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SAKARYA, TURKEY

DAY

Ismael al-Ethawi does not know he is being watched.

The terrorist walks through the crowded bazaar wearing a checkered head covering and three-day facial stubble. He is fifty-five years old. The ISIS courier and top lieutenant to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi moves easily past the vending stalls, in no particular hurry to conduct his shopping. He holds a PhD in Islamic studies from the University of Anbar in his hometown of Ramadi, Iraq, and is one of five men al-Baghdadi trusts. One of al-Ethawi's key roles is selecting leaders for the ISIS command-and-control structure, but he also delivers religious messages to various ISIS factions. Al-Ethawi is in charge of issuing a fatwa—religious punishment—for those accused of breaking with their faith. In short, Ismael al-Ethawi is personally responsible for stonings, beheadings, and murdering people by throwing them off rooftops.

The terrorist fled Iraq with his wife months ago, when US and Iraqi forces recaptured Mosul. The couple arrived in Turkey and live in this small town outside Istanbul. Al-Ethawi has taken on a new identity, using the name of his brother, but an informant now recognizes him from a photograph. Quickly, Turkish authorities place him under surveillance.

What happens next to Ismael al-Ethawi is still classified. What we do know is that he is arrested. The Turks keep him in custody for a time, extracting what information they can. The terrorist is then handed over to Iraqi authorities.

It is more than likely that al-Ethawi was taken to the Iraqi Intelligence and Counter Terrorism Office's prison in Qayyarah, forty miles south of Mosul, which has a very low release rate. This facility is notorious for torture. Interrogations start with being blindfolded and beaten, then grow more medieval. One method of extracting information is to handcuff wrists behind backs, then use a rope to slowly raise the arms to the ceiling, dislocating the shoulders.

As this is taking place, the suspect is whipped on his bare back and the soles of the feet with a metal cable. Iraqi interrogators call this the “bazooka.” There is also the technique of burning a man’s testicles with a hot steel ruler. Often, a combination of the two is utilized, with a man hung in the bazooka position and beaten while a one-liter bottle of water is tied to his penis with a thin string, cutting deep into the flesh.

It doesn’t take long for Ismael al-Ethawi to “turn.” In a word, he becomes an informant.

The ISIS terrorist begins telling the Iraqis what they want to know: how he and other ISIS leaders travel freely through Syria and Iraq, including the common method of hiding within a pile of vegetables inside a minivan. He reveals the locations of al-Baghdadi’s many secret homes. Curiously, he says that the ISIS chief prefers to hide within a region of Syria controlled by a new rival terror organization called Hayat Tahrir al- Sham. That crew is led by a former ISIS leader turned enemy named Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Al- Baghdadi’s hideout is located in a mountainous and poor area, far from military patrols. His compound is honeycombed with escape tunnels. In fact, the ISIS leader is behaving in precisely the same manner as Osama bin Laden—sheltering in a walled compound just outside a busy town. The Iraqis soon pass the information along to the CIA, which immediately begins the process of spying on al- Baghdadi using drones and satellites.

The information provided by al-Ethawi leads to air strikes on hidden ISIS compounds and munitions factories in Syria. Thirty-six terrorists are killed. The fact that al- Ethawi is in custody is not known to ISIS— which thinks he is still operating freely. There is absolutely no suspicion that his confession led to the bombings.

“Ethawi gave valuable information which helped the Iraqi multi-security agencies team complete the missing pieces of the puzzle of Baghdadi’s movements and places he used to hide,” as one Iraqi security official describes the terrorist’s confession.

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One thing is for certain: al-Baghdadi never suspects his whereabouts have been compromised.

But Ismael al-Ethawi is not done providing information—and what he puts forth is horrible.

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His phone is the key.

One of the first items taken from Ismael al-Ethawi when he is captured is his cell phone. With the balding terrorist's help, the Iraqis unlock the device. Systematic interrogation follows, for the phone is a treasure trove of information— names, dates, locations of ISIS meetings and safe houses. Finally, al-Ethawi reveals the identities of the ISIS leaders whose names are encoded in the device.

The interrogators are stunned. They now have the names of some of the most infamous ISIS killers. Using an app known as Telegram, which is preferred in the terror world because of the ability to encode text messages, the interrogators begin a group chat. The American and Iraqi analysts begin assembling information. None of the terrorists on the chat know they are being played. One of those men is a person of incredible savagery.

“Ethawi gave us details on five men . . . who were meeting Baghdadi inside Syria and the different locations they used,” an Iraqi official will reveal.

The trap will soon be set.