



VICTIMS OF KIDNAP:
THE DIFFICULT READJUSTMENT UPON RELEASE.
THE CONTRIBUTION OF
HOSTAGE ITALIA

By: Rita Russo

Kidnapping is a frightening and lonely experience, impacting not only the hostage, but their family, friends, community, colleagues and employers. As an independent charity, HOSTAGE ITALIA strives to make sure that people affected by kidnapping are supported throughout this ordeal.

Many, if not all, who have either directly or indirectly been caught up in the turmoil of a kidnapping will

attest to having at some stage experienced a profound sense of loneliness. The very visceral act of being taken hostage, or having a loved one taken hostage, represents a highly traumatic experience that catapults not only the hostage but also the individual's unsuspecting family, friends and colleagues into what can feel like a parallel universe. The same is true for victims of other terrorist activities that occur nationally and abroad. Everyone is looking for answers to questions for which there are no guidelines or operating manuals that can offer comfort or support. Beyond the intensity and

extreme volatility of the experience, hostage or terrorism-related crises can also last for lengthy periods of time; adding further complexity to the challenges and stresses faced by victims. Almost all those that have lived such events speak of having been marked for life by their experiences.

I have been interested in this area of trauma since 2012, after meeting Mariasandra Mariani, an Italian citizen kidnapped in Algeria by Al Qaeda in the Maghreb, where she remained for 14 months in extreme physical and psychological conditions. From this first encounter came many others with her, her family, as well as other hostages on their return to Italy along with their families. Families who lived in a "suspended time", a nervous and distressing wait for the return of their loved one.

This began a fruitful and synergistic collaboration between the Unità di Crisi ('Crisis Unit') of the Farnesina (Italian Foreign Ministry), the EMDR Association and numerous therapists who took care of the former hostages and the families who requested it.

In recent years, several Italian citizens have been kidnapped in foreign countries and have lived the terrible experience of imprisonment for long periods.

In many conflicts of our time, hostage-taking is the preferred weapon used by terrorist groups, to exercise power and spread terror also through the cynical, but generally effective, use of higher quality media that they are increasingly able to produce.

The experience gained in these years makes me say with deep conviction that the future psychological well-being of victims of kidnapping depends on the treatment they receive in the hours, days and weeks following their release, and on the subsequent appropriate work on their traumatic memories. The idea that people who have survived a period of imprisonment can simply be freed and resume their path in a free society alone is not sufficient for a proper rehabilitation and management of trauma. Hostages who survive in such special conditions

have managed to adapt to the environment around them and have managed to survive as a result. However, the skills needed to survive as a hostage are radically different from the skills needed to re-adapt to normal life. Long-lasting trauma, resulting from a kidnapping, leaves psychological wounds and indelible traces, which can resurface in time even in people that successfully managed their wellbeing in the moment.

KIDNAPPING AS A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Kidnapping is a highly traumatic event because it obliges the victim to confront possible death or the threat to their physical integrity, which in many cases encourages the development of long-lasting defensive emotional symptoms and reactions. Reactions which make it difficult and complex to readapt to normal life and to process trauma.

The experience of a kidnapping inherently leads to victims being forcibly deprived of their freedom and above all being forced to live for a (sometimes very long) period of time in primitive hygienic conditions, and lack of food, under constant fear of dying, with a total lack of communication and connection to the outside world. These conditions provoke psychological, cognitive and somatic reactions that differ according to the personality of the victim and the conditions of imprisonment, ranging from the submission of some to collusion, to aggressive reaction, or to resistance towards others. Already precarious living conditions are often aggravated by episodes of violence, sometimes real torture at the expense of the hostage. The victims are thus subjected to a whole series of deprivations and humiliations that can have a strong impact on the psychological, social and working functioning both in the immediate term and the future. It is a trauma that has physical and psychological consequences for the survival of the victim, and social consequences that also affect the family, friends and institutions.

