Terrorists for hostages: The agonizing dilemma

written by David M. Weinberg | 16.08.2024

According to government sources, the deal currently under discussion between Israel and Hamas would see between 500 and 1,000 Palestinian terrorists, 100 of them considered “heavy” terrorists (i.e., bloodthirsty butchers), released from Israeli jails in exchange for 22 live Israeli hostages, mainly women and other civilians, alongside the bodies of another dozen deceased hostages.

The plan also theorizes second and third tranches of terrorist/hostage exchange, but nobody really believes this likely. Too many conditions apply to the supposed next stages, ranging from international supervision of Gaza’s borders (against Hamas wishes) to IDF withdrawals. And nobody in Israel can say for sure that additional hostages are still alive/will still be alive for a second or third stage.

Many Israelis will say that the 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. That the suffering of our hostages and their families is intolerable on the personal and national levels. That giving freed hostages one big 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 complete withdrawal of the IDF from Gaza. In other words, even if Hamas retains power and essentially wins the war.

Some Israelis will argue that the IDF can be sent back to continuously crush Hamas in Gaza after the deal is done (although manifestly this will not be possible given inevitable diplomatic restraints). Some will say that the need for further strikes will be obviated by better border technologies, more IDF sentries, and allied foreign forces (although this is patently ridiculous in the near term). Some will add that the deal usefully will collapse the current government (which in their view may be more important than hostage release).

Oh, what a horrible situation! How can the heart not bleed in pain.

HOWEVER one finesses the moral and strategic dilemmas here, there is one additional grand security calculus that seems absent from public discourse. This is the piercingly high price of releasing so many Palestinian terrorists.

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 towards its intended takeover of Judea and Samaria too.

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

And 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 never has proven to be true. Every deal involving the release of terrorists has led to much 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), but estimates range from 10 to 50 percent of released terrorists who swiftly return to hard-core terrorist activity, with devastating effect.

The 1,150 Palestinian prisoners released by Israel in the 1985 Jibril deal (in exchange for three Israeli soldiers) proceeded to fuel the First Intifada. According to the Ministry of Defense, about ten percent 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 territories including 7,000 card-carrying PLO terrorists. Between 1993 and 1999, Israel released many additional Palestinian terrorists as "gestures" to the PLO, which fueled the Second Intifada.

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. Among the more than 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners released in exchange for a single staff sergeant were Yihye Sinwar, Warchi Mushtaha, Ahmed Andor, Abdulah Barghouti, Izzadin Sheikh Khalil, Musa Dudin, Jihad Yamour, and Hassan Salameh – today's Hamas leaders. In fact, almost the entire Hamas command structure that planned last year's Simchat Torah assault on Israeli towns and cities, which killed over 1,200 Israelis on one day, was made up of terrorists released in the Shalit deal.

Other Palestinian terrorists released in the Shalit deal proceeded to carry out the most notorious terrorist murders of the past 13 years: Baruch Mizrachi by Ziad Awad, Dr. David Applebaum and his daughter Navah (on the eve of her wedding) by Ramez Sali Abu Salim, Malachi Rosenfeld by Ahmas Najjar, Rabbi Miki Mark (a father of ten kids) by Mohamed Fakih, and more.

Mahmoud Qawasameh, another terrorist released in the Shalit deal, planned the kidnapping and murder of the three teenagers Naftali Fraenkel, Eyal Yifrach, and Gilad Shaer in Gush Etzion in 2014. Jasser Barghouti, also released from Israeli prison in the Shalit deal, directed from Gaza the murders of Yosef Cohen and Yuval Mor-Yosef and a child, Amiad Israel.

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.

Dr. Gadi Hitman of Ariel University, who has studied terrorist releases, says that numbers count, not just the identity of "key" terrorists with known terrorist records. The more terrorists released, even "pedestrian" ones, the more likely that some of them will become "key terrorists" themselves and ignite the territories.

There is some debate among experts as to whether Israel has a better chance of interdicting terrorist activity of released terrorists in the territories 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" terrorists to Turkey, Lebanon, and 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 Tulkarem, for example, proves that released terrorists must be expelled as far away as possible. Otherwise, they will bolster the already-solid, Iranian-backed military machine that terrorists have built in these areas, and will 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 October 7) in exchange for Israel's innocent suffering hostages endangers even more Israeli lives down the road – and that road is not notably long.

Dvora Gonen, whose son Danny was murdered near Dolev in 2015 by a terrorist released in the Shalit deal, told journalist and researcher Nadav Shragai last month that "the difference between the hostages currently held in Gaza and the next generation of Israeli victims who will be murdered by those released in the impending Hamas hostage deal – is that the hostages have faces and names, while future victims remain as yet unknown."

Gonen: "On the other hand, the previous generation of terrorist victims like my son Danny, murdered by Palestinian terrorists released in previous deals, have both faces and names."

What Dvora Gonen is saying, I think, is beware and be aware. Dealing for the hostages held in Gaza now might be the most humanitarian and morally necessary thing in the world to do, but it also may be the most dangerous and potentially disastrous thing Israel can do. The cost will pay out over a prolonged period, and it will be steep. An agonizing dilemma for Israel, indeed.

Published in The Jerusalem Post 16.08.2024 and Israel Hayom 18.08.2024