby had approached him. It would not be the first time he had assisted in such a case. Daniel had served in the Israeli special forces, studied law, taught in Arabic, and eventually become a board member for the Liechtenstein Foundation for State Governance, using his extensive Middle Eastern contacts and cultural understanding to aid diplomatic and mediation efforts.

Daniel had worked on a project known by the code name “Bistar” for a number of years; its goal was to identify and prepare promising young Syrians for leadership



**Countless times, Daniel Levin had negotiated personally for the release of young men and women, doctors and journalists who disappeared during the violent Arab Spring.**

roles in postwar Syria. But the country was decimated now, and the project had been placed on indefinite hold. Because of the foundation's contacts in Syria, it fielded constant requests to help find missing aid workers, journalists, military advisers and the occasional adventure seeker.

Countless times, Daniel had negotiated personally for the release of young men and women, doctors and journalists who disappeared during the violent Arab Spring. Just a few months earlier, after weeks of negotiations, a hostage had been executed by a terrorist group days before the exchange was to be finalized. Traumatized, Daniel vowed he would never again take part in negotiations like those.

Yet here was his acquaintance, a grown man, sobbing.

"I'll make one phone call," Daniel told him. "But this is Syria we're talking about. There's a good chance that he's been kidnapped and killed. Even finding proof of life, that he was there at some point, would be a huge accomplishment."

Huby nodded somberly, his eyes glittering with tears. Daniel would later learn that Huby had practically raised Paul. Huby

himself had cultivated powerful government contacts over the years, but none could or would help him now.

Daniel was his last resort.

"I'll pay whatever you need," Huby said. "I'll cover your time and any expenses."

"No," Daniel told him. "I can't take money for anything. This needs to be done for purely humanitarian reasons. Money can't be mixed into any of the decisions I'll make."

### **One Phone Call**

The call that Daniel promised to make would be to his friend Khalid al-Marri, whom he had met by chance some 20 years earlier.

"I was in Qatar, in a hotel waiting to be picked up for an anti-corruption project with the government there," Daniel recalled. "Khalid was waiting to be picked up for a meeting of his own. We both ended up being stood up by our hosts. We were sitting in the lobby reading, and he noticed that by pure chance, we were reading the same book. He started talking to me, and we became really close friends over time. Khalid fled Saudi Arabia when he upset the king

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there, and he has really transcended where he came from. He has many connections in Syria, so I knew that if anyone had a lead on Paul, it would be him.”

As an influential adviser to the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, Khalid played a powerful behind-the-scenes role. He frequently visited Arab capitals and had direct access to the top levels of many groups in Syria.

Khalid sighed when he heard the story. “Oh, Daniel, *habibi*,” he said, “why do you always allow yourself to get dragged into such ugly stories? They almost never end well.”

“I know,” Daniel said. “But I feel like I have to do this. Will you help me?”

“Of course,” Khalid said. “Send me Paul’s picture.”

Huby immediately sent a picture. Daniel couldn’t stop staring at it. Those innocent blue eyes... He shuddered to think about the cruelty that had probably been inflicted on Paul.

Khalid called Daniel back a few days later. “The sheikh in Beirut is willing to share information. But I’m afraid it won’t be enough for me to ask the questions for you. He wants to meet you. Why don’t you come meet me in Istanbul and fly from there?”

Daniel paused. The sheikh was known to be brilliant, powerful...and ruthless. He was the leader of the largest militia group bent on Israel’s destruction. He also had access to ironclad sources of information. The thought of meeting him in person was terrifying.

Daniel had already done what he’d promised. He could walk away now and tell Huby that he’d done what he could. But Daniel felt his parents’ legacy looming over him.

### Family Legacy

As the son of a diplomat, Daniel had spent his early years in the Middle East and Africa, where he was exposed to many cultures, languages and religions.

“There are many things that have formed me, including the wonderful person I’m



married to, but certainly how I grew up had a big effect on me,” Daniel said. “I was born in Israel, and my father was from the founding generation. He would tell me stories about how he helped smuggle in Holocaust survivors from the ships that the British turned away. He was only a teenager when he left school to fight in the War of Independence. He was severely injured and left for dead on the battlefield, his left arm gone. There was even a death notice for him in the newspaper. Somehow my father recovered, and he never lost this idea of sacrificing for a larger context. That was something he always lived by. I admired that about him.

