Behind the Curtain of War: A Reporter in the Midlle East and Elsewhere by Jakub Szántó

Translated by Graeme Dibble

Chapter 1

One Street Further On

Curiosity. That's what draws journalists to armed conflicts. It's the same as with a government press conference, a forest fire or an interview with a financial analyst who is critical of the national budget. That basic drive that makes a reporter a reporter, the impulse to be where *it* is happening, where you can put your finger on the pulse of history, where you are at the source. It is connected with adrenaline, but that isn't the main goal. The main goal is to be the first to know, to know as much as possible – ideally everything – and then be the first to interpret it correctly. Whether it's about the size of the national budget for the next year, changes in the public transport system of a major city or the current status of the front lines.

When it comes to war reporting, how far to go, how far to stick your neck out, is a purely pragmatic question. The front lines of modern conflicts are far removed from the trenches of the First World War. They are permeable, often invisible and rapidly changing. It can be the outskirts of a city, a river or a discontinuous line of fortified points. But it can also be a street or an isolated building. War is a myriad of microscopic processes and points. Where there is imminent danger one moment, perfect calm descends five minutes later. A tank shell explodes in an open space between houses, while fifty metres away around the corner there is relative safety.

Journalism from combat zones attempts to paint as accurate as possible a picture of the real war situation for someone who consumes it from the perfect calm and safety of home or work. A reporter gets closer and closer until he is *there.* Because of that inner urge, he has to be *there*. Because of the reader, the listener, the viewer. But the question is, where exactly is *there*? Here by this house, or around the corner? Here, or a street further on, closer to the estimated positions of one of the warring parties?

The role and perception of the journalist in the midst of conflict has changed significantly through history. In the days of William Howard Russell, an Irish journalist for *The Times* and one of the first war reporters, who began his career in 1850, it was a gentlemanly vocation for educated noblemen. Later on, the journalist acquired an internationally recognized status as an independent observer with special protection. In a number of 21st-century conflicts, however, journalists themselves have become a target to be silenced. Or even prey to be used as a source of ransom money, or in the case of Islamic State as a means of brutal propaganda.

April 2002, Ramallah, West Bank

“Fuck, drive smoothly! I don’t want them to think they’ve got a reason to shoot at us!” I yell from the passenger seat at the technician, Michal Rydval. “If you want to get out, I’ll stop for you! I mean, they’re shooting at us.” Smack, smack, vzoom. It’s coming from the right, from my side. The bullets hit the asphalt and whirr past the car. Individual shots. Most likely a sniper, so probably an Israeli soldier. Ratata, tatata. That’s coming from the left, from Michal’s side. It must be a Kalashnikov, so that’ll be a Palestinian.

We’re speeding through debris on a narrow road winding alongside hills in Palestinian Nabulus. Israel’s Operation Defensive Shield is going on around us. One of the chapters in the second pan-Palestinian *Intifada* uprising. A small war in the midst of a great one. The Israeli army has occupied Palestinian cities which have had nine years of self-government as agreed during the peace conference in Oslo.

Now the tanks and soldiers are back, organizing a hunt for militants from radical Palestinian factions. And also for police officers who have joined the battle against the Israelis. Our noisy exchange is interrupted by Pavel Stibůrek, the cameraman in the back seat: “Let’s just hope we don’t run out of tape,” he remarks stoically.

Three minutes later, I get out of the car, my hands clutching our passports high above my head. Kneeling on the ground in front of us are two soldiers with M-16 assault rifles. They are pointed at me. Another two on the left and right. “Crossfire,” I hear in my mind. I force a smile and slowly move forward, explaining loudly in English who we are. Anybody can stick a tape with “TV” written on it onto a car. Even a terrorist from Hamas or the Islamic Jihad. However, they don’t look like the tall, long-haired greenhorn from Europe who is approaching the first soldier. I know that Pavel is filming me from behind through the car window. And it is also clear to me that that won’t protect me.

“I know that this is a restricted zone,” I apologize loudly over occasional gunfire somewhere behind us. “And that we’re not supposed to be here.” They lower their weapons. They move aside the barbed-wire roadblock and show us how to get out. Towards a checkpoint where half a day ago other soldiers refused to let us inside.

