

UK man charged with kidnapping journalists in Syria

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On Wednesday, a 26-year-old British trainee doctor appeared at Westminster's magistrates charged with terrorist-related offences in Syria.

Shajul Islam, from East London, was arrested at Heathrow airport on October 9 after arriving from Egypt, accompanied by his wife and year-old daughter. His wife was also detained but released without charge. Islam was remanded in custody and is due to appear at London's Old Bailey on November 2.

Islam is not the first British Muslim to be charged with terror-related offences. Numerous others have been hauled up in court on charges, often relating to "potential" plots, many on the flimsiest of evidence. That hasn't prevented screaming headlines in the media denouncing an imminent terror threat, and statements from government ministers explaining why, in order to combat this danger, it is necessary to jettison long-established democratic norms.

In Islam's case, there have been no hysterical headlines and barely any official pronouncements. His initial arrest was a footnote in the news and his court appearance passed with little comment.

The reason for the contrasting approaches is not hard to fathom. Islam's arrest is regarded as an embarrassment by the British establishment and its media because the charges against him threaten to expose the dirty war of regime-change being conducted in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad by the Western powers, in alliance with the Gulf States and Turkey.

Islam, who studied medicine at St. Bart's and University London Hospital, is charged with being part of a jihadist group that kidnapped Briton John Cantlie and Dutchman Jeroen Oerlemans, both photographers, and held them captive in northern Syria between July 17 and July 26.

Oerlemans and Cantlie, who works for the *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Telegraph* and the BBC, were both shot

during their ordeal. The pair had crossed into Syria from Turkey at Bab al-Hawa, on July 19.

Following their release, Oerlemans told the Dutch media that "almost immediately" on crossing the border, "we had a circle of men around us with Kalashnikovs."

Describing the kidnapers as "foreign jihadists", he said that they included a number with "Birmingham accents."

"All day we were spoken to about the Koran and how they would bring Shariah law to Syria. I don't think they were Al Qaeda; they seemed too amateurish for that," he recounted.

Oerlemans was shot in the foot and thigh and Cantlie shot in the arm when they tried to escape, after which they were kept blindfolded and handcuffed.

Cantlie explained how the kidnapers "were from anywhere but Syria. They were from Bangladesh, they were from Pakistan, they were from the UK, they were from Chechnya, the Caucasus—a real mix."

One of his captors had a strong London accent and told him he was a doctor with Britain's National Health Service. He was using saline drips marked with the NHS logo to treat wounded fighters.

"I asked for his help as we were both from London, but he refused to even send a text to my girlfriend to say we were alive," Cantlie told the *Daily Mail*. "He said he would be beheaded if he did. It wasn't much fun expecting to end up on an execution video at the hands of extremists—one of whom was treating Londoners like me a few months ago."

The journalists were eventually "freed" by the Free Syrian Army. "I ended up running for my life, barefoot and handcuffed, while British jihadists—young men with south London accents—shot to kill," Cantlie wrote. "Not a Syrian in sight. This wasn't what I had expected."

Following news of the journalists' release, Britain's Foreign Office had released a bland statement welcoming news that they were "safe and well." Little more was said

even when Cantlie's and Oerlemans's accounts of the dangers they had faced from apparent British nationals was published.

Foreign Secretary William Hague issued a remarkably low-key statement on news of the October 9 arrests at Heathrow. Acknowledging that "there is some evidence" that British nationals were involved in the military campaign against Assad, Hague said, "We could strongly advise them not to do so...we don't supply ourselves anything that could contribute to lethal action inside Syria and we don't want individuals to do that either."

Hague's remarks are a pack of lies. Britain, alongside the United States and other Western powers, has been actively involved in promoting the insurgency against the Assad regime, which they regard as a hindrance to their geo-political interests in the Middle East. To this end, they have sponsored the FSA and the Syrian National Council—comprising Assad opponents, military defectors, CIA stooges and Islamists—and provided money and intelligence. The FSA is being armed as a proxy force on behalf of the imperialist powers by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Hague's statement read as friendly advice to British jihadists, and for good reason. It was motivated by concern that any reckless actions on their part could reveal the mercenary conspiracy hatched between the imperialist powers and Islamic extremists to deliberately provoke civil war and sectarian tensions.

Oerlemans described how, when their captors realised they were European journalists, "One of the black jihadists freaked out and shouted: 'These are journalists and now they will see we are preparing an international jihad in this place'."

When the FSA members entered the camp where the two were held, they "started dressing down everyone," Oerlemans said. They asked "why the hell we were being kept there, how long we had been kept there, why we were being treated in this way."

As the two were driven out of the camp, the FSA were shooting in the air "like gangsters", he said. "As soon as Assad has fallen, these fighters want to introduce Islamic law, Sharia, in Syria," he added.

There is no end to the criminality and duplicity of the Western powers. Syria is following the Libyan model, where the imperialist powers cultivated an "opposition" movement in Benghazi—again comprising CIA assets and former regime stalwarts—to provide a pretext for their bombardment of Tripoli and the brutal murder of Muammar Gaddafi, with the aim of establishing a

bridgehead in North Africa.

Last week, Labour's Jack Straw, former foreign secretary, was named as a key defendant in court documents served by the law firm Leigh Day and the human rights group Reprieve. They accuse Straw and Sir Mark Allen, a former senior MI6 officer, of misleading parliament as to Britain's role in the rendition of Libyan dissidents Abdel Hakim Belhaj and Sami al-Saadi.

Belhaj and Saadi were leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, opposed to Gaddafi. After the Libyan regime was embraced by the Blair Labour government in 2004, Belhaj and Saadi charged that they were abducted in the Far East and rendered to Gaddafi's secret police with the help of the CIA and Britain's MI6, where they were tortured.

When the West decided to move against Gaddafi, following the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, Belhaj became head of the Tripoli Brigade allied with the imperialist-backed National Transitional Council. The Brigade was formed in April 2011 by Mahdi al-Harati and played an instrumental role in working alongside NATO during its attack on Tripoli. Al-Harati was later outed as a US asset.

According to the journal *Foreign Policy*, al-Harati now leads the Liwa al-Ummah Brigade in Syria, aimed at ousting Assad. Al-Harati told *Foreign Policy* that he had stepped down as commander of the Tripoli Brigade in autumn 2011 and made his first trip to Syria soon afterwards for "humanitarian work".

The decision to set up Liwa al-Ummah was made earlier this year, he claims, after "several Syrians", familiar with his role in Libya, "approached him about founding a similar outfit in Syria."



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