“At one point, there was a particular Israeli fighter who was killed abroad. My father made the arrangements to bring his remains home, and he was verbally attacked by members of his own circle because the fighter had been a member of a different political party. But my father’s view was that this was about bringing home a fallen soldier. You don’t mix politics into that. This deeply affected me and it became my life’s work as well, helping people without regard for their affiliation.

“My mother came from a religious fam-

ily in Berlin, and her great-uncle was Dr. Leo Deutschländer, who founded the first Bais Yaakov in Vilna and worked together with Sarah Schenirer. These are the people I look up to and aspire to be like one day.”

With the concept of *pidyon shvuyim* instilled in Daniel from childhood, and with the support of his wife and family, his decision was made. Daniel would meet with the sheikh.

### Beirut

Daniel traveled to Istanbul to meet Khalid and the sheikh’s right-hand man, Jamal, who would fly with him to Beirut. He had to fly blind, surrendering his passport and cellphone. Daniel had a Swiss passport that didn’t name Israel as his country of origin, but the risks were still significant. If his Israeli nationality came to light, he could be in serious danger.

“I was a little worried,” he said. “But I trusted Khalid. He had once helped save the sheikh’s life, when he was in danger for criticizing the king of Saudi Arabia. This was before he radicalized and became a leader in Lebanon. The sheikh owed his life to Khalid, and he never forgot it. He was doing this as a favor to him. But more than



**The sheikh was known to be brilliant, powerful...and ruthless. He was the leader of the largest militia group bent on Israel's destruction. He also had access to ironclad sources of information.**

anything, I knew Khalid wouldn't send me somewhere if there was a possibility of harm."

As the plane taxied to the terminal, two floodlights lit up a remote runway. "It gave the sense of an air force base preparing for the stealth landing of a jet returning from a clandestine mission," Daniel said. "Beirut permanently smacked of conspiracies and hidden dangers. Nothing had changed from the first time I'd set foot in this country many years earlier."

He said it was strange to be back in Beirut in a different capacity. He had last been there decades earlier, in an Israeli uniform. He also vividly remembered being stationed in the Golan Heights in 1990, when his unit arrested a Syrian army unit that had inadvertently crossed into Israeli territory.

"We kept them for a few hours while we awaited directions from the northern commander," Daniel said. "We served them coffee, and I talked to their commanding officer. It was a moment where you forgot the color of your uniforms and just connected with the person on a human level. I'm not trying to say that we should all be friends, hold hands and hum some songs. But it

was a formative experience. I think they realized the stark difference of what would have happened had the positions been reversed. Eventually, we got the directive to send them back to Syria."

Three years after that, Daniel bumped into the Syrian commander when he was sent to Cyprus by his law firm. The commander was accompanying his mother, who was getting medical treatment in Cyprus, and he and Daniel realized they were staying at the same hotel. They started talking and became good friends, keeping in touch over the next 30 years. "He's still in the army, and on several occasions he has risked his life to get a hostage out or help provide proof of life for a captive," Daniel said.

That close friendship aside, Beirut was a minefield for a Jew, particularly a former Israeli soldier. Daniel's meeting with the sheikh took place in a damp, musty room in an old building. After a 30-minute wait, the sheikh finally appeared with four armed guards. They exchanged pleasantries, and then the sheikh was silent for a minute that seemed to last an eternity. Finally, he turned to Daniel and gave him a faint nod.

"I see from your name that you come

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from a line of priests, correct?" the sheikh asked.

Daniel was taken completely by surprise.

"Levin' comes from Levi, Jacob's third son," the sheikh said. "From the tribe of Levi came the Levites who served in your Temple."

"Yes," Daniel confirmed. "Although to be precise, it was the Levites' job to serve the *kohen*, the priest."

Daniel wanted to take the words back even as they left his mouth. He had just corrected a sheikh! But after a long, agonizing pause, the sheikh moved on.

"Isn't it interesting how you Jews fail to recognize the threat of the eagle?" the sheikh asked. "The eagle was the dominant symbol of the Romans, a symbol of power and strength. The Nazis used the eagle. The Greeks had an eagle. But the most interesting thing of all is that you haven't noticed the biggest threat of all."

Daniel was quiet. He wasn't sure what the sheikh was talking about. What was the biggest threat of all?

"America," the sheikh said, as if reading his thoughts. "The biggest threat to the Jews comes from America. And if you knew your history, you would recognize the American eagle. That was your warning."

"How is America a threat to the Jews?" Daniel asked. "In no country have they been so accepted, so successful."

"Precisely," said the sheikh. "The threat comes from assimilation. The Jews are losing their identity, dwindling away, becoming Americans. In a few generations, that is what they will be—not Jews. And once again you Jews will miss the omen of the eagle."