They don’t shout – they are tense, strict, but they don’t threaten us with weapons or arrest. That day was the first time I had that experience with Israeli soldiers – obviously conscripts, judging by their age. And I had it many more times in the years that followed. It’s something to do with their age, the egalitarian atmosphere of their army, and who knows what else. But unlike other soldiers in war zones you can talk to them in a pretty normal way. However, the same doesn’t always apply to their officers.

The ones we tried to persuade in the morning were pleasant too. But unyielding. Nabulus and the other Palestinian cities had been a strictly blockaded war zone for three weeks. Not one of the dozens of journalists from around the world was allowed inside. The Arab media had released a report about a massacre in the city of Jenin. The Israelis had allegedly killed as many as 500 people. But it was impossible to get inside. There were checkpoints everywhere and the soldiers wouldn’t even let us get close. An inquiry later showed that there weren’t five hundred dead, but approximately fifty, and most of them armed men. But there were around a hundred dead, including many civilians, right here in Nabulus.

We’d headed here because it was impossible to get into Jenin. But how the hell could we get inside? We couldn’t go back empty-handed. It was only in the years to come that I understood that the broadcasts in faraway, peaceful Prague weren’t dependent on my

reports from the scene every day. That neither programming nor viewers' interest necessarily called for daily reports, even from a hot spot. At that moment, I felt under pressure from a sense of duty towards the TV bosses, as well as my own ambition. Luckily. It was only thanks to that and to *chutzpah* – the traditional Jewish/Israeli art of brazenness, which I quickly mastered – that I eventually managed to find a dirt road into the besieged city. Although not without losing points…

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It was my first time. My first war. Unlike my more experienced colleagues, as someone born in 1977 and a graduate in international +studies rather than a trained journalist, I got into journalism too late to make it to Bosnia. That war, which between 1992 and 1995 competed for the world's attention with the euphoria following the fall of the Iron Curtain, did everything it could on European soil, with its bloodbath and unbridled killing of neighbour by neighbour, to prove the naivety of Francis Fukuyama and his book *The End of History and The Last Man*. And it also provided a tough school of war for a whole generation of Czech journalists.

Four years later, I missed the repeat performance provided by the war in Kosovo by a month. I joined an intensive journalism programme in the summer of 1999. After three years spent in a French company which had absolutely nothing to do with the field, and after the unsuccessful experience of office work – whose sole entry in the index of my personal memory was the fact that it took place under the auspices of the *Arthur Andersen* company, which in 2001 became one of the major players in the huge financial scandal surrounding the energy giant *Enron* – I got a call from my friend Martin Krušina with an offer of work: a job on the foreign news desk of TV NOVA.

It was August 1999 and commercial television, which had entered the stagnant waters of the Czech TV world like a torpedo five years earlier, was going through a painful divorce with its American owners. The original employees remained bound by contract to the old management. The foreign section was looking for someone with a knowledge of languages. And it was such a broadly defined category that even the holder of a new bachelor's degree in international studies from the Faculty of Social Sciences fitted into it.

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First one shot, quickly followed by another. "Michal, stop, I reckon those were stones going through the wheels. Take a look and make sure we haven't blown a tyre."

Tip number one for a car passenger in body armour: Wearing a bulletproof vest in a car is extremely uncomfortable. I open the door, lean out, and the weight of my vest almost topples me out onto the stony road. The tyres look all right. Tip number two for a car passenger in body armour: Never, and I mean never, put on music when travelling in a war zone. You can mistake a gunshot for a blow from a rock.

Something tells me to look up. I straighten up against the weight of the vest, my gaze wandering upwards over the hill beside the road… A total of three barrels are pointing right in my face from four metres away. This is my big moment. There is no time for surprise, fear or panic.

“Journalists! Journalist from the Czech Republic!” I shout, flashing an international press pass, whose only advantage (and on future trips I never bothered to get one) is the red cover with PRESS in bright gold lettering.

“Get the hell out of here! This area is sealed off.”

“OK, sorry. But we can’t turn round here.”

“Keep going, a few hundred metres on there’s a turn-off out of town. Turn left, got it?! LEFT!”

We absolutely, totally get it. We drive, of course, to the right.

Mustapha Jibril’s house was hit by a missile from an Israeli helicopter. We walk through the charred rubble of his living room. Next to it is a completely destroyed bedroom and then a burnt-out child’s bedroom. The plastic toys have melted. Luckily the family weren’t at home.

