

### Israeli military court sends captured Hamas leaders for trial

- 15 West Bank politicians face up to 10 years in jail
- Speaker of Palestinian parliament is shackled

By Rory McCarthy in Jerusalem

**09/01/06 "The Guardian"** -- -- An Israeli military court yesterday ordered 15 Hamas leaders, including two cabinet ministers and the speaker of Palestine's parliament, to go on trial charged with membership of an outlawed organisation. The group, 12 of them elected members of the parliament, appeared in court at Ofer Camp on the occupied West Bank. At trial on December 12 they face a maximum jail sentence of 10 years if convicted.

They are among more than 30 Hamas political leaders detained in recent weeks after the capture by militants near Gaza of an Israeli soldier, Corporal Gilad Shalit, who is still being held. The men, in brown prison shirts and trousers, each held a finger aloft as an act of defiance as they sat together in the dock, surrounded by armed troops. Abdul Aziz Duaik, speaker of parliament, one of the most recent detained, was in pyjamas and chains.

Jawad Boulous, a lawyer representing Mr Duaik and some others, challenged the Israeli court's jurisdiction. "The defence does not recognise the legality of this court because it is a political trial," he said outside the hearing. "We're talking about leaders abducted by Israel. We demand the release of all of them."

Hamas, Islamicists responsible in the past for suicide bombings in Israel, won a surprise victory in elections in January on the promise of an end to corruption and the hope of a stronger Palestinian authority. But since Hamas is proscribed as a terror organisation in Israel and most western countries, western donors held back their usual \$30m (£16m) monthly support and Israel stopped transferring its usual \$60m in monthly customs receipts.

The result has been to put Hamas under financial pressure at a time when its leaders have been detained, including some like Mr Duaik who are regarded as more moderate. Since March the 160,000 employees of the Palestinian Authority have not been paid and in the past week strikes have begun amid a sharp economic decline.

In Gaza, where Hamas is strong, there has been a descent into lawlessness and militancy severe enough to prompt one well-known Hamas official, Ghazi Hamad, to write in a Palestinian paper this week asking militants to stop firing rockets into Israel and to end the chaos. "We have lost our sense of direction," he wrote.

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