



A Second Islamic State Is Emerging in Syria

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JR: Welcome to RiskHedge Radio. I'm your host Jonathan Roth coming to you from Vancouver on the beautiful but cold west coast of Canada.

My guest today is in Paris, France... a long way from the horrific and brutal prison cells he inhabited not that long ago. Theo Padnos is an American freelance journalist and author. In October of 2012, after entering Syria from Turkey with the intention of reporting on the Syrian conflict, Theo was kidnapped by men posing as former Free Syrian Army fighters. He would go on to be held in various prisons operated by Syrian rebels with ties to al-Qaeda and eventually the Sunni Islamist terrorist organization, al-Nusra Front. He was finally released from captivity in August of 2014 but came away with some very deep scars.

A new film has been made about his story titled, *Theo, Who Lived*. In the accompanying article, you can see the trailer and find out more information about how you can view this documentary.

Theo, thank you for joining me.

TP: Thank you for inviting me.

JR: First, Theo, why don't you tell me where it all began? Why were you in Syria and how did you get there?

TP: In October of 2012, I was a struggling freelance reporter... as I still am by the way. And I wanted to... I felt that since I had lived in Syria before... in Damascus from almost, like, 2007 to 2011. Really, for a period of years. I spoke Arabic; I had studied the Koran there; I felt I understood the religious tensions that were underlying this conflict better than the other reporters who were writing in English. And I said, "Alright, I have something to contribute here and I know I'm not going to get paid very much." I mean, I knew I was going to make like, a few hundred dollars but I didn't care. I wanted to, you know, shed light on this conflict and do something that I did—deploy the one skill that I had in life—which was analyzing this conflict, you know. I felt I could do it well, and I could help us all understand what was really at stake and why we should care and, you know, it seemed to be getting worse and worse and worse. I was just intrigued by the whole thing, and I had sources on both sides. And I've always gotten along really well with Syrians, like, they've always been so sweet to me, whether they're on the Mujaheen side or the rebel side. I mean, I was like, you know, they know I'm not a... I felt, they know I'm not a participant, so I'm not going to have any problems with these guys. And other reporters were going in, and they seemed to be having a nice time, and so off I went.

JR: So had you been to the region before? Give me some of the background of your experience.

TP: Well, I had... I started studying Arabic and Koran in Yemen in 2004. I stayed there 2005/2006. I was a reporter. I wrote a book about Yemen. And in 2007, I moved to Syria, and I studied Koran there and, you know, in Damascus before all the trouble. And I had no... I never had anybody being in the least bit aggressive or hostile to me. You know, people wanted to explain things to me, but nobody threatened me personally. I was in Syria at the very beginning of the violence in 2011. And later, I came back in the beginning of 2012, and at that point, I could feel the society, kind of, falling in on itself, like collapsing. The social contract was clearly fraying, and people were... you just felt, this society is falling apart. But even then, it was the beginning of 2012. I'm like, "They're not going to come get me." I went home that summer, and I came back in the fall and I went into Syria in the fall of 2012, and that's when I got in trouble.

JR: Okay, you just said that's when you got in trouble. Spell out for me what actually happened to you. How were you actually taken?

TP: What actually happened is I met some seemingly nice young men, who told me that they were, like, fixers for the Free Syrian Army or some kind of media, like, you know, they helped set up journalists from the West with... I wanted to interview doctors, for instance. I was interested in a vanished American journalist called Austin Tice, and they told me they could take me to some of the villages this guy had been in. I was interested in the Westerners who were fighting on behalf of the rebels, so I said, "Can you take me to some of the brigades in which the Westerners were fighting?" They said, "No problem, no problem." To everything I said, they said, "no problem." That should have been, you know, a red flag right there. There were many, many red flags that I did not pay attention to. I wanted to do my thing, and I felt that I understood the situation. Clearly, I didn't.

JR: This is on the Turkish side of the border, correct?

TP: That's right. I mean, I met these people in Turkey, and they said, "Okay, sure, no problem we'll take you down into Syria. We have a nice car, and we'll drive you around, and you can make all your interviews, and we'll drive you back in two days." So I got in the car with them. We ran through some olive groves. We got in another car on the Syrian side of the border. They drove me to a place called Jabil al-Zawiya... which is now like, it's a dangerous area in the northwestern part of Syria... which is now, sort of, under the control of al-Qaeda.