“Why did it have to happen to us? I don’t care about politics, I just make soap,” wails a stout man with a big moustache. Here they don’t view the Israelis as people but as a kind of natural disaster. They don’t even use the Arabic term *Israili*, they say *Jahud*, Jew. “The Arabs won’t abandon us. One day we’ll destroy them!”

Every Palestinian city has a famous commodity. In Nabulus it’s the traditional bars of soap made from olive oil. We wade through piles of cracked bars on the roofs of houses. They are traditionally dried in the sun up here. In many places layers of soap bars several metres thick have managed to protect the buildings from shots fired from helicopters.

The children’s hospital down below in the old town centre has been spared by the fighting.

“Just a couple of hits, nothing serious,” explains the doctor Anan Masri calmly. “But the electricity has been off for two weeks, and that means the water pump as well.”

But the Palestinians are world champions at improvising. The harsh conditions in occupied Palestine or in Arab countries, where for decades they have remained second-class citizens in refugee camps or outside of them, have taught them to find a solution to just about every problem in life. It’s the same here. Generators are running at full capacity. Despite the blockade, fuel somehow gets in. It’s the same with food and weapons and ammunition.

On our way back to safety we come across a pair of confused characters decked out with cameras just past the military checkpoint. They are Japanese. Both bespectacled and deferential, both frightened and covered in dust from head to foot. We load them into the boot of our jeep and drive on. Almost immediately we run into another crew – Brazilians from Globo TV. Like the Japanese duo, they didn’t make it into the city either because of gunfire. They had some bad luck – they arrived a couple of hours later than us. And then some more bad luck – a bullet punctured one of their tyres.

It’s suddenly very crowded in our car, now full of ninja turtles from three continents in bulletproof vests and helmets: the three of us, the two Japanese and a Brazilian brunette. Her cameraman and producer are slowly making their way behind us in a car with a flat front tyre. We are finally out of Nabulus. In the evening we find out that we were the very first crew to get into the besieged city in three weeks. The next day our footage is used by European commercial television, who were offered it by the producers in Prague as part of a union of private broadcasters.

February 2016, on board the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman

A terrible all-encompassing din, graceful curves, the surface of the blue sea all around, wind in the hair and bright sunshine overhead. And the speed! If Formula 1 racing manages to attract women as well as men, then the launch of a fighter plane from the deck of an aircraft carrier takes this fascination to a whole new level. An F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter-bomber has just taken off on a mission against Islamic State from the deck of the USS *Harry S. Truman*, one of the biggest warships in history.

We are standing just fifteen metres away from the next plane, which is taxiing to the take-off position. A bar sticking out from the white-painted undercarriage is lowered and hooked onto the protrusion of a metal grab in a track built into the flight deck. Hidden below it is the massive catapult system. Thick white steam from the previous take-off shrouds the elegant twin-tailed fighter for a moment. Meanwhile a second catapult is subjected to enormous pressure from below using steam produced from seawater by the ship's two nuclear reactors. Each launch uses up 600 kilograms of it. Behind the jets of the plane, a massive protective panel is raised. It protects us from getting scorched by hot gases from the two dark openings in the rear of the aircraft.

The noise increases, the pilot checks the engine's performance, and the carefully choreographed ballet of technicians, steel and deadly weapons enters its finale. A figure in a helmet and red shirt makes a last-minute check of the weapons suspended under the wings. A brown shirt signals to the pilot that the flaps on the wings are working. Then it's the green team's turn. They check that the catapult grab is correctly attached to the nose gear. They run off towards us. The last in line is a "shooter" in yellow. He crouches down and with an arm outstretched in the direction of take-off gives a signal: "All clear!" The overwhelming thundering of the engines, and the twenty-one-ton plane worth 60 million dollars rushes towards the end of the short marine runway. From nought to 270 km/h in a second and a half.

"There's a whole lot of Gs crushing your body at that moment," says the pilot Justin Richardson later on, referring to the force that operates on the pilot and his machine during extreme manoeuvres. "It's the best rollercoaster ride you'll experience in your life! But otherwise it's really pretty simple. They just fire you out, a moment later you engage the afterburner, and up you go," he grins. The afterburning makes the jets glow with a blue light, and the plane at the end of the runway lifts up into the wind. The fighter-bomber rushes skyward. Far to the north-west lie Iraq and Syria and an unsuspecting target in the territory of Islamic State. A convoy of jeeps, a truck, a captured tank or a bunch of cutthroats have no idea that an airborne predator will soon be zooming high above them.

