

Alan Johnston

From nowhere to the most terrible place

The Observer, December 2007

At the beginning of March, even people at the BBC hadn't heard of Alan Johnston. He was 44 and bald, and his work as a reporter in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Gaza had earned him a reputation for adventurousness and composure, but these were not attributes to set him apart from the rest of the crowd on the World Service and From Our Own Correspondent. You wouldn't have recognised him in the street, and you would struggle to quote a memorable line from any of his dispatches.

In one of these reports from January 2006, towards the end of his second year in Gaza, he had mused on the peculiarities of the local kidnap. 'In Iraq an abduction can end in the most brutal murder,' he said. 'But fortunately Gaza is not Iraq, nothing like it. So far, all the foreigners kidnapped here have been freed quite quickly and unharmed.'

He listed three obscure militant groups that he likened to the Keystone Cops. He did not mention the Army of Islam, whose members hustled him from his car in spring sunshine on 12 March and brought his period of professional obscurity to a close.

Within a week of his disappearance he was the most spoken of reporter within the BBC, possibly the world. For once, we couldn't wait to hear from him. There were posters, banners, petitions; his father made impassioned appeals; people who valued liberty and the freedom of ideas held candlelit vigils in far-flung places.

Johnston was held captive for 114 days, and we could only imagine his prolonged deprivations - a basement, perhaps, with beatings and torture, occasionally punctuated by gunpoint videos atoning for the sins of the West.

On his release, we learnt more. He was not beaten, he was initially

on a roof, and after a while he was given a radio on which he followed his own plight (uniquely, he had the exclusive, the inside scoop). The truth of his confinement was more mundane than our worst imaginings, but no less intolerable. 'I paced backwards and forwards across the cell. Five strides, then a turn, and five strides back. Mile after mile after mile. Imagine yourself in that room. Imagine pacing, or just sitting for three hours. For five hours. For 10 hours. After you had done 12 hours, you'd still have four or five more before you could hope to fall asleep. And you would know that the next day would be the same, and the next, and the one after that, and so on, and on and on.'

Meeting him now, in the office of Profile Books, the publisher of his collected radio dispatches, he says he just wants to disappear again. He is being interviewed reluctantly, to publicise his book, and there are some ground rules. He has requested only a limited number of questions. He will tape-record the proceedings himself to document his answers and guard against misquotation. He says he is flattered by the continued attention, but he has had enough of being the story.

Johnston's speech is slightly breathless, and he smiles with almost every observation. I wonder whether, no matter what he achieves in the future, he won't principally be known for the one terrible thing that was beyond his control.

'It's entirely possible. Brian Keenan said, "Welcome to the club." It is quite a small and exclusive club that nobody wants in to.'

He believes that memories are fading already. 'I asked a guy in Tesco the other day, a shelf-stacking guy, where the Cokes were, and he said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, I know you... Don't tell me..." He was wondering maybe what soap opera I was in or who I played football for, and then he eventually gave up. I said, "I'm that kidnap guy." He goes, "Iraq!" and I said, "Well, nearly." And then he showed me where the Cokes were. I think that if I came back in a year's time he would just show me where the Cokes were straight off.'

Johnston was abducted three weeks before he was due to return to Britain. The plan was to work at Bush House newsroom for a year, and then perhaps spend time in Damascus perfecting his Arabic. The year in the newsroom will begin in January, but the move after that is uncertain. 'I want time for things to get much more normal.'

I asked whether he had seen an analyst. He said that the BBC flew out a psychologist, and they talked on his second day of freedom. Subsequently there have been phone chats and an hour-long meeting, but that appears to be the end of it.

'I feel I'm fine and he does too. This was a serious thing, and I guess I have to be on alert for it coming back at me in some way in nine months or a year or 18 months. If they'd been coming in every few days and knocking me about, the whole business of surviving it and the whole aftermath would have been much harder. As it was it was a psychological game, and although I didn't win every battle, I felt that I was always in the fight. I felt I came out of it as well as I could mentally.'

For a short while after his release he had nightmares and difficulty concentrating. But he maintains he was 'the world's luckiest kidnap victim' because of the attention he received and the diplomatic lobbying for his release.

'I was aware that there would be people - journalists and others - in basements and makeshift cells in Mexico and Columbia and the Philippines and Iraq, and their names wouldn't be known beyond their circle of family and friends. And there I was... I thought that if any of those guys were listening they would think, "That BBC guy gets all the attention." So I honestly felt then that I would do what I could with my heightened profile to shed some light on them.'

He has upped his work for Amnesty, and delivered an address at International PEN. 'The idea that worthwhile people on the outside are watching and worrying is a huge thing. And even if your message doesn't penetrate the cell walls, the chances are that the

guards will be aware that the world is watching - mine certainly were. The message to them is that you might be doing what you're doing in dark places, but your inhumanity and injustice is not going unnoticed.'

When his ordeal was over, Johnston spent some time in Scotland with his parents, and then holidayed in Spain alone. He has neither wife nor children, although he does speak of one day finding the right woman.

'I always thought that because I didn't have kids, then it was easier,' he says. 'And then when I was in trouble in the biggest way I realised just how much my parents were paying the price. I hadn't thought so much of my responsibility for staying out of trouble on their behalf. It was terrible once I realised that I had visited the worst possible situation on them.'

When Johnston met Brian Keenan in Dublin, the first thing he said to him was: 'I did four months and I know you did four years or more,' and Keenan replied: 'Four hours is enough in those places.' Johnston has also talked to Terry Waite and John McCarthy on the phone, and found an immediate connection: 'The things they say, the way they start sentences. Having said that, it doesn't trouble me that many people don't know exactly what it was like.'

When he talks to others he anticipates familiar questions. Many wonder what was the worst moment. And what did he eat? They ask whether his attitude to the conflict has changed: 'I am absolutely clear that whatever happened it wouldn't be very impressive for me to re-order my whole view of the Middle East or the wider dispute between East and West on account of a one-off experience to myself. You need to have a more secure grip on the dynamics of the political landscape than to have it reordered by the actions of an unpleasant guard.'

So what did he eat?

'I was in real trouble diet-wise. I was ill in a way that I thought

might lead to complications that might lead to my death. But I worked out that they did seem to be able to make chips. I've always trusted chips anywhere in the world. No bacteria from the Hindu Kush to the Atlas can survive sizzling oil. So I felt that if they could be persuaded to bring me a plate of chips for lunch every day... Half of British teenagers get by on exactly that and still have the strength to trash foreign holiday resorts,' he points out.

Now he likes to sit in London cafes with a croissant and a paper, but there are interruptions. 'Maybe once a day somebody does say in the nicest way, "I'm glad you got out." Or mostly they say, "I think your Dad was great." But it's by no means any kind of problem. As I said to the people at the Beeb, there are a lot of bald blokes out there, and we all do look pretty much the same.'

Johnston smiles. 'Andy Warhol says we get 15 minutes, and I think I'm in my 14th.'

But this sounds like wishful thinking.