And anyway, we slept in an abandoned house the first night, my first night in Syria. These guys did not... they were very distant and, sort of, cold with me, which Syrians never are. And they didn't eat with me, which is another bad sign. We drove near some villages with the flag of the Islamic State. We drove, like, through these villages. At the entrance to these villages, there was that flag of the Islamic State that we know now as meaning ISIS. And at the time, it was the fall of 2012, it didn't mean ISIS. There was no ISIS, but it was a spooky kind of thing... which, their car slowed down, they slowed down the car. They pointed this out to me. They go, "Can you read that sign?" I go, "Yeah." They go, "What does it say?" I said, "La ilaha illallah. There is no God but God." And they go, "Very good." And they keep going.

They showed me the handgun that they eventually used to, like... as they were carrying out their kidnapping operation. They showed me the handcuffs. There were all these signs. I just did not put it together because I wasn't in this mode of looking after myself. I was like, "I'm a reporter. I need to analyze what's going on." I wasn't worried about myself. I was like, "How can I better understand?" you know?

JR: So in retrospect, do you believe that these gentlemen, to put the term loosely, do you think that they were working directly for some sort of rebel group in Syria or were they just strictly business?

TP: Oh, I'm sure. I've seen these guys since on Facebook. You know, you can... they're all on Facebook. They're all on Twitter and Facebook. And the chief guy, yeah, he's a... clearly started out sort of as a rebel and then maybe worked with Jabhat al-Nusra. You can tell from his Facebook page, but eventually, he ended up like ISIS thinking in psychology and supporting ISIS. You know, you can tell very well exactly what kind of character this is by the stuff that he posts on Facebook.

JR: You were accused of being a CIA spy. Why do you think that was?

TP: I think any American who... really any American... but particularly one who can speak Arabic and has... I told them I had been in Yemen. Look, at the time, in the fall of 2012, there were rumors circulating that the American army was soon going to come and just start invading Syria the way they had invaded Iraq. And they felt that I was an advanced, sort of, guard or spy or reconnoitering agent who was preparing the ground for an imminent American invasion. So they wanted to catch me—and by mistreating me, send a message back to the Americans behind me that they shouldn't come because... you know, they told me this constantly... they shouldn't come because what was happening to me was going to happen to them ten times as bad. We were constantly making videos, you know. It wasn't like... we were doing this, you know? They were... when there was torture or electricity or they put me like in a grave at one point, everything was filmed. And I'm sure it was filmed for the purpose of making some kind of, you know, propaganda/James Foley type of video, which they never, thank God, they never got around to doing. But that's what seemed to be in their mind at the time, like, "We want to send a warning to America. Don't... don't even think about it," basically. I kept telling them, "When the American government comes, they do not come, like I come... with no weapons, you know? flip flop sandals, and, 'Hey, man, how are you?' is my attitude. They come with guns. They come with helicopters and tanks." I kept trying to tell them, but they didn't believe me.

JR: So you just mentioned the name James Foley. What contact did you have with other Westerners while you were being held?

TP: Well, in my prison, they eventually put another American in my prison cell. This wanna-be freelance journalist guy called Matt Schrier... and he was the only, like, non-combatant Westerner that I met. I met actual combatants from the West but no non-combatants. He was clearly a non-combatant.

JR: Right. What was your relationship like with him?

TP: Awful. He was a very... he was, like, a confused young man. You know, war attracts really strange people, and this character had... he wasn't really a journalist but he wanted to be a journalist. He had no connections with any newspapers or anything and never done any journalism before, but he decided, "I'll prove my metal in Syria, and this will impress all the editors back home, and suddenly I'll be a famous photo journalist." He was like... that was his fantasy and look. War is the kind of environment that attracts people who are up for an adventure, and that's what he was interested in. And as soon as he found himself under adverse circumstances, he became very hostile and angry and aggressive, and I was, like, on the receiving end of his rage. He was an angry character, so there was a lot of violence in our cell. So it was like, you know, you can't pick your cellmates obviously, so....

JR: I guess you can't. You just mentioned there was a lot of violence in your cell. Just psychologically, what do you go through once this starts happening? I guess you might have had an advantage over a lot of other Westerners who had been held in Syria in that you understood and spoke Arabic, so you knew what was being said and talked about around you.

TP: Right, I mean that could be an advantage, but sometimes ignorance is bliss. It's like, if you don't know what they're talking about, you're happier. They make a lot of threats, and the threats don't affect you when you don't understand them. And they just... they just describe horrible things that they are doing to other people. And you know... you hear what they're doing, but when they tell you what they're going to do to you, it makes it worse.

