



Intelligence and Terrorism Information  
Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage  
& Commemoration Center (IICC)

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**The Army of Islam, a radical Islamic Palestinian terrorist group in the Gaza Strip, claimed responsibility for the abduction of British journalist Alan Johnston. In exchange for his release, they demand the release of global jihad operatives, particularly Sheikh Abu Qatada (a Jordanian of Palestinian descent, held prisoner in Britain)**

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1. On May 8, 2007, some two months after the abduction (March 12) of BBC journalist Alan Johnston, an organization calling itself **Jaish al-Islam** (“**The Army of Islam**”) claimed responsibility for the abduction and laid out its demands. A videotape sent to the Al-Jazeera office in Gaza City contained a recording of the abductors’ demands with an image of Alan Johnston’s journalist’s security pass in the background. The announcement was broadcasted on Arabic-language TV channels Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya (May 9) and on Al-Firdous, an online message board associated with Al-Qaeda.



Alan Johnston’s journalist’s security pass (Al-Arabiyya TV, May 10)

2. Following are the main points of the announcement given by a representative of The Army of Islam, which contains distinctive radical Islamic terminology used by Al-Qaeda and other associated global jihad elements (Al-Firdous, May 9):

a. **The Army of Islam** took Alan Johnston captive against the background of the ongoing struggle between “the forces of infidelity and tyranny” (i.e., the US and its allies) and “the believers in God’s unity” (i.e., Muslims who identify with Al-Qaeda’s ideology). As part of that struggle, the “crusaders” (i.e., the US and its allies) imprisoned Muslims who are held in jail and brutally tortured.

b. **Britain compromised the Palestinian interest and humiliated the Palestinians.** It put “the children of monkeys and pigs” (an Islamic anti-Semitic term for Jews taken from the Quran) in their midst and fought Islam and the Muslims. The British army keeps occupying the lands of the Muslims and Britain is one of the main partners in the US-led “crusade against Islam”.

c. **There is no difference between the British government and the British people,** “all of whom have become warriors deserving to die,” since the British government “helps the tyrannical Jews in every way possible”. According to the announcement, “the USA, Britain, and their peoples have become warriors whose blood and money are free for the taking”.

d. **After that foreword, which is designed to grant legitimacy to the abduction of Alan Johnston and attacks on British and American civilians, the abductors detail their demands:** “We demand Britain to release our captives [i.e., Muslim prisoners associated with global jihad] **and we specifically mention the honorable Sheikh, the Palestinian Abu Qatada** [see below]”. **There is also a demand to release captives “in the other countries”** (referring to the US and its allies). The announcement warns against any attempt to release Alan Johnston by force and implies that his abductors will not hesitate to spill the blood of Palestinians who will attempt to do so.

## Responses to the announcement of The Army of Islam

3. What follows are responses to the announcement attributed to The Army of Islam on the organization's responsibility for the abduction of journalist Alan Johnston:

a. **Ayman Taha, a Hamas spokesman**, condemned the abduction of Alan Johnston, called it an immoral act, and demanded the abductors to release him immediately. He admitted that the Hamas movement had ties with The Army of Islam at the latter organization's inception, in the context of the action which led to the abduction of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, but claimed that Hamas since ceased its association with that organization. According to Taha's statement, The Army of Islam today does not have anything to do with the soldier Gilad Shalit, who is held only by Hamas and the Popular Resistance Committees (AFP, May 9).

b. **The British Foreign Office** announced it was urgently inspecting the videotape. The announcement also said that the Foreign Office was holding close contact with the Palestinian Authority in order to ensure the safe release of Alan Johnston (AFP, London, May 9).

c. Spokesmen on behalf of the **Palestinian Authority** said that it was **still unclear whether the announcement was authentic** and whether there was indeed a connection between The Army of Islam and Al-Qaeda.

## What is The Army of Islam?

4. **The Army of Islam** is the name of a Palestinian group in the Gaza Strip which numbers several dozens of operatives ideologically affiliated with the ideas of global jihad and holding contacts with its operatives. The group is headed by **Mumtaz Durmush**, a member of a powerful clan in the Gaza Strip who seceded from the Popular Resistance Committees with his supporters about a year ago. In the past, at least at its inception, The Army of Islam had close ties with Hamas.

5. Mumtaz Durmush and The Army of Islam embraced the modus operandi of global jihad, including abduction of foreigners and attacks on recreation sites (such as internet cafés) which, in their opinion, damage the Islamic morals. The Army of Islam is one of the three organizations which claimed responsibility for the abduction of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit (June 25, 2006)<sup>1</sup> and for the abduction of two Fox News reporters.



**Mumtaz Durmush (right) with one of his supporters (the Hamas website, January 21, 2007)**

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<sup>1</sup> The other two organizations are Hamas and the Popular Resistance Committees.

