



## Iraq hostages 'were saved by rift among kidnappers'

*Guards got cold feet after American was shot  
Returning Kember 'failed to say thanks to rescuers'*

**Jonathan Steele in Amman, Ewen MacAskill and Richard Norton-Taylor**  
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*forwarded by Nancy Hawkins*

The British hostage Norman Kember and his two Canadian colleagues owe their freedom to a rift among their Iraqi kidnappers, a western security source close to the rescue operation said yesterday.

The source said their guards got cold feet when more senior and ruthless members of the group turned up at the house in Baghdad and took away a fourth hostage, Mr Kember's American colleague, Tom Fox, and shot him dead.

Mr Kember, 74, a Christian peace activist, is due to arrive home in Britain today. He was transported from the British embassy in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone yesterday to catch a plane from the international airport.

Before leaving, he said: "I have had the opportunity to have a shave, relax in a bath and have a good English breakfast. I'm very much looking forward to getting home to British soil and to being reunited with my family."

However, the head of the British army, General Sir Mike Jackson, expressed disappointment last night that Mr Kember, an avowed pacifist, did not thank those who had saved him.

The general told Channel 4 news he was "saddened that there does not seem to have been a note of gratitude for the soldiers who risked their lives to save those lives".

Mr Kember and the two Canadians, who are also due to fly home today, were found bound in a house in western Baghdad on Thursday morning in an SAS-led operation, part of Task Force Black, which is made up of SAS troops and MI6 officers hunting hostages and Iraqi war criminals. The kidnappers had fled.

Although Tony Blair, the defence secretary, John Reid, and the foreign secretary, Jack Straw, praised the bravery of the British forces and months of intelligence work required to secure their release, the source said it was nervousness on the part of the guards that led to a tip-off to the British authorities and the peaceful end to the three men's ordeal. The source said Mr Kember and his colleagues were well treated throughout. "They were able to watch TV and movies, were given writing materials, were well fed, and encouraged to exercise and keep in shape," the source said.

Six Iraqis are in custody, accused of being in the

gang, and are being interrogated by British intelligence to try to find clues which might help locate other hostages, including the American Jill Carroll and two Germans, Thomas Nitzschke and Rene Braeunlich. A British official said there was no direct link between Mr Kember's kidnappers and those holding Ms Carroll, but "it is possible the information might lead to other networks".

The more senior members of the gang responsible for Mr Fox's murder were part of one of the Islamist insurgent groups, either Jaish al-Mujahideen or al-Jabha al-Islamiya. The group made a series of political demands, in particular that the US and Britain release all prisoners held in Iraq. They threatened to kill the hostages if their demands were not met.

But the guards holding Mr Kember and his colleagues were part of a cell motivated by money rather than politics. "It's a bit absurd that they consider themselves innocent, even though they were looking for money. They don't see themselves as criminals," the source said. "The guards were involved, which is why it was a soft operation. They played a significant role in allowing the authorities to find the hostages."

He added: "The death of Fox changed the whole thing. Someone higher up the chain took him away. Because the ante had gone up and it had become more serious, it's quite possible that the operation began to open up and they got nervous about the repercussion." He said the "higher-ups" who took Mr Fox did not initially intend to kill him. Examination of his body found dumped by a road two weeks ago did not show signs of torture, as first reported, the source insisted. Nor did he seem to have been killed execution-style. It was more likely that there was a scuffle or an attempt to run away which led to his death.

Mr Kember and his colleagues did not know until they were freed that Mr Fox was dead. Peggy Gish, of the Christian Peacemakers Team, said yesterday that the three hostages had not seen Mr Fox since February 12. British officials said MI6 and military intelligence officials had debriefed Mr Kember to try to find clues to the location of other hostages, and about the tactics, weaponry and other details of the insurgent group. A more thorough debriefing will take place in Britain.