Alright, your question is like, the dynamics in our cell. Well, prison is... in Syria anyway, it was a little like survivors of a shipwreck in a raft, in that we had very little food. We didn't know how long it was going to last, and we didn't trust each other to share the food properly. And we also were surrounded by sharks, and we were afraid that... each prisoner... sometimes we were in our cell with like, 30 people. So everybody, every one of these 30 people, was afraid that one of the inmates was going to make a deal with the shark. Like, "I will turn you over to the shark, you fellow prisoner, in exchange for my freedom." So we were terrified of each other, you know? This is the kind of environment that they create, and in a really stressful situation, we couldn't trust each other. And, you know, I think the Syrians were pretty good to each other. Even they had some problems though, but they were pretty good to each other. They stuck together, but the two Americans, man, we were at each other's throats.

JR: Wow, that must have been for you, personally... I would assume, just trying to hold it together, it must have been very, very difficult going through this at the same time.

TP: Exactly, yes. Yeah, you know, I was afraid of my fellow prisoners. I didn't know where I was going to get it from. You could get it from your fellow prisoners. You could get it from Jabhat al-Nusra. They could... you could get it from the air. Like, they were bombing us from the air a lot, and they were shelling us from the air, so we could have died in so many different ways. And it was like, choose your poison, but we didn't have a choice. In prison, you just had to sit and let it happen to you.

Well, one thing that I am, like, I don't want to say, "proud," but I'm... I had a very... my attitude was, "I will not participate in any violence because this violence is so destruct.... What they're doing to us is so bad, I don't want to be like them." And a lot of the prisoners became a little like the guys that were imprisoning us. This happens in prisons, like, where the prisoners become a little bit like the guards to one another. There's a hierarchy within the cell, and I refused to participate in that, which made me like the weak guy in the cell... the guy that always gets picked on, but I didn't care. I mean, I am, like... I'm not going to be violent to another person, and I still believe that. I would never, ever, you know, I would never do anything... I cannot imagine a circumstance that would cause me to... perhaps there is a circumstance. You know, when your life is on the line, you have to fight for yourself, but my life would really have to be on the line. I'm not going to sweat the little stuff. I never get in a traffic argument with anybody. If I do, I'm not going to be violent about it, and I'm not going to take it seriously. I'll be, like, "Alright, man, whatever." This is what you learn in prison, it's like, pick your battles and don't sweat the small stuff. Something I took away from jail.

JR: You did end up trying to escape a couple of times. What were those experiences like?

TP: Well, the first time, I... it was those original kidnappers, the guy who I found on Facebook. I was handcuffed to that guy who eventually became like this crazy ISIS supporter/fanboy, maybe member, and I was handcuffed to him during the night, and he was like snoring loudly. So I'm like, "I gotta persuade this guy somehow to loosen up the handcuffs enough so I can slip out of them." So I kept asking to be released from the cuffs so I could go pee as he was sleeping. And he would take off the cuffs and then put me back in them. And every time he would put me back in the cuffs, I would say, "Oh, it's too tight, it's too tight, it's too tight." So one time, he left it really loose, and as he was snoring, I slipped my hands out of the handcuffs and I ran away. I stood up. I walked over his sleeping body. There were another couple of guys with Kalashnikovs and handguns, and I walked over them and I ran out into the dawn at the time. And I ran to the Free Syrian Army. I'm like, "These are the moderate dudes. These are the good guys. Help me." Of course, maybe some of them are moderate. I'm sure many of them are moderate, but these individuals that I ran into felt that I should be turned over to the court.

So they brought me to the Islamic Court, and the judge took one look at me... he's, like, "Spy." And there were some formalities. There was like a show of testifying. They had some witnesses. They were my kidnappers. You know, in an Islamic Court, you need two witnesses to constitute a prosecution. So these two kidnappers were the prosecution witnesses against me, and I was the defendant and my own witness on my behalf. And it was all in Arabic... and this is very... like a formal kind of Arabic that I'm not very good at, and it was kind of over my head. And before I knew it, I was like, condemned, and I didn't really know what for. You know, suddenly I was in jail. I was in a prison cell underground next to some Shiite Muslims that they had also in prison. So my advice for you is, don't ever be a defendant in an Islamic Court because you don't have a chance to defend yourself.

JR: So you're saying that, at least in legal matters, there seems to be this relationship between the Free Syrian Army and these other participants that are in the battle, the rebel groups like al-Nusra and others like them.

