

BBC correspondent kidnapped in Gaza: Freedom for Alan Johnston: Freedom for Us All

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In Trafalgar Square in London, dozens of journalists representing every major news organization descended on a designated corner in the tourist infested area in support of Alan Johnston, the BBC correspondent kidnapped in Gaza on March 12, 2006, one month after his ordeal began.

Awaiting the arrival of Alan's family to a press conference, organized by Reporters without Borders, I stood along with a few activists. My nervous smiles, interrupted by brief statements to inquiring journalists, could hardly hide my utter feelings of shame. It's not often that I feel this way, taking part in a solidarity event in support of anyone. This time was different, however, despite all attempts to distance oneself from responsibility. "Alan, they are not from amongst us," read of the banners held by hundreds of journalists gathering in Ramallah, in the West Bank, to support Alan on the same day we gathered in London. The unfortunate fact is that while the kidnapers were not exactly elected representatives of the Palestinian people, mostly known for their unparalleled generosity, warmth and kindness to strangers, they were exactly what that banner tried to refute: there were a rational outcome of the state of chaos, corruption and overt militarilism that has plagued Palestinian society for years. Indeed, they were from amongst us, and there is now denial in that.

In times like these, reporters care little for details, all they seek are a few sound bites, preceded by an intense introduction and a snappy finish, and consequently a TV news report is made. I had to accommodate. "These kidnapers don't represent the Palestinian people, and I call on the Palestinian government to do its outmost to free Alan, whose professional reporting and unprecedented objectivity is a rarity in the age of polarized media," I told a Spanish newspaper.

Then Alan's family arrived; they were the most unthreatening and kind looking group of people one can ever encounter. Alan's father, Graham, an older version of his son, dressed in a dark suit, with a belly sticking out slightly, and a voice so proud, yet somehow broken. "Chin up, my son," he told Alan, hoping that the message would reach him somehow. Then to the kidnapers, "You have family. Please think about what this is doing to my family, including in particular the distress and deep concern Alan's mother and sister have had to endure for all these long weeks. As I have said before, please let my son go now, today."

A Palestinian, with links superior to mine in the Occupied Territories leaned and whispered in my ear. "Why must these depraved individuals (referring to the kidnapers) keep placing us in these tough spots? What is even more bizarre about all of this is that everyone in Gaza

knows who the kidnapers are.”

Everyone in Gaza knows, I was told, including the authorities, and even the BBC received some heads up. He named names, elaborated on the demands of the kidnapers, who belong to a powerful clan, affiliated with some people in Fatah, the once leading Palestinian resistance movement which has slowly evolved into a most impressive network of power-hungry batch of individuals, factions, sub-factions, clans and so forth, a great source of national fragmentation and political discord. It turned out that other people at the press event had similar information. The kidnapers are apparently asking for five million US dollars and loads of ammunitions. My friend believes that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas must agree to the demands, to keep the rogue elements in his party in line; clan wars in Gaza tend to be politically taxing.

As journalists petered out, following Alan’s parents departure, and as Trafalgar Square returned to its cheerful self, there was nothing left but the large poster carrying Alan’s photo, which was unfurled earlier that day and scores of doves reclaiming their space in centre stage.

How did we end up where we are? I asked myself as I too left the square and Alan behind. How could our struggle for freedom, for justice and for rights be so utterly reduced to an active state of civil war, factional clashes and constant cries for aid, and how could our narrative, our entire narrative be so effortlessly hijacked, and now dictated by mere gangsters, vying for power and money?

Alan’s ordeal has lasted longer than other journalists and aid workers kidnapped in Gaza since chaos ensued in the Strip nearly two years ago, but most notably following the Hamas victory in January 2006. Israel ensured that it left formidable allies in the area who acted on a whim to ensure that Israel’s narrative prevails, even after its ‘withdrawal’ from the devastatingly poor Strip. And so the narrative goes, Palestinians are not capable of governing themselves, thus, in hindsight, four decades of Israeli occupation is justified and Israel’s current illegal military occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem is vindicated. Those allies held true to their purpose, and had since then wreaked havoc.

The advent of Hamas, a well regarded and anti-corruption group changed nothing; it in fact precipitated the political fragmentation that defined the Palestinian struggle since the Oslo accords in 1993, and even before. Israel’s active military onslaughts, since then, killing hundreds, and the US political and economic embargos weakened the Palestinian front like never before. But the truth must be told: political cohesion was hardly a quality that Palestinians had ever enjoyed. They were too vulnerable, too receptive to pressure, which made their various leaderships, especially the pro-Israel camp – as galling as this term may sound – as flexible as clay, shaped by skilled Israeli hands and positioned wherever found fit.

But how can we claim that they are not from amongst us? How can we claim that they don’t represent us if we lack the political will to confront them? And when Alan is freed, as he must, who will free us, Palestinians, from this destructive path on which we tread?

Trafalgar Square is so distant, teeming yet so lonesome, but Alan’s friendly face continues to spur a sense of hope.

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and other book venues.

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