## Who is Abu Qatada, whose release is demanded by The Army of Islam?



Sheikh Omar bin Mahmoud Abu Omar (Abu Qatada)  
(Al-Jazeera TV, December 7, 2005)

6. **Sheikh Omar bin Mahmoud (some add Othman) Abu Omar**, also known as **Abu Qatada**, a **Jordanian national of Palestinian descent**, is a **fundamentalist Muslim cleric**. Born in Bethlehem in 1960, he lived in Jordan until 1989 and left it probably to Afghanistan or Pakistan (it is possible that he was held prisoner in Jordan and was released as part of a general pardon granted at the time by King Abdallah II, or that he escaped from Jordan). It appears that in the years 1989-1993, he was involved in Al-Qaeda's activities. In 1993, probably using a fake UAE passport, Abu Qatada came **from Pakistan to Britain, where he sought political asylum**. His request was approved about a year later.

7. **During his stay in Britain, Abu Qatada gradually became one of the most significant ideological authorities of global jihad supporters, particularly of the Al-Qaeda organization**. He published written materials, wrote in a publication called Al-Minhaj ("The System" or "The Modus Operandi"), disseminated his views by videotapes, and even expressed his support of global jihad on British media. Some of his tapes were found in Hamburg, Germany, in the room of Muhammad Atta, the leader of the terrorist group responsible for the September 11 terrorist attack. In an interview he granted, Abu Qatada admitted to financially supporting the Chechen separatists. In 2001, he was described by the Spanish investigating

judge who examined the activities of the Al-Qaeda cell in Spain as “the spiritual leader of Al-Qaeda” (even though he denies it). Abu Qatada also openly expressed his unconditional support of the “resistance” (Palestinian terrorism) against Israel.

8. Abu Qatada is also suspected (and considered) to be a prominent theorist of **North African Islamic terrorist organizations which act in Europe as well, particularly of the global jihad group in Jordan, where he was sentenced (in absentia) to a lifetime in prison.** He was convicted of involvement in planning (thwarted) terrorist attacks against tourists who came to Jordan for the Millennium festivities (in 2000).

9. **In October 2002, Abu Qatada was arrested by the British authorities for his support of global jihad, and was held in custody without a trial.** He was released on bail in March 2005, but was arrested again in August 2005. His arrest without a trial for a long period of time was made possible thanks to changes made in British legislation to prevent terrorism, following the September 11 terrorist attacks and the terrorist attacks in London on July 7, 2005. **The British ruled that he “posed a threat to the national security” of Britain, in addition to accusing him of ties with global jihad.** Therefore, he remains in custody in Britain to this day.

10. Following the July 2005 terrorist attacks in Britain, the British government signed several extradition agreements with some Middle Eastern countries, including Jordan. According to the agreements, Britain would extradite terrorists wanted in those countries, provided they are not tortured in prison following their extradition. One of those extradited was supposed to be Abu Qatada; however, his attorneys appealed the decision. **In February 2007, Britain’s Special Immigration Appeals Committee (SIAC) approved his extradition to Jordan following a lengthy government debate.** However, it seems that another appeal will be submitted to a higher legal authority. Until a final decision on the matter is made, Abu Qatada remains in custody in Britain.

## Summary and assessment

11. If the announcement turns out to be authentic, and the British journalist is indeed held by The Army of Islam, it amounts therefore to a **first-of-a-kind** expression of the willingness of a Palestinian organization with radical Islamic ideology to take practical measures to promote **global jihad goals that are not strictly Palestinian objectives** (in this case, the release of global jihad operatives held in Britain and in the US). In our assessment, this kind of activity, **whose goals go beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict**, is a challenge not only to Fatah and Abu Mazen but also to the Hamas movement, which is harshly criticized by the **Al-Qaeda leadership, attempting to gain a foothold in the Palestinian Authority-administered territories and, above all, in the Gaza Strip.**<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For the past several months, the Hamas movement has been exchanging verbal blows with Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden's deputy, who has repeatedly lashed out at Hamas for abandoning "the path of jihad" and "selling Palestine" for the benefits of power. Hamas spokesmen accused Al-Zawahiri that his views were a result of his ignorance of Palestinian reality. They claimed that he was encouraging Hamas operatives to undermine the organization's leadership in order to form a rift within Hamas, which would allow Al-Qaeda to gain a foothold in Palestine. They said they were certain it would fail (see, for example, the article of publicist Lamma Khater in the newspaper Felesteen, May 9, titled "Al-Zawahiri and the deceitful entry into Palestine"). See also our Information Bulletin dated March 22, 2007: "[Ayman al-Zawahiri lashed out at the Hamas movement once again, accusing it of abandoning jihad and "selling Palestine" for seats in the Palestinian unity government. Hamas spokesmen defended their political activity, stressing the continuing adherence of the movement to its radical principles, namely "resistance" and "jihad", and non-recognition of Israel](#)".