TP: Actually, I think that depends from place to place. If you are interested in the relations between Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS and the, like, moderate rebels, they're... I can discuss that. I don't think the courts in general, whenever they have a valuable asset, they don't take these things to court. And in fact, this court that I went to, it was like, it was kind of a... it wasn't even a Jabhat al-Nusra court. The court turned me over to Jabhat al-Nusra. But basically, Jabhat al-Nusra controls everything. I mean there are some... there's like a pretense of control of the Free Syrian Army, but beneath this pretense is Jabhat al-Nusra. That's in the areas that... like the rebel areas, the things that we think of as the Free Syrian Army. It's all Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS area as well, that's all ISIS. It just happens that way because they have the popular support. They have the moral authority. They have the spiritual authority. They have the cash, and they have the guns. They are the power that is in Syria, and the US government has this, like, crazy notion that they can give weapons to the moderate dudes and those weapons will stay in the moderate guys' hands. They will stay in the moderate guys' hands for 10 minutes... as long as Jabhat al-Nusra allows it to be that way. But the real power on the ground is Jabhat al-Nusra. It just is. You know, they get the oil. They have the oil from the oil wells in the east, and they have like millions and millions of euros from the business of kidnapping and ransom, which is something the Free Syrian Army doesn't do as much. So anyway, with the cash and the guns and the spiritual authority, they control the landscape. And if only I could have impressed this upon John Kerry or Samantha Power, we wouldn't have sent so many TOW missiles to them. But we did in the belief that they were like sweet and nice and would advance democracy. But really all we were doing is advancing al-Qaida.

JR: Another thing that I think might have been useful for John Kerry to hear from you, as well as a lot of others... I've heard you say that for many of those who join al-Nusra or ISIS or groups like them, the Jihad is actually fun. And that's not usually a term we associate with the war in Syria. How did you personally come to realize that there was this fun aspect to the jihad?

TP: I mean, I lived with the young men who were having a wonderful time for two years. It's hard not to notice. It's like... these are young men that, they didn't really have a whole lot going on in their lives. They were either university dropouts, they were like employees at grocery stores, or they were young men who were looking for the next big thing... and nothing was coming along and nothing was likely to come along. Syria is a place where, if your dad was a shoemaker, you are going to be a shoemaker. You know, it was that way for hundreds of years. And suddenly the revolution arrives and you can be what they call an Emir, which is, I think we translate that word as "Prince" sometimes, but what it means is like, a man of riches and wealth and renown and accomplishment... and you can have a good gun, and you can have a pickup truck, and you can get married to more than one woman, by the way. So there's like a fantasy that appeals to young men. Tons of chicks, guns, cars, and cash that Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS... they feed into this fantasy.

Now in real life, the commanders will promise these men, “Oh, yeah, we’ll get you married; we’ll make sure that you have a car; we’ll make sure you have a nice salary, blah, blah, blah.” But in real life, the beautiful things that the commanders are promising are always just around the corner, and they never give it to the soldiers. The soldiers are always like, “I hope like, tomorrow, I will get my....” “Soon, next week, next week,” but it doesn’t happen. These guys remain in a state of constant frustration, which, by the way, is just the way they were before the revolution. You know, it’s a very failed revolution for the fighters themselves. They are not accomplishing what they want.

JR: Taking that into account and realizing that there’s this... as you say, there’s this tension between the boots on the ground and the commanders on what’s being promised and what’s actually being delivered, what do you think is happening in Syria today that we, in the West, seem to be missing in terms of understanding this conflict and where it is going?

TP: I’ll tell you one big thing that’s happening is that, there’s a second Islamic State that has emerged without the awareness or, you know, nobody knows what is happening in the northwestern corner of Syria. But I know because I’m in touch with some of these people. And they’re making videos all the time. We just haven’t connected the dots. But yeah, there’s a second Islamic State. It’s right on the Turkish border. It has, like, to get to this second Islamic State from any European country, it’s a couple of days on the bus, and young kids are going every day. That’s what they tell me. That’s what the guys on the ground in Syria tell me, “Oh, yes, we have new French people, new English people every day, every day.” They’re coming and they’re... you know, and the journalists cannot go there, because if you go there, you will either get kidnapped or tortured or both, and nobody wants to risk it. Intelligently enough, I mean, the journal [INAUDIBLE]. So they’re not going. But, yeah, that’s one bit of important news, is the existence of this second Islamic State.