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Aircraft carriers have been a symbol of naval power since the Second World War. Along with nuclear submarines, they represent the most powerful weapons in the world, which only truly great naval powers can afford. At present there are forty of them ploughing the waves of the world's oceans under thirteen different flags – twenty of them under the banner of the Stars and Stripes. However, a number of these vessels are designated as helicopter carriers, landing and rescue ships. There are nineteen of the classic aircraft carriers for launching fighters, and eleven of those are American.

America, having learned from the end of Britain's global dominance, bases its worldwide influence on this effective symbol of military and economic power. In the last three-quarters

of a century, its aircraft carriers have taken part in conflicts, demonstrations of force, patrolling and rescue and research operations along the shores of all the continents including Antarctica. The giant ships powered by nuclear reactors sail at the head of six American fleets, each of which has been assigned a sector of one of the world's oceans. Meanwhile the others are repaired in their home ports. In times of war, everything changes. During Operation Desert Storm in 1991, four aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf were involved in the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. Now, in the midst of the war against Islamic State, there is always one aircraft carrier in the same waters taking its turn at the head of the Fifth Fleet.

The brunt of the naval part of Operation Inherent Resolve, which began targeting Islamic State in Iraq and Syria on 8 August 2014, is borne by the aircraft carrier USS *Harry S. Truman*. This mighty colossus 333 metres long, 78 metres wide and 74 metres high is powered by two nuclear reactors hidden deep below decks. The vessel is capable of carrying up to ninety airplanes and helicopters and has a capacity of nearly 6,000 people on board.

In the spring of 2016, American air strikes are entering their nineteenth month. So far the American, European and Arab bombs have managed to halt the rapid advance of Islamists from the east of Syria into western and northern Iraq. In the autumn of 2015 they stopped the invasion of the Kurdish cities of Irbil in Iraq and Kobani in Syria. With their support the Kurds gradually took control of almost the entire border between Syria and Turkey. Then the newly created Iraqi army, also thanks to coalition attacks, liberated Tikrit and Ramadi. By mid-February 2016 more than three hundred American and dozens of coalition aircraft had already participated in Operation Inherent Resolve. The number of operational sorties by the entire coalition was close to 68,000, with American aircraft accounting for roughly nine-tenths. The number of targets hit was in excess of 21,000.

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Getting on board an aircraft carrier had been my dream ever since I first saw the film *Top Gun*. The year was 1988 and I was sitting in the Moscow flat where my mother and I spent the years of Soviet *perestroika*; the copy in our video player was terrible and also had primitive Russian dubbing by an utterly disinterested actor. Getting on board an aircraft carrier in the midst of a military conflict was a slight extension when I began to make my living from journalism. And getting on board the *Harry S. Truman* was a combination of perseverance, numerous emails, string-pulling by a US Navy officer I had filmed with in Iraq and a recommendation from the American embassy in Prague.

In less than five months, Marek and I were packing our gear and clothes for the warm spring of the Arabian Peninsula. Then it was just a journey from Tel Aviv to Amman, a change of passports and wallets, and a direct flight to the island of Bahrain, where the American Fifth Fleet is based and which recognizes neither Israel nor passports containing Israeli visas. When an officer of the Fifth Fleet is waiting for us at the international airport in Manama, I'm beginning to think that twenty-eight years later the big dream of that little boy from the Communist bloc is actually coming true and he is about to step confidently aboard an aircraft carrier belonging to what was once the chief bogeyman.

"Here are some earplugs. Put on your helmet and protective goggles. You have to wear them the whole time." The crew member of the Seahawk, the light-grey cousin of the more famous Black Hawk helicopter, has to shout over the noise of the propellers. We only just made it

from the hotel to the helipad of the American naval base in the island kingdom of Bahrain in time. The liaison officer got the departure time wrong and there's only one flight a day.

"Put this life jacket over your head. In the event of falling into the water, it'll inflate. But be careful – first the weight of the engine will flip the helicopter roof-down. Then you have to pull the green handle on the door and get out. Only then do you pull on the cord to inflate it."

