



Fox News team release: What is the message?

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The release in Gaza of Fox News journalist Steve Centanni and camera man Olaf Wiig, kidnapped as of August 14 by a group calling itself "Holy Jihad Brigade" raises a number of salient issues related to the kidnapping and release:

1.- "We were forced to convert to Islam at gunpoint," Centanni told FOX News. "Don't get me wrong here. I have the highest respect for Islam, and I learned a lot of good things about it, but it was something we felt we had to do because they had the guns, and we didn't know what the hell was going on."

Such a statement raises a number of points. First it is not unusual that Jihadists groups would force hostages to convert to Islam. But at the same time it hasn't been a systematic behavior. Over the past 25 years, Jihadist organizations, cells and captors -including al Qaida,

Hezbollah, Laskar Jihad, Jemaa Islamiya, Salafi Combat group, etc have taken hostages. In many cases the Jihadists either asked the hostages or forced them to convert. But in other cases they haven't. Statistically, most hostages who have been executed were not asked to convert, while those who were released were either asked if they wished or in some cases were told that it would be better for them to do so. Obviously, hostages - especially if they weren't evangelists - would accept the conversion as a mean for securing liberation or at least physical security. But there were cases of Priests, Evangelists and Christian local leaders, who were executed after they refused to convert. These cases didn't receive the publicity received by media or secular Western citizens' hostages.

However, there were cases where hostages were released without being forced or even asked to convert.

The question emanating from these hostage-conversions is two fold: a) is it considered as legitimate one in the eyes of Islamic law? Under international law, any forced conversion under threat is null and void. Under Sharia law a similar verdict could be issued by an Islamic court who would argue that conversion by force is not acceptable (*La ikrah fil deen*). But Jihadi interpretation may argue that the conversion is standing with the immediate consequence that reverting back from the new religion is punishable by death. This would play a considerable role in intimidating the ex hostages, and would allow the Terrorist group to call for sanctions in the future against the journalists.

2.- The group calls itself "The Holy Jihad Brigade." As in previous cases, this may not be a new organization but a name given by the kidnapers or those who ordered the kidnapping for this particular operation. There have been many names that appeared after a Terrorist operation or hostage taking and never heard from again in Iraq, Gaza, Lebanon, and Kenya to name few cases. A Palestinian security official told AP that "Palestinian Authorities had known the identity of the kidnapers from the start." The source said "the name was a front for local militants." While indeed the name was created as a front for a local operation, the question is who ordered it? Hamas-led Government Prime Minister Ismael Hanieh said "it is not al

Qaeda, and there is no al Qaeda in Gaza." In fact al Qaeda presence exists in Gaza and it was reported in many previous reports not denied by the Hamas cabinet. However it would be less likely that al Qaeda was behind the operation because of the modus operandi of the group: Such as sending a video to al Jazeera, and as in some cases in Iraq or Pakistan, execution could have ensued. So, who could be behind the kidnapping and the release? There are strong possibilities that the Hamas organization (which is in power) could be behind the operation. Why?

3.- Hamas has been complaining about the US support to Israel, but more importantly about Washington's pressures to shut down all economic support to the US-listed Terrorist organization. In many speeches by Haniya and Hamas spokespersons, they blamed the US for the "sanctions" against their Government. It is widely known in the Palestinian territories that the financial conditions of Hamas' Government is worsening, allowing their opponents in Fatah to criticize them. An unofficial hostage operation against journalists affiliated with a media network perceived as close to the US Administration and very critical of Hamas, could have been authorized by the security agencies of Hamas as a way to send a message to Washington. Haniya may not want to cut it completely with the United States yet, knowing that the Mahmoud Abbas forces can still take advantage of the situation, hence the authorization for a "local" group to perform a Jihadi-like ab-

duction and release to send a message Westbound.

4.- Another analysis takes the regional situation into account and factors in the Syrian and Iranian regimes that have a strategic alliance with Hamas with Tehran funding the group and Damascus hosting its headquarters. Requests from either one or the other regimes for such an operation in Gaza are not unlikely. Since the Tehran embassy incidents both Iran and Syria demonstrated that they do not implicate themselves in hostage taking on their own soil. For two decades at least, Jihadist groups allied to the two regimes have taken, released, and

some times executed hostages in Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian territories by proxies.

5.- Is that a signal for a developing trend? It could well be. During the Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon, CNN and other media complained from intimidation and control of the reports by Hezbollah. And as Iran and Syria are mobilizing for confrontation with the international community over the nuclear crisis with Ahmedinijad and on the international forces with Assad, Western and international media should be careful in their planning for coverage in Jihadi controlled areas.

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