The release from forced captivity does not necessarily close the chapter of a kidnapping event. The difficulty of readapting to a normal life and

reconnecting with one's daily life, of reappropriating one's own spaces and time after a kidnapping, can be another element of stress. The first contact with the family is a very strong emotional experience which for some can also represent a challenge. Victims of kidnapping return to a changed physical and psychological appearance, as relatives have changed in going through this experience and find themselves renegotiating ways to enter into a relationship and wondering how to behave in such circumstances.

At the intrapsychic level, being exposed in a continuous way to situations of danger and the threat of death tends to have distinctive effects on the memory and integration of the functions of perception, identity and awareness. If the victim of a single acute trauma can feel that they are "no longer themselves", the victim of a chronic trauma can feel that they have changed irrevocably and have lost all sense of self:

"...this kidnapping left a heavy mark on me. The impact with the world on my return was equally severe. I first found myself coming to grips with a very changed world... but apart from that, which was already not little, I found myself coming to grips with a different me...".

The above quote illustrates that appropriate specialist intervention is needed to help the victims of kidnapping and their families find a new balance after such a devastating experience.

SUPPORT UPON RETURN AND THE INITIATION OF EMDR THERAPY

Although each kidnapping is a unique experience and each victim has lived and still lives his or her kidnapping in a deeply personal and subjective manner, it is possible to delineate 'stages' that define what this type of victim goes through during detention, after release and along their therapy journey, and what the most appropriate treatments to follow are.

In the acute phase, immediately following a release and from the point of first contact, it is essential

to enter into a relationship defined by empathy and sympathy with the individual. Critical to this stage is the ability to immediately establish a bond whilst providing non-invasive support. Victims of kidnapping became very vigilant in captivity and understand everything because they simply had to survive: "... from the moment of kidnapping until release, I lost the sense of time, space and life. For almost six months, the most important engagement I had was: don't die, don't go crazy, don't cry."

It is important to restore a sense of trust within them, something deeply undermined by their experience of kidnapping and imprisonment, and to initiate an early recovery of their sense of control over their lives, thus reducing the feeling that they have been subjected to the dominant behaviour of the kidnappers: "...there will be a way to regain their liberties calmly and it is good that we are not forced to make unnecessary and irrelevant choices on the outside, but that are prohibited until a moment before they could provoke some tension again, by triggering feelings of guilt or remembering the fear of punishment." In practice, the immediate intervention on the individual aims at emotional decompression and normalisation, the effect of which is to depathologise and contextualise the strong emotional reactions felt: "they threatened me and my brain started to function differently, I felt something going off inside, while a current was driving me away. It's like I've come out of myself. To hear a specialist tell me I'm not crazy reassures me."

Acceptance and normalisation in the period following liberation, favours the creation of a "safe base", a reference that has been maintained over time and that facilitates the referral to a specialized psychotherapeutic treatment through EMDR.

In the early stages of EMDR therapy, prolonged stabilisation and psychoeducation is desirable in order to re-establish strongly impaired temporal and spatial links and work towards the resolution of dissociative states. The work on the memories of a victim's experiences in detention allows the individual to regain their emotions, link them to their experiences during the kidnapping and do so in a

protected environment. The goal is to recreate the link between the experience and the emotion that the mind had broken to protect itself during detention: "..... through the EMDR. I rediscovered my emotions and a renewed awareness that slowly brought me home..." The resources that were leveraged in that extreme situation and allowed them to survive can resurface in the therapy room. Forced and prolonged inactivity, along with prolonged conditions of heightened alarm leads to a freezing state that is maintained even after release.

EMDR therapy has contributed to the restructuring and return of the identity of the person who integrated their kidnapping and what it has meant in terms of establishing a new sense of self. The clear result of the EMDR treatment with these types of victims can be found in the following testimony: "...EMDR for me was a struggle to legitimise the indescribable suffering caused by the kidnapping. But more than that, a struggle to legitimise my identity, my place in the world, my sense. I mean... EMDR has been a very difficult journey. The question then becomes: was it worth it? Yes... it's as if the kidnapping had hit me like a bomb... and through therapy I took the rubble into my hands, legitimised my suffering and finally gave my life a new form."