It's perfectly clear. If we fall into the sea and by sheer chance are still conscious, we will turn upside-down, remain hanging in our seatbelts and search for some handle with our life jackets inflated.

The co-pilot adds another important instruction: "Once we reach the *De Gaulle*, everyone has to get out. No-one's allowed to stay inside during refuelling. Then straight back in and we'll fly on to the *Truman*!" My mind is in overdrive. But now it's clear why two Frenchmen have joined us in the Seahawk. The elegant moustachioed gentleman with a round belly in a sports jacket turns out to be the chairman of the French senate's defence committee. He and his assistant are going on an inspection mission – aboard the French aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle.* Then the helicopter will take us on to our destination, the USS *Harry S. Truman*. I'm delighted by this unexpected bonus – two carriers for the price of one!

(…)

We are standing on the command bridge again. In the meantime, night has fallen – pitch-dark ocean night, lit only by the glow of the moon. The deck is flooded with dim green light, but all other lights have been switched off. The pilots manage to take off using night-vision devices. Any brighter light could dazzle them, causing a disaster.

Suddenly a blue flame lights up the darkness and, despite the earplugs and special headphones, a powerful roar bellows in our ears. The Super Hornet has fired up its thrusters for take-off. The catapult abruptly yanks the elegant machine forward, the pilot engages the afterburner, and the fighter-bomber, its wings underslung with auxiliary fuel tanks and a collection of missiles, heads off into the darkness. The whole launch sequence repeats itself another three times in the order darkness – dazzling light – deafening rumble – darkness. And it's far from being over.

An invisible ballet begins on the flight deck in near darkness. Different coloured teams remove anything unnecessary, check the arresting cables and check the runway. It takes less than ten minutes, then the bustling ceases and the last lights go out. It's the start of the most dangerous phase: a night-time landing.

Beside me, cameraman Marek is desperately trying to focus on the pitch-black darkness. It all happens so fast. Suddenly there's the gleam of jets, a fast-moving shadow appears out of the darkness, abruptly brakes on the deck thanks to the arresting cables, and the grey-green fuselage appears in the dim lighting. All the missiles are gone from under its wings. The internal and auxiliary fuel tanks are almost empty.

From the deck the *Harry S. Truman* looks enormous. But from the sky, never mind at night, it is only a small, dimly lit island in a pitch-black sea – an island that is moving. The pilot has to descend to the deck correctly, lower a tailhook located between the mighty legs of the rear landing gear and use it at the correct speed and height to grab one of three thick cables fixed across the deck. All of this at a speed of nearly three hundred kilometres an hour.

"Coming back, especially at night, is really stressful. Always!" admits fighter pilot Justin Richardson.

A quote from the computer game Fallout unexpectedly comes to mind. *War. War never changes. The Romans waged war to gather slaves and wealth. Spain built an empire from its lust for gold and territory. Hitler shaped a battered Germany into an economic superpower. But war never changes.*

Wars will probably never cease. The creative energy of humanity is balanced by its ability to destroy. The price of progress is ever more destructive weapons. Unfortunately, I don't have a recipe for putting an end to this brutal human impulse. I only have another, much less effective recipe – bearing witness to it. And that means packing my backpack and combat boots again and again and setting out for places that anyone with common sense and an instinct for self-preservation would run away from. Like my colleagues, I'm helped in this by the firm belief that no matter how harsh the truth about wars, terror or revolutions, it can help to bring an end to violence and a return to normality.

(…)

October 2014, the village of Mulla Abdullah, Iraqi Kurdistan

They are right in front of us, observing us from a distance of some fifty metres. They have black turbans and long hair and beards. They are wearing military tactical vests and loose Arab clothing and holding Kalashnikovs and a DShK heavy machine gun, nicknamed the *doshka.* The Islamic State fighters are standing on their side of an irrigation canal near the Iraqi city of Tikrit. There are five of them behind sandbags on the left and three on the right. This is the closest we can get to them while remaining in one piece. On their side of the concrete canal, a black standard with a white circle on it is fluttering every fifty metres or so. It is a symbol that inspires fear from Europe through Africa and the Middle East all the way to Asia. On our side, the red-white-and-green flags of the Iraqi Kurds are flying. The golden sun in the middle symbolizes light in the battle against the darkness of the Islamist barbarism represented by those men and their pitch-black flag.