And what else is happening? I mean, the other thing is that the Syrian government gradually, by hook and by crook, is winning. And they are dispersing the rebels. The rebels have been concentrated in certain urban neighborhoods, and now they’ve gone off into the countryside. They’re occupying villages. And when the US Army or the Kurds or some combination finally arrives in Raqqa, all those ISIS fighters, they will have been gone for weeks. You know, they’re out of town now. The US is preparing, apparently, some kind of land invasion of the ISIS capital, Raqqa, but by the time the US guys get there, there’s not going to be a single ISIS dude anywhere nearby. I know this because I talk to them. They’re not anywhere near there, you know? And all the big dudes are gone and have been gone for weeks already. Because this is... listen, this is an age old Arab strategy. When the larger, more capable, more competent, more powerful army comes, you fade into the hills. They’ve been doing this for centuries, and they’re going to do it again in two weeks when the Western armies or the proxy army arrives in Raqqa. They’re still there, but they’re just in camouflage... in the background. And they’re gonna wait it out. That’s what they do. That’s what they did, by the way, when we went to Anbar Province in Iraq. You know, ISIS emerged as soon as the US government left in 2011, okay? There was al-Qaida in Iraq. Out of this al-Qaida in Iraq thing came ISIS, and they just... they know where to go when it’s time to fade into the hills.

The reason why I'm saying this is because we must develop a strategy that is more powerful than their fade into the hills strategy. Otherwise, it will be whack-a-mole forever, you know? We will go, we will say, "We're here." And then they'll go, "Fine, we don't care because, you know, we have faded into the background. We're civilians again." But as soon as we leave, they'll come back, and they'll start cutting people's heads off and blowing things up and attacking the café's in Paris.

So ultimately, we want to negotiate. We want to better understand who these people are, what they want, and come to a kind of a peace with them. Otherwise, we will be killing them and they will be killing us until the end of time. We don't want this. So if it sounds like I'm advocating for peace with ISIS, well, I am. There's too many of them to kill. And a lot of them are children. You know, we can't kill these kids. We have to understand who they are and give them something of what they want. By the way, they will negotiate with you. I negotiated with them every day for, like, two years. You can negotiate with them. There's stuff that they want. Well, let's give it to them. They all want iPhones. I don't think that we should give them all iPhones... well actually, maybe we should, but I mean, there's stuff that they want. So we have to, like, pacify them somehow. So we gotta give them some stuff that they want. We gotta start talking to them, you know. For... the reason why they killed Kayla Mueller, for instance, is because we refused to talk to them. We would not pick up the phone. And this beautiful young woman, so promising, so full of life, and so expressive of the good side of American culture, we let her die for no good reason that I could see, simply because we refused to pick up the phone. So my feeling is, yeah, we gotta pick up the phone and talk to these guys.

JR: Alright. I guess a final question for you then is, to what degree... and this is all with the backdrop of what you just told me... to what degree is the conflict in Syria and the broader Middle East, to what degree is this a military conflict, a political conflict, and then really a theological conflict within Islam? Because those narratives are all, you know, they're very difficult, I think, for us in the West to kind of understand what's happening.

TP: Right, to sort out. Yeah, I mean, you could say it's also a financial conflict. Perhaps, at the bottom of everything is the fact that there's a bunch of people who feel that they're birthright, meaning their oil, their natural resources, has been robbed from them by these multinational companies and their own government. And they want to come at the employees of the companies, at all the well-to-do people and take that wealth that they feel has been robbed from them, back. I mean, to me that's the most powerful driver... it's the deep economic inequality that exists in Syria. You know, it's a society with a tiny, tiny cast of very, very rich people, millionaires, and then millions of people that do not have two pennies to rub together. You know, they can't feed their families and they have enormous families. So I think... the key, to me, to begin to resolve the conflict is to address this economic inequality and to provide jobs and infrastructure and schools and, you know... hope. Economic hope for the millions of people that have none today. I think if we get that in order, all these theological issues will sort themselves out. They will turn out to be the trivia that they really are. You know, if you ask a bunch of ISIS fighters, like, "Hey man, what is the real difference between the Alawites, theologically speaking, and you guys?" they come up with a few theological points, but they change the subject within, like, 30 seconds because they don't know and really they don't care.

In other words, what I'm saying is this is a pretend theological conflict, and beneath it, there are other issues.

JR: Great insight, Theo. I really, really appreciate your time and wish you all the best.

TP: Okay. Thank you very much.

JR: For RiskHedge Radio, I'm Jonathon Roth.

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