

Our journey into the dark heart of Isil

The only Western writer to be invited by the Islamists talks exclusively to Joe Shute about meeting Jihadi John and why he took his son

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My Journey into the Heart of Terror by Jürgen Todenhofer (Greystone Books, £17.99).



Islamist fighters parading in Raqqa in June 2014 to celebrate their declaration of a ‘caliphate’

There is a roundabout in the centre of the Syrian city of Raqqa where few dare to tread. The swirl of decorative concrete surrounded by a wrought iron fence was once intended as a cheery feature. But nowadays it is one of the most dangerous places on earth; where the world’s most brutal terrorist group displays the severed heads of its enemies.

When the German author and journalist Jürgen Todenhofer and his son Frederic found themselves being driven around the notorious improvised gibbet – mercifully free of fresh victims – they knew they had arrived in the dark heart of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil). The pair had come to Raqqa as the first western journalists ever invited by the group. No one had been that far and avoided capture – or far worse. As they stared at the arrow-shaped spikes, they prayed they would be the first to return alive.

Isil has established an unrivalled reputation for barbarism. In 2014, six western hostages were publicly executed, including US journalist James Foley and British aid workers Alan Henning and David Haines. To visit of one's own volition is incomprehensible to most. To take your only son something else altogether. But in early December 2014 that was what Mr Todenhöfer decided. The 75-year-old and his 32-year-old son would travel across the group's sprawling territories in Syria and Iraq, interviewing the jihadists and living in constant fear of being turned upon by their hosts.

The masked driver allocated to them and who would often lash out with fury, later transpired to be the executioner Jihadi John.

The full account of those horrifying 10 days is detailed in a new book, *My Journey Into the Heart of Terror*, which has become a bestseller in Germany and is published in the UK this month. This is the first full interview they have given to a British newspaper.

We meet in old Munich, in a woodpanelled medieval building from where he runs his charitable foundation established in 2008 to support sufferers of multiple sclerosis. (Todenhöfer's youngest daughter Nathalie, 30, has the disease.) It works with Munich's elderly as well as in several conflict areas. All the book royalties are going to support child amputees from the war in Syria.

A former judge and politician, writer Jürgen Todenhöfer looks easily a decade younger in his biker jacket. He has, however, spent time with some of the most brutal men on the planet. Previously, he met leaders of the Mujahedeen in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan and latterly the Taliban and al-Qaeda. In 2012, he first interviewed the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and has done so several times since. "If you want to find the truth, you must speak to both sides," he says.

In the summer of 2014 (assisted by Frederic) he sent a message on Facebook to more than 80 German jihadists asking for help to make inroads into Isil. Despite being a fierce critic, he claimed to want to understand its motives better.

On September 9, a man called Abu Qatadah responded. Previously known as Christian Emde, this 31-year-old German convert who had travelled to Syria in early 2013 had now assumed a prominent role in Isil's media unit. After months of Skype conversations, Todenhöfer received a piece of paper stamped by the caliphate as a guarantee of his safety. It came with the caveat that were he to commit the unspecified crime of "blasphemy" he would be executed. At the start of December he was ready to go.

Frederic, a filmmaker, had accompanied his father on trips to war zones, including Syria, but Jürgen's French wife Françoise (the couple remain married despite separating in 2004) and two daughters Nathalie and Valerie, 33, pleaded with him to stay behind.

Eventually, though, Frederic persuaded his father by saying he would be unable to live with the guilt if something happened. Equally, Jürgen says: "I knew I couldn't come back without my son. They would have needed to kill me as well."

When Isil announced their visit on Twitter the pair began receiving online death threats from anonymous jihadi sympathisers. “Before I left I had recurring dreams where somebody was drawing a knife across my throat but with the blunt edge,” Jürgen says.