The *Peshmerga*, the Kurdish fighters around us, describe the battle that ended this morning. "I saw a big vehicle come in. An old guy with a beard got out and everyone was running around him," says forty-year-old Hassan with an ammunition belt around his prodigious belly. "I thought it must be one of their commanders, the military emirs. So I sent over an RPG." The explosion of the anti-tank grenade killed the crew of the vehicle. But it also unleashed a two-day exchange of fire with a number of dead on either side. It's quiet here now, so for a while it's possible to peek out from behind the earthen barricades and the cover of sandbags.

It's a strange feeling. Directly in front of us is a mined concrete bridge, which used to link the two banks of an agricultural area. In the middle of the bridge another black flag is flying. In this mutual game of chess, nobody has dared to go and take it down. This is now the location of the border between the self-proclaimed caliphate, which does not balk at burning people to death and crucifying children, and Kurdistan, which has found itself within reach of the independence it has coveted for centuries. The absurdity of war frozen at a point in time. The pleasant October breeze, the warm sun overhead, the chirping of birds and the quiet trickle of water in the river below us.

Most of the time during wars there is no shooting. Fighting is like an epileptic seizure of feverish convulsions amid the neurosis of life, which tries to go on at all costs, despite the mortal danger lurking at unexpected angles. Most of the time soldiers in places like this are bored. The arrival of foreign journalists is a welcome distraction, not only for the *Peshmerga*, but also for the Islamists on the other bank. By sheer force of will I suppress the urge to

move beyond the Kurdish trenches and onto the border bridge. We can't go any further, it would be suicide.

We were brought here by a convoy of five SUVs. Along a hard-packed track across a plain, where hilly Iraqi Kurdistan gives way to the semi-desert of Arab northern Iraq. Crammed in with Kurdish *Peshmerga*, we were transferred to the place we had been told about by their legendary commander, Anwar Haji Osman, a veteran of the wars against Saddam Hussein, the Kurdish civil war and the war against Iraqi Islamists, supposedly wounded seventeen times with a prosthesis instead of a left hand. He stoically informed us that "it will be interesting."

Until then we hadn't seen the black flag with the white circle up close. Yesterday we were at the *Peshmerga*'s defensive position in the hills about three-quarters of an hour from the Kurdish capital of Irbil. Another bizarre feature of war. From the commercial centre of the Kurdish world, where skyscrapers have sprung up from the oil dollars and nearby you can buy cans of beer or hard liquor in the Christian district, it is possible to reach the front in three-quarters of an hour by taxi. That is, if you can find someone willing to drive you there.

As chance would have it, after at least five refusals, an elderly Kurdish patriot wearing the typical *shalwar* baggy trousers and a loose linen jacket is happy to take us. His name is Ibrahim and he will be the good soul of this and other military expeditions into Kurdistan. He soon gets the nickname of Old Man Okey-doke. His answer to everything is "bashi" – "okay" in Kurdish. He doesn't have a problem going anywhere. For him, taking us to the front to his *Peshmerga* heroes is a patriotic duty.

Old Man Okey-doke doesn't speak English, but we have a great Czech/Syrian/Kurdish fixer with us, Rashid Khalil. And Rashid teaches us a couple of key phrases, which we constantly practise with Old Man Okey-doke. "Rosh bash, kak Ibrahim?" "How are you, my friend Ibrahim?" "Bashi! Kak Jaaqub!"

Our courageous and kind-hearted driver's booming "bashi!" is often directed into a phone in his battered Toyota. He has a habit of putting the bottom of the mobile, not the speaker, to his ear. The worse he hears, the louder he speaks. His eyesight isn't that great either: he has bilateral cataracts. At dusk and at night the adventurous ride along the war-scarred asphalt of the northern Iraqi roads and between the moving checkpoints of the Kurdish and Iraqi forces takes on a whole new dimension. But he's our Old Man Okey-doke and he'll take us anywhere. Even to the *Peshmerga*'s forward position high up on a hill. I haven't mentioned it yet, but even this expedition to the front would not be complete without Pawluscha Novotný, our faithful newspaper travelling companion.

