

# Journalist Richard Engel's 2012 kidnapping account was part of drive to war with Syria

By David Walsh  
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In December 2012, NBC chief correspondent Richard Engel and five other members of a news team were allegedly kidnapped in Syria near the Turkish border. According to Engel, the gunmen claimed to be Shiite supporters of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. After five days, the NBC newsman said at the time, the news team was rescued by anti-Assad Sunni rebels in a gun battle.

The media's coverage of the kidnapping became part of the effort to influence public opinion in the US and worldwide in favor of military action against the Assad regime. It accompanied charges about the use of chemical weapons and other atrocities allegedly committed by the Syrian government and armed forces.

It turns out that Engel and the others were not taken by pro-Assad forces, but were held, according to the *New York Times* on April 15, "by a Sunni criminal element affiliated with the Free Syrian Army," i.e., anti-Assad forces supported and financed by Washington.

The *Times* goes on: "The group, known as the North Idlib Falcons Brigade, was led by two men, Azzo Qassab and Shukri Ajouj, who had a history of smuggling and other crimes. The kidnapping ended ... when the team was freed by another rebel group, Ahrar al-Sham, which had a relationship with Mr. Qassab and Mr. Ajouj." In fact, "Abu Ayman, the rebel commander credited with freeing the team, is related by marriage to Mr. Ajouj, and ... staged the rescue."

Perhaps more damning is the revelation that NBC news executives knew at the time of Qassab and Ajouj's involvement, and who they were, but "the network moved quickly to put Mr. Engel on the air with an account blaming Shiite captors and did not present the other possible version of events." In other words, NBC's coverage of the event was a big lie and

the network *Times* piece The notes that "Just hours after emerging" from their captivity, Engel—not known for his aversion to publicity—and his team "appeared on the 'Today' show."

One has every right to ask: was Engel informed of the real facts, and, if so, when? It strains credulity to believe that in the intervening two plus years, NBC executives have not told their chief foreign correspondent who probably grabbed him.

In his own account, now posted on the NBC News website, Engel claims that "About a month ago, we were contacted by the New York Times. The newspaper had uncovered information that suggested the kidnappers were not who they said they were and that the Syrian rebels who rescued us had a relationship with the kidnappers."

The NBC correspondent asserts that he and his associates carried out an investigation and discovered that the group "that kidnapped us was Sunni, not Shia," that they "put on an elaborate ruse to convince us they were Shiite Shabiha militiamen," and that "the group that freed us also had ties to the kidnappers."

In his original and lurid account, published by *Vanity Fair* magazine ("The Hostage"), Engel claimed that at the time of his capture by the supposed Shiite, pro-Assad forces, the anti-Assad rebel commander accompanying his team, Abdelrazaq, was kicked in the face and had a rifle butt smashed into his back at least twice. Engel provided a dramatic account of Abdelrazaq's bodyguard later being shot, although the journalist said he was blindfolded at the time: "The gunmen had their AK-47s set on burst. They each fired four or five rapid shots, paused, then squeezed off another burst. The bodyguard didn't scream or utter a word. He died too quickly for that. I heard his body hit the ground." He subsequently recounted how his

rescuers shot and killed two of the kidnapers.

Was any of this true?

Engel now writes more modestly in regard to the first death (he makes no mention of the beatings): “We heard gunshots and what sounded like the thud of a falling body.” In regard to the deaths of his alleged kidnapers at the time of his rescue, Engel tries to pin the blame for any misinformation on his producer, Aziz Akyavas. The NBC journalist writes that their chief rescuer said, “he and his men had killed the two kidnapers. Under the circumstances, and especially since Aziz said that he had seen and stepped over a body, I didn't doubt it and later reported it as fact.”

The exposure of this affair hardly comes as a surprise. The American media has become a ceaseless fount of falsification.

Engel is an unwavering propagandist for the US war drive in the Middle East and around the globe. He can generally be seen anywhere American armed forces are about to invade or pound with bombs some essentially defenseless country. He has donned a flak jacket and had his hair mussed up on numerous Middle Eastern borders. It is not difficult to track down video footage of Engel reporting from or on Iraq, Libya, Syria, Egypt, Iran and Yemen, and always following the State Department line or some variation of it.

In December 2014, Engel was prominent in denouncing the release of the Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA torture. In regard to the barbaric activities documented in the report, Engel falsely claimed the torture was “legal at the time” and, anyway, the CIA “was asked to do it.” He crossly suggested the report’s release was about “rewriting the narrative of history” and “settling scores.”

Engel’s *Vanity Fair* account needs to be read to gain a full appreciation of the man and his milieu. The piece reads like a potboiler novel, or perhaps a trash movie script. His internal monologues are especially banal, and often self-serving:

*“ This can’t be happening. I know what this is. This can’t be happening. These are the shabiha. They’re fucking kidnapping us . ... That’s where they are going to put us. That’s here for us. We’re going into that truck. ... Maybe I should run. Maybe I should run right now. But the road is flat and open. The only cover is by the trees near the truck. Maybe I should run. But where ? ”*

Did any of the dialogue among the prisoners and their sadistic, or mock-sadistic, captors that Engel recounts actually take place? To demonstrate the ruthlessness of Assad’s supporters, Engel has the chief kidnapper declare: ““You come here to write that we kill children and that there is no bread and that people are suffering? This is our country. Yes, we use cluster bombs and kill their children’—he was referring to the Sunnis in revolt against the government. ‘Yes, we kill their women. We will kill all their women so they won’t give birth to more dogs. We will destroy their villages. We will leave nothing. We will burn this country.’”

However, even amid the graphic descriptions of killings (which never took place) and threatened torture (one has the right to be skeptical), Engel never fails to drive home his themes: he is merely a journalist with a concern for human rights in Syria, America has no interests in Syria, the war there is a purely sectarian conflict, the Assad regime is monstrous, etc.

Out of the blue, Engel also offers this odd aside: “An Egyptian newspaper once publicly identified me as the C.I.A. station chief in Cairo. It seemed so stupid at the time. I was only 24, a little young to be a station chief, and, of course, I was never with the C.I.A.”

The incident, including Engel’s account in *Vanity Fair*, one of the voices of New York’s ignorant and self-absorbed well-to do, further demonstrates to what extent the media and the pseudo-intelligentsia have identified and aligned themselves fully, whatever the cost, with the American ruling elite’s drive for global domination.

Why should we believe anything Richard Engel and his media counterparts say?

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