Support to the families of hostages during the detention and return home of their loved one deserves separate analysis. From my interaction with some of the relatives of hostage cases, I started asking myself questions: how did or do they experience the news about the kidnapping of their family member? How have they dealt with his/her release and how will they deal with it? What emotions coexist with the long period of imprisonment of a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, a husband, a father. From these questions, for some of which there are no simple answers and from the meeting with Giovanna Motka, mother of Federico Motka, an Italian aid worker kidnapped by ISIS in Syria, the idea was born of the foundation Hostage Italia, an independent and non-profit association that aims to provide psychological and practical support to the families of the hostages and the hostages when they return to their homeland. Hostage Italia makes use of

the valuable collaboration of the EMDR Association and its therapists and provides support from people who have been involved in one way or another and have experienced this terrible experience of the kidnapping (former hostages and family members).

Hostage Italia onlus offers independent emotional and practical support to families affected by a loved one held hostage, and former hostages after their release.

At Hostage Italia, a group of ex-hostages, ex-hostages' family members, and experts in their respective fields came together to offer support to those facing the trauma of such events head-on. The first and only organization of its kind in Italy, Hostage Italia extends all manner of services to the victims of kidnapping and their families so that no individual need feel abandoned. Set up as a non-profit association, its mission is to assist victims to navigate and manage the many questions and choices they are confronted with at a time of particular distress and duress. Through a network of responders who have themselves experienced the trauma of a kidnap, alongside specialist service providers from key sectors, Hostage Italia accompanies victims upon their return, and their families throughout the period of disappearance and process of reintegration of their loved one. The form this support takes depends on the needs of the individual, but can cover technical or personal needs. Any engagement by Hostage Italia is initiated by the individual via our hotline, website or through any member of our wider contact network.

We provide:

SUPPORT – Independent emotional and practical support to families affected by a loved one held hostage, and hostages after release;

TRAINING – Tailored training in family support. Our bespoke approach incorporates our direct experience and knowledge of family issues into our training to help organizations which operate in high risk environments;

UNDERSTANDING – A commitment to improving

understanding about the plight of hostages and returning hostages.

Support

Our depth and breadth of knowledge within the Italian context is magnified by our connection to a global network represented by the UK-based Hostage International. The last decade has proven that hostage-taking is a global rather than national problem. We are deeply aware of this at Hostage Italia and although we are an Italian organization with a deep understanding of the social and political realities in Italy, we have purposefully enabled our organization to be in a position to leverage a truly global network of resources.

Hostage Italia is entirely dependent on a network of volunteers who offer their specialised expertise to serve the particular needs of victims of terrorist activities and their families. We are however a nascent organisation and recognise the need to professionalise and structure our systems and approach so as to better serve the individuals and institutions that depend on us. This is also critical for our ability to become self-sustaining and to more effectively engage in advocacy around important conversations that are constantly taking place at a national and European level.

Since our inception we have sought to strengthen Hostage Italia's response capabilities. We are constantly building our network of specialists and responders and continue to welcome interest from any stakeholder across Italy and Europe. We have so far operated as a very tight network which has allowed us to respond quickly and in a highly agile manner based on the requirements of the moment. Whilst this was the right way for us to rapidly launch an active presence, this approach limits our ability to expand and be operationally able to handle larger and more complex workloads. Formalising the network and establishing the training packages and operating manuals that currently exist informally will be key to our being able to absorb and manage a wider network of volunteers. Furthermore, the peculiarities of the Italian context is such that pure pro-bono services are rarely available beyond an initial phase of acute

need. Given that the majority of cases in which we have direct experience last for 6 months, the reality is that we require access to funds that would allow us to formally engage specialised services (at a discounted rate) when critically necessary and where our clients are unable to meet what are often unexpected / unplanned cost[s].