They headed to the Turkish city of Gaziantep from where they were smuggled into Syria. After a few days they were picked up in one of two cars transporting the latest recruits. During their trip they encountered jihadists from a league of nations, including Britain. Among them was a German from Berlin, her blonde hair and blue eyes visible beneath a black cloak. She was travelling alone but told them she had a six-year-old child who had been taken away by the security services in Germany.

At the border they crawled under the barbed wire and were taken to an Isil registration centre – with a PlayStation occupying pride of place on the main desk – then on to a safe house where they slept on the floor alongside new foreign recruits from the US and Lebanon, separated only by their AK-47s.

From here they were met by Abu Qatadah and a driver whose face was almost entirely obscured by a charcoal scarf which showed only half-hooded eyes. The man remained with them throughout the trip and spoke in a thick London accent with barely concealed loathing. “The difference to the other trips is this time we were with the bad guys,” says Frederic. “I knew they hated us.”

In Raqqa, their mobile phones were confiscated and they were taken to an apartment with no electricity or running water. The foreign fighters they stayed with moved between an array of basic accommodation to hide from drones.

“Living (in Raqqa) there was a surprising normality,” Jürgen says. “Propaganda videos show fighters marching carrying machine guns but it is different. There is traffic in the streets; the souks are busy – it’s the normality of evil.”

While requests for interviews with senior command were denied, they were taken on visits to enhance the notion of a functioning state. They were shown a hospital draped in the black flags; an Isil publishing house in Mosul which had reams of pamphlets, including “How To Handle Your Slaves” and “How Women Should Behave And Dress”.

Takeaway vendors sold Pepsi, Snickers bars, pizza, cheeseburgers and fries to Isis fighters, who top up their salaries by being allowed to claim four fifths of any spoils of war. Christians living in Raqqa are forced to pay a Jizya, protection money of about \$630 a year and Muslims pay a religious tax.

While they did not witness any torture, their guides boasted of punishments, included 30 lashes for smoking in public and amputation for theft of an item worth more than \$40. A judge offered to haul a prisoner out of jail to execute for them on the spot.

Even if the streets were thronged – on one occasion they passed a wedding party – it was only with men. Foreign fighters swaggered among the local population, discussing the price of Yazidi women slaves (\$1,500 – the same as a Kalashnikov) in between hip hop and football. Fear and loathing on both sides was palpable.

“They are people who were unimportant in the West and now told they are in an apocalyptic last battle between good and evil – heroes in Nike trainers and Jack Wolfskin boots,” says Jürgen. “They were posing with their brutality and talking openly and proudly about a religious cleansing if they had the power.”

And this hatred of the West and boasting of world domination was to bubble up further. Continuing their trip to Mosul, Jürgen was stopped by one foreign fighter. “He said, ‘I just want you to know that one day we will come to Germany, we will find you and we will kill you.’”

On a trip to the toilet, Jürgen accidentally encountered his driver without his mask; his hair fell in black curls around his shoulders and his nose was sharply hooked. Even though Isil would later deny it, they are convinced it was the British twenty-something Mohammed Emwazi, known as Jihadi John, who was killed by a drone last November.

He was clearly in command. Recalling the night the two were abandoned alone with no food while the terrorists held a meeting in a nearby bungalow, Jürgen says. “Even now I refuse to think about what could have happened.”

Instead, Jihadi John ordered the confiscation of all their camera equipment – although only a handful of 800 photographs were deleted – then he drove them to the border and left them without a word at a safe house where they could later cross into Turkey.

Within minutes of leaving Syria, Jürgen phoned his family to find them hysterical. Despite their hosts promising to email every day assuring their family of their safety, there had not been a single message. His daughter Valerie describes the wait as “the worst week of my life”.

Jürgen admits it was several months before he could sleep properly again. His account casts a darker light still on Isil and he admits the threat of a reprisal attack is very real.

So what else did his journey prove? “We can show they have nothing to do with Islam,” Todenhöfer considers for another moment. “And they are much more dangerous than we thought.”