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John Cantlie: a final message from a hostage to misfortune?

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John Cantlie has been producing video content and articles under duress. Futurenet1977 - Photograph taken by a friend Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY

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On February 9, Islamic State propagandists uploaded the latest video to feature captured British journalist John Cantlie. In the film, *From inside Halab (Aleppo)*, an expectedly unkempt and slightly dishevelled Cantlie presents a nevertheless mostly assured report from Syria's largest city.

His scripted delivery is clear and pronounced as he tours Aleppo delivering observations on his surroundings and interviewing in the style of a veteran travel broadcaster.

In a remarkable commentary lasting nearly 12 minutes, the camera follows Cantlie around as he tells us that the seriously war damaged city is home to "vibrant markets" where "livestock leisurely graze

on lush green grass”. We see the soldiers of the mujaheddin fishing, socialising and drinking tea. We see children in schools and in front of brightly coloured fruit stalls.

The message is clear: IS-controlled Aleppo is a city that, despite the Syrian and western bombs: “remains a place of serenity and surreal beauty” where the “standard of the caliphate flutters high”.

Cantlie's final film?

But the message of jihad is underlined in the video's final section when a French-speaking IS fighter refers to the recent attacks in France (clearly dating the documentary as after the Charlie Hebdo massacre of January 7).

Here Cantlie stands mute and nodding, holding the microphone in front of the young soldier who implores all of “brothers in the west” to defend their religion. They should start to carry out individual attacks, he says. Be as “wolves on the earth ... kill them with knives, at the very least strike them in the face ... So I call on you to come here or defend your religion wherever you are.”

And there, with one final call to attack, the broadcast ends. No coda, no piece to camera, no graphics, no end music. Just an abrupt halt to what Cantlie says at the start, is the “last film in this series”.

Professional quality

The two previous films: *From inside Ayn Al – Islam (Kobane)* and *From inside Mosul* follow much the same bizarre pattern. *From inside Mosul*, (uploaded on January 4) begins with a seemingly relaxed Cantlie addressing the audience in an almost irreverent Alan Whicker prime-time fashion:

Hello – I'm, John Cantlie. And today we're on top of the world in Mosul overlooking the second largest city in Iraq ... It's the absolute heartland of the Caliphate and home to 2m people from every walk of life.

The contrast between this approach and the extreme brutality evident in the footage of the beheadings of David Haines and Alan Henning or the murder of Jordanian pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh is glaringly apparent.

The Islamic State of Cantile's video is one that cares about its image and about what the West thinks. Walking around a market, where we are told everything is normal and busy, Cantlie says: "This is not a city living in fear as the western media would have you believe".

From inside Mosul.

So it is explicitly clear that these images of civilisation, prosperity and hope are meant to challenge the Western media and the prevailing perception of IS as barbaric, medieval and ultimately backward-looking.

At one stage, in a Sharia court room, Cantlie states: "Like any other law court in the world, they're playing TV in the background. This being the Islamic State, they're playing Islamic State videos. I must say, they're a lot more entertaining than watching the news at six."

Cantlie's reports seek to encourage comparison with Western life and to normalise life under the caliphate – for the observer and for those who might wish to join it.

Chilling message

The Inside... series is also reasonably well made and stylistically recognisable to viewers of current affairs programmes the world over. This is no surprise and the regressive, all-consuming rejection that IS has for the modern world clearly does not extend to the use of Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr and the other necessities of contemporary communication.

Writing about the fall of Mosul in June last year the Guardian's Patrick Kingsley, reasoned: "in wars gone by, advancing armies smoothed their path with missiles. Isis did it with tweets and a movie."

But of course the series is quite basic propaganda. As **Steve Rose** points out in his excellent article on Islamic State's hi-tech operations: "there is no evidence of in these films of abduction, rape, persecution, destruction of mosques, crucifixions, severed heads mounted on railings, whippings of women found not wearing the hijab and other Isis-inflicted atrocities. Women are barely visible at all, in fact."

But why would there be? This is a different, more palatable IS. And what of Cantlie? He is a popular and experienced war zone journalist who has worked previously in Afghanistan, Libya and Somalia and written for a number of familiar titles including the Sunday Times, Esquire, GQ and Top Gear magazine.

In July 2012 he was kidnapped by jihadists in Syria before being rescued. He returned to the country again in the November of that year before he was abducted by Islamic State.

Lend me your ears.

Nothing was heard from him until the Lend me your ears series of broadcasts which began in September 2014. In these, a clearly under-duress and undernourished Cantlie wearily addressed the camera sitting behind a desk and against a pitch-black backdrop.

For six instalments, clad in an orange jumpsuit (to presumably mirror those detainees in Guantanamo Bay and the garb worn by IS's other captives) he solemnly delivered his scripted material.

The Cantlie of Inside Mosul and Inside Halab uploads is markedly different. The clothes, the demeanour, the delivery – all much more professional and expressive. The occasional stutter and stumble notwithstanding, there is a confidence to him which, given his situation, is extraordinary.

There has been some speculation that his declaration to camera in Inside Halab that this was his “last film” somehow indicates that he has been murdered or that he soon will be. For the family and supporters of Cantlie it’s important to note that though he does say those words, he specifically emphasises with his hands, that it is “the last film in this series”.

Let’s hope that this means John Cantlie is alive and let’s hope he stays that way.

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