Training

We also however recognise the value of greater preparedness by all stakeholders across Italian society. Individuals, businesses / corporations with international presence, local and regional authorities, media entities, national governments – every one of these stakeholders have critical roles to play. Whether the aim is to mitigate the risk exposure individuals and business face in their international operations, or to be better prepared to manage a crisis when such events do occur, the stark reality of our collective lessons-learned is that much more can and indeed should be done to exercise duty-of-care that is embedded in a principle of "do-no-harm". Stakeholders in such circumstances are often asked to perform a delicate balance between providing duty-of-care (even when this is a moral imperative rather than a legal liability) whilst exercising their day-to-day responsibilities. At times the needs of those directly involved in a hostage crisis may seem diametrically opposed to their own. At Hostage Italia we believe that with greater dialogue and through greater training before any crisis occurs, the interests of all parties can align, to the benefit of victims and their families directly and for society as a whole.

To achieve this we intend to develop and formalise a package of seminars and workshops along with associated participant materials that cover topics encouraging institutions and individuals to prepare for, and practice, greater duty-of-care towards their own stakeholders (and, ideally, their families) and to streamline 'do-no-harm' and other safeguarding principles across their operational frameworks and associated manuals. These seminars and workshops will eventually develop into a package of paid-for services that we intend to offer to businesses, professional networks, international non-profit

organizations, and relevant government agencies at-cost and as a means to fundraise for future activities.

Understanding

As one of our co-founders, Federico Motka, wrote in a preface to Umberto Saccone's book "Protocollo S": "The phenomenon of kidnapping and ransom as a power tactic is unlikely to disappear anytime soon; it is that effective (and brutal) a weapon. Although the incidences of kidnapping ebb and flow, it presents a constant menace. Most importantly, it is a threat that doesn't only manifest itself to those who make the difficult choice to work in high-risk environments; history teaches us that kidnapping and ransom can permeate any society."

Given this reality, we intend to offer our support and experience to efforts that advocate for legislative and operational changes across our society that benefit those impacted by hostage-taking. Hostage Italia delivers training and tools for businesses, government departments, media groups and NGOs around best practices in family support and hostage reintegration. Through our services, we encourage stakeholders to adopt policies and practices that balance duty-of-care with their other imperatives, and support efforts to raise the level of discourse nationally and internationally around how best to protect citizens from, and respond to, hostage-related crimes.

Critical to this advocacy effort is the establishment of a body of proof that offers tangible recommendations for policy and decision-makers across the breadth of Italian society. We intend to set up a small grants fund to support individuals from the academic and professional sectors to undertake, and ideally collaborate on, research efforts that can help generate positive public discourse around a subject that in many ways has been victim to un-verified and un-informed statements of fact.

Partnerships

Hostage Italia is a member of the umbrella group of 'Hostage' organizations led by Hostage International which is based in the United Kingdom. Hostage International extends its services across primarily

Anglo-phone countries across the globe, although a separate entity – Hostage US – established and supported by the James Foley Legacy Foundation founded by James Foley's mother Diane Foley. James and Federico experienced their kidnapping ordeal together in Syria.

Since its launch, Hostage Italia has developed formal and informal partnerships with a wide variety of stakeholders including, but not limited to:

ASIS Italy Chapter; Associazione EMDR Italia; Auxilia Group; Hostage International; Hostage US; Ifi Advisory Services; Unità di Crisi della Farnesina

Each of these partners support our work and offer our organisation different platforms from which to advocate and engage new audiences and expand our reach. Hostage Italia conducts many engagements across Italy, participating in events that are relevant to its work. Since its inception, members of the core Hostage Italia team have participated in TV interviews², ASIS Italia's Security Manager 4.0 annual event focused on knowledge development and exchange in the security sector, and have been directly and indirectly involved in different published books³. These partnerships will be crucial for Hostage Italia to evolve and create a more self-sustaining financing model. Indeed, Hostage Italia intends to leverage relationships it continuously develops to evolve its fundraising ability. We are currently also exploring a number of options to connect with corporate philanthropic institutions as well as develop an online crowdfunding approach. My thoughts go to those who are still hostages and their families.....

For more info check out the website www.Hostageitalia.it 

