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Hostage negotiator: This is the deal Israel should strike over Hamas captives

Gershon Baskin, who oversaw release of Gilad Shilat in 2011, advocates freeing Palestinian women prisoners

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Israel should release all of its female Palestinian prisoners to secure a deal for the hostages held by Hamas, the country's best-known negotiator has said.

Gershon Baskin, who oversaw the freeing of Gilad Shalit, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldier, called on the government to offer up 34 jailed Palestinian women and 190

teenagers.

Mr Baskin dealt with Hamas in the historic 2011 deal that saw Pte Shalit released in exchange for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners.

More than 200 Israeli and foreign nationals have been abducted by Hamas and other Palestinian Islamic groups and are currently held in the Gaza Strip.

Hopes have risen this week for a deal that would see the hostages freed in exchange for some form of ceasefire.



On Friday, a Hamas leader said the terrorist group was proposing to free all foreign hostages in exchange for a five-day ceasefire, United Nations-supervised supplies of aid and fuel, and the release of all Palestinian women and teenagers.

Mr Baskin told The Telegraph that the Israeli government still had time to save the hostages ahead of the ground invasion.

The release of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners was controversial at the time, but proof of how much Israel valued the lives of its troops.

Asked whether it was a fair price to pay, Mr Baskin said: “Nothing is fair here ... The question is what is possible.

“What’s possible over a short period of time is a deal to release the civilians – in a very loose definition that Hamas has for Israelis.”

On Friday, Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari, Israel's chief military spokesman, called on Israeli citizens not to pay attention to "rumours" of a deal. He said these were "psychological terrorism" aimed at exploiting Israeli sentiments.

Unconfirmed reports earlier this week suggested that Hamas was poised to release 50 foreigners through the mediation of Qatar.

Any exchange is likely to be complicated by the intense Israeli strikes on Gaza on Friday, though Rear Admr Hagari said the army was still committed to freeing the hostages.

Mr Baskin said the release of female and young prisoners would pose no threat to Israel.

"They could be released without any worry to Israel," he said. "They all are from the West Bank, none of them have killed Israelis."

On Thursday, two of Hamas's political leaders visited Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin's Middle East envoy and discussed potential hostage release deals.



Senior Hamas officials Bassem Naim and Moussa Abu Marzouk with Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia's deputy foreign minister | CREDIT: Reuters

Mr Baskin, who has been in touch with various Hamas functionaries for over two decades, told The Telegraph that he exchanged text messages with the head of Hamas's delegation, Mousa Abu Marzouk, while he was in Russia.

He said he was alarmed by the fact that the group's political leadership appears to be out of sync with its militant wing.

United States intelligence has reported that a small cadre of the militant wing planned and carried out the Oct 7 attack without involving the Qatar-based political leadership.

“My conclusion from my conversation with Abu Marzouk and a few other Hamas leaders is that they say there is no coherent Hamas position,” he said.

“They’re not in co-ordination with each other, they don’t have a grip on reality, and they really don’t have control on what’s going on the ground. If they do make a deal, can they deliver on that deal?”

He said he believed Hamas’s claim that they do not know the location of every single hostage, since many were abducted by lone fighters who took the opportunity in the chaos of the attack that killed more than 1,400 Israelis.



Mr Baskin emerged as Israel’s main Hamas negotiator when Pte Shalit was abducted by Hamas’s military wing in an attack on an Israeli outpost in 2006.

A Gaza-based professor called the peace activist and former academic one week after the soldier’s kidnapping, saying “we have to do something”.

Later that day, Mr Baskin helped set up a call with Pte Shalit’s father and a senior Hamas leader.

In the ensuing weeks, he made several trips to Gaza, which is out of bounds for Israeli nationals, to help secure proof of life – a hand-written letter from the 19-year-old soldier.

Mr Baskin, now 67, described to The Telegraph the low-tech methods he used to get in touch with the soldiers' captors. "You pick up the phone and make a phone call," he said.

Throughout Pte Shalit's long captivity, Hamas insisted the soldier was safe and that they were in no rush to negotiate his release.

Israeli society meanwhile agonised over the price it had been asked to pay, in terms of releasing Palestinian prisoners, for the life of one soldier.

Ehud Olmert, the then Israeli prime minister, initially ruled out negotiations with Hamas but later accepted Egypt's mediation efforts.

Despite the family's pleas to do whatever it takes to secure their son's freedom, Israel's leaders were reluctant to agree to the demands of Hamas.

By the time Pte Shalit was set free in 2011, public opinion had overwhelmingly shifted in favour of a deal. But the price that Israel paid was steep.

Out of the 1,207 Palestinian inmates released in the deal, more than 300 were convicted for killing Israeli citizens, according to Mr Baskin.

Four of them were responsible for the abduction and murder of Mr Baskin's wife's cousin – something which served only to motivate him to secure Pte Shalit's release.

He said he was motivated to secure the release of Pte Shalit as, in the case of his own family, the government had refused to negotiate – leaving them in the end to die.



The current hostage crisis could not be more different from the release of Gilad Shalit, says Gershon Baskin | CREDIT: AFP/Getty Images

The current hostage crisis could not be more different, said the former negotiator.

“We don’t have five years,” he said.

“It’s a matter of days before the window of opportunity closes to release the women, the children, the elderly, the sick and the wounded – the window closes once the large-scale military operation begins.”

While Israeli society mostly supported the deal to free Pte Shalit, the government has now been facing calls to punish Hamas for the murderous Oct 7 attack, even if it comes at the cost of the lives of hostages.

The public might accept releasing a small number of jailed Palestinians but would likely not approve of freeing all 7,000-odd prisoners, as some Hamas leaders have demanded. There are more than 500 now serving time for killing Israelis.

“I don’t see Israeli society accepting that,” said Mr Baskin.

But he suggested that the Israeli government could win public approval by revealing more details of the operation to save Pte Shalit. Vengeance, he said, was delivered to all those Hamas operatives involved in the kidnapping.

“Every single Palestinian who had anything to do with the abduction and holding Gilad Shalit for five years and four months is dead,” he said.

“Israel reached every single one of them ... And the people who are holding the hostages right now – they all will be killed.”

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