The tunnels dug out of the chalky rock come to an end after about thirty metres. They are full of rubbish and excrement. A few days ago Islamists were still hiding here before being driven out by the current Kurdish owners during American bombing. This was the target of the first bombs in August 2014, after America and the others realized that the situation was really bad and it was necessary to halt the rapid advance of Islamic State across the Syrian border, the second largest Iraqi city of Mosul and here. But the Islamists soon grasped the new reality and excavated dozens of kilometres of underground tunnels using slave labour from thousands of captured Iraqis and Syrians. Only the rise of the *Peshmerga* managed to force them out of strategic locations like this one.

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Islamic State originated in Iraq in 2003 as an offshoot of al-Qaeda. It was founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian extremist born in a slum district of the Jordanian city of Zarqa. After his return from the civil war in Afghanistan, he was looking around for another battleground for the international jihad. Formed on the back of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, it was strengthened after the American-led operation to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, and acquired a new battlefield after the new, again American-led, war against Iraq in 2003.

It was Zarqawi and his extremists who summoned Islamic extremists from the entire Muslim world into the country and launched a bloody offensive of suicide attacks. His death during an American bomb attack in 2006 deprived the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda of a strong leader.

A few months later, the organization declared itself the Islamic State in Iraq. And in 2010 an Iraqi expert on the Koran, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, took over its leadership. Together with other predominantly Iraqi veterans of jihad, he managed to recruit former enemies for the organization: the leaders of Saddam Hussein's previous regime and officers from his army. After the overthrow of the dictator it had been hastily disbanded by the Americans, depriving tens of thousands of its members of social prestige as well as employment.

Like Saddam Hussein, Baghdadi's cutthroats in Iraq also belonged to the Sunni minority which had lost power as a result of the international invasion. The new masters of the country – the previously oppressed Shias – began to take their revenge. Shia militias sowed death and destruction among Sunnis. In this lethal environment the Sunni al-Qaeda, now under the name Islamic State and reinforced by former soldiers and weapons stolen from army stores, appointed themselves the protectors of Sunnis – and launched a war against the American occupiers and Shia oppressors.

The departure of American troops from Iraq in August 2010 offered an opportunity for Baghdadi's plan. His manual became the book *The Management of Savagery*. This manual of jihadism calls for an escalation of extreme violence and brutality with the aim of intimidating the enemy. it describes guerrilla and terrorist fighting and calls for suicide attacks.

The foundations of the future caliphate were not laid by Islamic State in 2014, but four years earlier. Even then, while filming the final phase of the American withdrawal from Iraq, I found out that Islamists already had control of extensive districts in Mosul and Fallujah. A year later a cruel civil war broke out in neighbouring Syria. Initially peaceful protests turned into an armed uprising after brutal reprisals from Bashar Assad's regime. Al-Qaeda – and the branch of Islamic State in Iraq still formally subordinate to it – could not remain on the sidelines. Islamists ,initially the minority– but reinforced by international jihad veterans from the wars in Afghanistan, Libya and, of course, Iraq – soon took leadership of the toughest units away from the moderate insurgents.

And then Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi decided to become supreme leader of the global jihad. The position became vacant in 2011, when American commandos killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. In January 2014 al-Baghdadi refused to obey al-Qaeda central command, which was hiding out somewhere in the Afghan–Pakistani mountains. Just as he had in Iraq, he now gave the other Islamists in Syria a choice: join my grand plan or die. Many of them agreed. Others refused, and a war of jihadist groups broke out in the midst of the civil war. By the time it ended there were more than a thousand dead and Islamic State had established an Islamist hegemony in eastern Syria.

A number of field victories, suicidal courage on the front and a strategy of ruthless brutality towards enemies started to bring Islamic State successes in the field of psychological war as well. Propaganda became just as important as the war itself.

In the summer of 2014, Islamic State began to spread like a black tide across eastern Syria and northern and western Iraq. Army divisions scattered before a determined and exceedingly cruel enemy. Extensive desert areas, long highways and remote towns fell into the hands of triumphant jihadists just as quickly as major cities: in Syria, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, and in Iraq, Mosul, Fallujah and Saddam's birthplace, Tikrit.

And the brutality escalated. The massacres of captured Shia/Arab soldiers and civilians showed who Islamic State hated the most. Then came the genocide of the Iraqi religious minority the Yezidis. Thousands of women and girls became sex slaves, and men, older women and boys ended up as victims of mass murder on these killing fields beneath the slopes of the sacred Sinjar mountains. A series of brutal murders of captured foreign journalists and humanitarian workers was intended to send a message to the West: leave us alone!