The sheikh watched him carefully. "All we Arabs have to do is sit back and wait for you Jews to erase yourselves from history. The rockets that we deploy from time to time are just a sideshow, a little gift to the



journalists."

Daniel felt like he was having an out-of-body experience. This radical Muslim leader was completely, unnervingly in tune with the threat to American Jewry.

"I think he valued that I was proud of my Jewish identity," Daniel said later. "I was open about my Jewishness despite the danger."

At the end of a long and fascinating conversation, the sheikh gave Daniel what he had come for. "Based on our sources, Paul entered Syria through Turkey," he said. "He was in the company of a man named Anas. This person is the key to finding Paul."

## Dubai

Nobody was quite sure how Paul ended up in Syria. Perhaps he thought it would be an adventure, not realizing how gruesome and violent the war really was. But a little research turned up some facts about Anas. He was the leader of the biggest drug gang in Syria. They dealt in a dangerous amphetamine called Captagon, which was mass-produced in Syria. And they didn't limit themselves to drugs and weapons; they also traded people, selling them to the highest bidder.

Daniel had gone way beyond the promised phone call; he now had proof that Paul had crossed into Syria and had been captured by a notorious drug gang. But he couldn't back out. There was something about Paul's eyes and his innocence that kept pulling at him, compelling him to follow the trail.

Khalid told Daniel that Anas was due to be in Amman, Jordan. But it was Sukkos and travel time was limited, so by the time Daniel made it to Amman, Anas was gone.

"I met two members of his gang there," Daniel said. "They were extremely unsavory characters who tried to extort money from me in exchange for information. But one of them made a mistake and divulged that Anas had left for Dubai a few hours earlier."

Daniel's next step was to meet with Anas' ex-wife in Dubai. "She was extremely angry at him," Daniel said. "He behaved in the most terrible way to her and to their daughter. He's just this awful, hideous individual. His ex-wife told me about a club where Anas usually hangs out and warned me to be careful."

Daniel went to the club, but Anas wasn't there. Turning to leave, he saw a drunken



**“I have come across people who lost everything but still managed to hold on to their humanity, in brutal contrast to those who lost nothing but their humanity.”**

man dragging a young girl by the hair. Daniel couldn't watch silently. He hit the man, and the girl managed to slip away in the commotion. Daniel was escorted out of the club, exhausted and dispirited.

“All I wanted was to get out of that despicable club and go back to my hotel. I wanted to give up on finding Anas.”

He was standing in the taxi queue waiting for his turn when another young girl approached him. “Can I talk to you for a moment?” she asked.

“What is it?” he asked irritably; he just wanted to leave.

“I want to thank you,” she said softly. “You saved my sister.”

The girl's name was Reem, and her sister was Samar. Reem told Daniel the story of how the sisters had been taken from their Syrian village by the drug gang led by Anas, the same one that captured Paul. They and the others who were kidnapped were essentially turned into slaves, sold to the highest bidder. Daniel told her that he was looking for Anas, and she promised to help him by messaging him when Anas returned to the club.

“That was a huge risk for her,” Daniel said. “She would certainly be killed if

anyone found out. Reem could have just thanked me and moved on, but she was unbelievably courageous; she hadn't lost her humanity despite all that she had suffered. During this trip and in other hostage situations that I've dealt with, I have come across people who lost everything but still managed to hold on to their humanity, in brutal contrast to those who lost nothing but their humanity.”

### Meeting Anas

Daniel returned to his hotel to wait... and plan. He recalled Khalid's wise advice. “Don't be like a barking dog,” Khalid had said. “It barks and chases after the car. But what is its plan for when it actually catches the car? If you ever want to catch up with Anas, you had better plan the work and then work the plan.”

Those words made a strong impression on Daniel. He sat in the hotel, feverishly thinking of how he could possibly get the information he needed. “Anas didn't owe me anything,” Daniel said. “He was this huge, threatening individual, so I wouldn't be able to threaten him with anything. I couldn't offer him valuable information. I couldn't corrupt him. I couldn't give him

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money.”

When Reem’s text came with the message that Anas was back in town, Daniel still didn’t have a plan. Then he realized what his greatest weapon was—flattery. He would inflate Anas’ ego and trick him into bragging about his conquest.

Daniel sat at a table in a café opposite the club that Anas liked to frequent. Sure enough, Anas showed up.

“He was a huge caricature of a man,” Daniel said. “He was very imposing, with a terrible temper, threatening the waiters and screaming at them.”

