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The Kidnappers

Gaza Captors of 2 Newsmen Pressure U.S.

By [GREG MYRE](#)

JERUSALEM, Aug. 23 — An unknown Islamic group on Wednesday issued a sweeping demand for the release of all Muslim prisoners held in the United States in exchange for two Fox News television journalists seized at gunpoint last week in Gaza.

The group, calling itself the Holy Jihad Brigades, had not claimed responsibility for the abductions or made any demands until Wednesday, when it released a statement along with a video of the two men, Steve Centanni, 60, an American based in Washington, and Olaf Wiig, 36, a cameraman from New Zealand.

More than a dozen Westerners have been kidnapped in the Gaza Strip in the past two years, though in every case, they were released unharmed, and almost always within 24 hours. By contrast, the video and the demand for the release of prisoners on Wednesday echoed kidnappings by Islamic militant groups in Iraq, Pakistan and elsewhere. And it was another sign of the worsening security situation in Gaza one year after the Israelis pulled out.

Moreover, the statement released Wednesday was the first time that kidnappers in Gaza had made a broad political demand that transcended the immediate Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“We will give you one chance that will not be repeated — the liberation of Muslims detained in American prisons in exchange for the detainees in our hands,” the statement said. “If you satisfy our condition, we will keep our promise.”

The statement made references to the Koran but was not more specific about the Muslim prisoners whose release was sought. The statement said the United States had 72 hours to decide, beginning at noon Wednesday, and did not say what would happen if the demands were not met.

In the video, Mr. Centanni and Mr. Wiig were sitting cross-legged and barefoot and appeared relaxed as they spoke to the camera.

“We are alive and well,” Mr. Centanni said. “We are in fairly good health. We get lots of clean water,

food every day. Access to a bathroom, shower, clean clothes and our captors are treating us well.”

Mr. Wiig added, “If you could apply any political pressure on the local government here in Gaza and the West Bank that would be much appreciated by both Steve and myself.”

The two men were traveling in an armored car in Gaza City on Aug. 14 when armed men stopped the vehicle and forced them out at gunpoint.

Gaza is plagued by armed factions, and it was not immediately clear whether the group claiming responsibility was a real group or just a cover for an existing faction.

Still, Palestinian factions have long insisted that their battle is only with Israel, and it is highly unusual that the statement singles out the United States for denunciation.

The statement condemned the American military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, saying, “The powers of evil are united in waging wars against Islam and their people.”

Israel says it is concerned that groups like [Al Qaeda](#) are trying to infiltrate Gaza, particularly since Israel withdrew from the territory, though there has been no hard evidence to date that this has happened.

For many years, Palestinians have welcomed foreign journalists, aid workers and other Westerners in Gaza. Palestinian officials, militant groups and citizens are normally willing, even eager, to speak to journalists. Even after heavy fighting broke out in 2000, Western journalists were able to operate with relative freedom in Gaza.

However, the territory has grown increasingly lawless in the past couple of years as Palestinian government authority has largely collapsed, while armed groups, some of them nothing more than criminal gangs, have proliferated.

In contrast to Iraq, where many kidnapped Westerners have been killed, kidnapping victims in Gaza often said that they were treated more like guests than hostages and that they did not feel threatened during their brief captivity.

Gaza kidnapers have usually been seeking jobs in the Palestinian security forces or the release of a relative held in a Palestinian prison. Kidnappers have often told their captives that they have no interest in harming them, but that Westerners serve as extremely effective bargaining chips when dealing with the [Palestinian Authority](#).

In many instances, the Palestinian Authority has quietly met the demands of the kidnapers after the hostages were released.

The tape on Wednesday was released to a television production office in Gaza City. [Al Jazeera](#), the Arab satellite channel, initially broadcast the tape, though Fox News and other news organizations also showed parts of it.

Fox officials and Mr. Wiig's wife, Anita McNaught, a television journalist, have been in regular contact with Palestinian Authority officials who say they are trying to secure the release of the men.

"We're encouraged that our colleagues appear to be alive and well in the tape that was released today," said John Moody, Fox's senior vice president for news editorial. "We trust that the abductors understand they are responsible for Steve and Olaf's welfare and safe return. We ask for their immediate release."

In Washington, the State Department said it would not give in to the kidnappers' demands. "We don't make concessions to terrorists, and we continue to call for the release of these journalists without conditions," said a State Department spokesman, Gonzalo Gallegos, according to The Associated Press.

The Palestinian prime minister, Ismail Haniya, told his cabinet on Tuesday that the government was "looking to win the immediate and unconditional release of the two journalists."

The Palestinian interior minister, Said Siam, who is in charge of the police and other branches of the security services, said Wednesday that efforts to find the men were under way. But the Palestinian Authority says it has been unable to contact or negotiate with the kidnappers.

In this case and in the previous abductions, Palestinian authorities have denounced the kidnappings and have said that they harm the Palestinian cause.

Raji Sourani, director of the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, said the kidnapping phenomenon had grown in Gaza because the Palestinian Authority had "failed to impose the rule of law against those who have violated it in broad daylight."

But he also criticized Israel for what he said was an extremely harsh response to the June 25 seizure of an Israeli soldier, who is being held by Palestinian militants in Gaza. The increased violence, along with the political and economic pressure imposed by Israel, has "created a very dangerous environment," he said.

Since the abductions, some Western news organizations have pulled their journalists out of Gaza.

American diplomats have warned that there are credible threats that additional kidnappings could take place in Gaza, while the Foreign Press Association in Israel warned its members to "exercise extreme caution in the coming days."

Israel and the Palestinians remain locked in a standoff over the Israeli soldier who was seized, Cpl. Gilad Shalit. After his capture, Israel's military forces, which pulled out of Gaza a year ago, returned to the

territory and clashed almost daily with Palestinian militants.

Israel is demanding the soldier's unconditional release, while the Palestinians seek an exchange for prisoners held in Israeli jails. Egypt has served as a mediator, but the talks appear to have stalled.