

Iraqi abductors want headscarf ban lifted

Reuters
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AN IRAQI militant group has kidnapped two French journalists and given the French government 48 hours to end its ban on Muslim headscarves in school, Arabic television station Al Jazeera has said.

Jazeera identified the hostages as reporters George Malbrunot and Christian Chesnot. Last week, the French Foreign Ministry said the two men had gone missing in Iraq.

The channel aired a brief video on Saturday showing what it said were the two journalists standing in front of a black banner bearing the name of the Islamic Army in Iraq. One man told the camera: "I would like to tell my family that everything is OK".

Malbrunot worked for *Le Figaro* and *Ouest France* newspapers and Chesnot for Radio France International. They were declared missing on the day Italy said freelance journalist Enzo Baldoni was also missing and his driver had been reportedly killed.

Jean-Louis Validire, editor-in-chief of *Le Figaro's* foreign service, said Malbrunot and Chesnot were last spotted in Baghdad on August 20 and were probably preparing to go to Najaf where US troops battled an insurgency.

The Al Jazeera announcer said the Islamic Army in Iraq

'Iraq new fertile ground for jihad'

IRAQIS attracting Islamic militants from across the world determined to join the "holy war" against the US-led occupation, the son of Osama bin Laden's mentor Abdullah Azzam said in an interview. "Hundreds of Muslims from all over Arab and non-Arab countries go to Iraq to help the resistance end the occupation, spurred by the conviction that jihad is a duty against the occupier," said Hudayfa Azzam, 34. He also claimed that the former regime of Saddam Hussein "strictly and directly controlled" members of bin Laden's al-Qaida terror network in Iraq before the US invasion, as charged by members of President Bush's administration but refuted by other experts.

AFP, Amman

issued an ultimatum to France to abandon its "unfair and aggressive" ban on Muslim headscarves in state schools within 48 hours. It did not say whether the group threatened to kill its captives if France did not comply.