Terrorist releases in exchange for hostages threaten even more Israeli lives

written by David M. Weinberg | 14.01.2025

Many Israelis will say that the hostage release deal under discussion is sad but necessary—that it is the government's moral obligation to free as many hostages as possible, as soon as possible, despite the high price, and that the suffering of our hostages and their families is intolerable on the personal and national levels.

Many will say that giving freed hostages a national hug will be the greatest triumph of all—something so necessary for Israel's collective spirit and its resilience over the long term.

Many Israelis might feel this to be so even if the deal entails a near-total withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces from the Gaza Strip. In other words, even if Hamas retains power and survives to fight another day.

However one finesses the diplomatic and defense dilemmas here, there is one additional grand security calculus that seems absent from public discourse: the piercingly high price of releasing many Palestinian terrorists from Israeli jails which will be part of any deal.

The released terrorists assuredly will strike again with God-only-knows how many Israeli casualties in the future. Their release certainly will incentivize future kidnappings, pour gasoline onto the terrorist fires already raging in Judea and Samaria, and catapult Hamas toward its intended takeover of Judea and Samaria, too.

I know this because its has been the case with every previous terrorist release. Israel has repeatedly erred by letting terrorists loose to murder more Israelis.

Each time, in advance of every deal, the Israeli "security establishment" arrogantly and falsely has assured Israeli politicians and the public that it "would know how to manage the situation," i.e., how to track the terrorists and crush any nascent return to terrorist activity without too much harm done.

But this has never proven to be true. Every deal involving the release of terrorists has led to more bloodshed, planned and carried out by these released terrorists.

There are no exact statistics on this (because unsurprisingly the security establishment refuses to release such statistics), though estimates range from 10% to 50% of released terrorists swiftly return to hard-core terrorist activity with devastating effects.

The 1,150 Palestinian prisoners released by Israel in the 1985 so-called Jibril deal, in which three Israeli soldiers who had been taken hostage in Lebanon by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were released, proceeded to fuel the First Intifada, which ran from 1987 to 1993 and lead to the deaths and injuries of Israeli and other citizens. According to the Israeli Ministry of Defense, about 10% of the released Palestinian terrorists returned to active terrorist duty.

Then came the Oslo Accords, when Israel mistakenly allowed at least 60,000 Palestinians from "abroad" into the Palestinian territories, including 7,000 card-carrying PLO terrorists. Between 1993 and 1999, Israel released additional Palestinian terrorists as "gestures" to the PLO, which fueled the Second Intifada, from 2000 to 2005. These shocking figures were revealed in an Israel Defense and Security Forum report from last year.

In 2004, Israel released more than 400 Palestinian prisoners and some 30 Lebanese prisoners, including leaders of Hezbollah, for one civilian captive—Elhanan Tannenbaum—and the bodies of three IDF soldiers. The Second Lebanon War against Hezbollah followed not long after.

The 2011 deal for Gilad Shalit was the worst; more than 1,000 terrorists were released in exchange for the 25-year-old IDF soldier, including Yahya Sinwar, the mastermind of the Hamas-led attacks and atrocities on Oct. 7, 2023. In fact, almost the entire Hamas command structure involved in planning last year's Simchat Torah assault on Israeli towns and cities, in which more than 1,200 Israelis were killed on a single day, was made up of terrorists released in the Shalit deal.

Other Palestinian terrorists released in the Shalit deal proceeded to carry out some of the most notorious terrorist murders in Israel of the past 13 years, including the murders of Baruch Mizrachi by Ziad Awad; Dr. David Applebaum and his daughter, Nava (on the eve of her wedding) by Ramez Sali Abu Salim;

Malachi Rosenfeld by Ahmas Najjar; and Rabbi Michael ("Miki") Mark (a father of 10 kids) by Mohamed Faki.

Mahmoud Qawasameh, another terrorist released in the Shalit deal, planned the kidnapping and murder of three teenagers, Naftali Fraenkel, Eyal Yifrach and Gilad Shaer, in Gush Etzion in June 2014. After the kidnapping and murder of the three boys, the IDF acted to re-arrest many of the terrorists freed in the Shalit deal. Col. (res.) Maurice Hirsch, who was chief prosecutor of the IDF in the territories, says that half of the 130 "heavy" terrorists released into Judea and Samaria in the Shalit deal had returned to terrorist activity and were re-arrested.

Many others, he says, also reactivated their terrorist ties in the territories and engaged in terrorist-support activities outside of Israel, but Israeli authorities could not always get to them for operational or legal reasons. An IDSF report from one year ago details this.

There is some debate among experts as to whether Israel has a better chance of interdicting terrorist activity of released terrorists in the Palestinian-controlled areas or abroad, meaning whether it is preferable to keep terrorists under surveillance in Gaza and Judea and Samaria, where they can be eliminated, if necessary, or to "exile" them to Turkey, Lebanon or Syria, where targeting them is politically and operationally more difficult.

Lt. Col. (res.) Baruch Yedid, former adviser on Arab affairs to the IDF's Central Command, and Moshe ("Mofaz") Fuzaylov, former Israel Security Agency investigations chief, say that the current terrorist free-for-all in Jenin and Tulkarm, for example, proves that released terrorists must be expelled as far away as possible. Otherwise, they will bolster the Iranian-backed military machine that terrorists have already built in these areas and expand them.

Either way, the danger of mass-releasing Palestinian terrorists is clear. A deal that frees vicious murderers of Israeli Jews, including the Nukhba killers and rapists of Oct. 7, in exchange for Israel's innocent suffering hostages endangers even more Israeli lives down the road, and that road is not notably long.

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