Anas was wearing biker jeans and a black T-shirt with an incredibly bright spherical pattern in the center. Daniel couldn’t stop himself from staring, and Anas noticed.

“You like this shirt?” he asked, his voice loud and aggressive.

**“The gang leader was a huge caricature of a man, with huge muscles and veins popping out of his forehead... He was very imposing, with a terrible temper, threatening the waiters and screaming at them.”**

“Yes,” Daniel said. “I apologize for staring. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You have expensive taste,” Anas said, laughing. “This T-shirt set me back a few hundred thousand dollars. These are diamonds, man! Diamonds! My shirt cost more than a Lamborghini!”

It was the opening Daniel had been wait-

ing for. Anas invited him over to his table.

Daniel discreetly started recording their conversation on his phone, getting every word. A Saudi royal joined them, and he and Anas drank vodka like water, talking about the war and the drugs that were driving the war economy.

“They talked about the drugs and the innocent victims in the same tone you would use to describe what you’re having for dinner,” Daniel said. “The whole scene was agonizing and repulsive to witness. They became billionaires by trading people, drugs and medicine. When the United Nations distributes food and water to refugees, it goes through them. They control every aspect of this war.”

“I learned that there are no real sides to the war. The regime trades with the opposition. The opposition trades with the



militias. The militias trade with ISIS. And the victims are the devastated civilians, the innocent children.”

Daniel’s flattery paid off. Eventually, Anas couldn’t help but brag about the foolish Westerner who had ended up in his hands. He had been captured by Anas and sold to the Nusra fighters, a cruel militia group whose members delighted in doling out daily beatings, torture and starvation, ultimately executing their captives. They actually returned Paul to Anas when the Western world made it illegal to pay for a hostage release. As the driver sped back to Anas with Paul in the car, it flipped over.

“It really cracks me up,” Anas said. “This Paul comes to Syria, manages to survive in the nastiest war zone, and even survives captivity with Nusra, just to die in an ordinary car accident!”

Daniel felt his heart stop for a moment. Anas didn’t notice his change in demeanor and continued laughing as he scrolled through his phone. “Here,” he said, holding out his phone. “I have a picture of this Paul guy.”

Here was the irrefutable truth. There was no mistaking Paul’s wide-open blue eyes. Paul had died instantly and had been buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in Syria.

Daniel mumbled an excuse and left the table to find a taxi. The queue was empty, so there was no one to see the tears that streamed unchecked down his cheeks.

### Postscript

There was no reason to stay in Dubai. Daniel had his answer—proof of death. It was shattering news to give the family, but at least now that they had answers.

“Even when I get involved in negotiations with Hamas, it’s unfortunately very rarely for the sake of returning a prisoner or a hostage,” Daniel said. “It’s almost always for closure, to find out what happened and obtain the body for burial, if you’re lucky. It’s always heartbreaking. But in some of these

situations, the family can finally move on, sometimes after waiting decades to receive definitive information. It doesn’t bring back the lost ones and it doesn’t ease the pain, but there is some sort of closure. That is something they couldn’t have as long as there was the smallest bit of hope.”

Daniel returned home, but he couldn’t get Reem and Samar out of his mind. These young girls were close in age to his own two children. Reem’s voice rang in his ears. *You don’t need to thank me. But if you want to do anything for us, tell our story.*

So Daniel sat down and wrote a book called *Proof of Life*, detailing his harrowing journey, the story of a nation at war, and the economics of the trade of drugs and humans. But Daniel didn’t just tell their story. The Liechtenstein Foundation was able to save the two Syrian girls, bringing them to a safe country and registering them in school so that they could restart their lives. Daniel has stayed in touch with them.

“Reem just graduated law school,” he said. “They are thriving. People ask me why I do this kind of work when my stories so often end in heartbreak. These two girls are the reason. This is the kind of experience that shapes you on a deep level, deeper even than your own identity and background.”

There was one important detail that Daniel hadn’t previously shared: Paul was Jewish. Three weeks after Daniel returned home, Khalid helped him identify Paul’s burial spot in northern Syria. The body was exhumed and taken out of Syria for a proper burial.

“I had more tears in my eyes at that *levayah* than at any other,” Daniel said. Paul was finally at rest, and Daniel’s 20-day journey—from Paris to Istanbul to Beirut to Amman to Dubai—was finally over. ●

*Nechamie Margolis specializes in recording family histories and creating heirloom books. She can be reached at [info@writingthesoul.net](mailto:info@writingthesoul.net).*



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