

## OPINION

### GUEST ESSAY

# How to Navigate a Hostage Situation Like No Other

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**By Gershon Baskin**

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Gilad Schalit, an Israeli soldier, had been a hostage for five years before Israel and Hamas were seriously willing to work toward his release. That was 2011. I had been pursuing secret back-channel communications with Hamas since a week after he was captured in a cross-border raid and dragged into Gaza. My partner in these secret negotiations was Ghazi Hamad, Hamas's spokesman who was then also a political adviser to its prime minister.

Mr. Hamad showed compassion for Mr. Schalit and his family many times. In the end, the price of Mr. Schalit's freedom was steep: 1,027 Palestinian prisoners. On Oct. 18, 2011, he returned to his home in northern Israel. When I talked to Mr. Hamad on the phone early that morning, he blurted out in a moment of spontaneous joy, "Next time we will negotiate peace!"

On the first night of Israel's bombing, I have learned, Mr. Hamad's home in Gaza City was destroyed in an airstrike. I saw it as a clear signal from Israel: Everyone affiliated with Hamas is a target. The time for talk is over.

Today, there are again hostages in Gaza — more than 200, according to the Israeli government. On Friday, Hamas released two of them — an American mother and daughter — but the fate of the others remains unclear. As deadly airstrikes on Gaza continue and Israel amasses troops at the border in preparation for a ground invasion, their safety grows more precarious each day. Should Israel negotiate to get their civilian hostages out of Gaza as quickly as possible? Should it sacrifice them to achieve its goal going into this war — to eliminate Hamas? Should it exchange them for prisoners, as it has done in the past?

These considerations present a stark dilemma for all Israelis, but perhaps none more so than Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was once the staunchest opponent of

negotiating with terrorists of any kind, but who also came to realize that the ethos of leaving no soldier behind did sometimes require that kind of engagement.

Israelis have been held hostage many times over the nation's 75 years. In May 1974, members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine held 115 hostages, most of them high school students in the town of Maalot, in northern Israel, for two days, an episode that ended in the murders of 22 hostages. An Air Force officer, Ron Arad, was shot down over Lebanon in 1986 and was never returned. In May 1985, Israel released 1,150 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the return of three Israeli soldiers captured in Lebanon.

Over the course of those painful episodes, the nation learned a great deal about how to work for its hostages' release, whether through third-party negotiations, secret back channels or force. But today's hostage crisis is unlike any other. It's not just a few people being held by hostile forces. It's about 200 people, including women, children and the elderly, and it's unfolding in the midst of a full-blown war. None of the old rules apply.

Hamas held Mr. Schalit in a secret location. Is that possible with such a large group? Gaza is a very small territory with a very dense population, not all of whom support Hamas. The inevitable intelligence leaks could enable Israel to conduct rescue operations. Israeli intelligence analysts will be looking for leads anywhere they can find them, such as data from cellphones found on the bodies of terrorists killed since the attack on Oct. 7.

It is equally unclear how this group of hostages will be treated. Hamas treated Gilad Schalit surprisingly well during his years of captivity. He was never physically tortured. Could the same be the case with so many hostages? Hamas has said that some of them are being held by other groups, including Islamic Jihad. Whatever Hamas's approach is toward these hostages, there is no guarantee that another group will share it.

Killing hostages is not what I would previously have expected from Hamas. But the killing spree of Oct. 7, including the butchering of whole families, the burning of homes, the destruction of whole communities, changed that. On Monday, it released a video of a 21-year-old hostage who appeared to have been wounded and was being treated on camera. There were no signs that she had been tortured but it was clear that she was under duress.

Negotiating for the release of hostages may also be less popular this time around. The Schalit deal was very difficult for Israel to accept. More than 300 of the Palestinians who were released from prison had been serving life sentences for violent acts, including killing Israelis. It was hard for me, too: My wife's first cousin, Sasson Nuriel, was kidnapped and killed by Hamas in September 2005. Four of the people responsible for murdering him were released as part of the agreement that I negotiated. Still, in the end, nearly 80 percent of the public, according to one poll, along with 26 government ministers and the entire national security establishment, supported the deal. Prime Minister Netanyahu signed off on the agreement.

Today, Israel holds about 7,000 Palestinian prisoners, of whom 559 are serving life sentences for killing Israelis, according to Addameer, a Palestinian prisoners' rights group. Will Israelis, still reeling from the atrocities of Oct. 7, be willing to accept this kind of bargain again? Is it safe to do so? One of the men who killed my wife's cousin, who was released in exchange for Gilad Schalit, was among the leaders of the Oct. 7 terrorist attacks, according to Israel's report of his recent killing.

I have no official authorization as a negotiator, but as far as I know I'm the only Israeli citizen who has contacts both with the leadership of Hamas and the leadership of Israel, so I have been in continual touch with both sides in hopes of advancing some long-term agreement. The release of those first two hostages is a positive development, but overall, prospects remain dim. Hamas continues to demand an end to "Israel's aggression against Gaza," and Israel says it has no intention of ending this war "until the job is done." Mr. Hamad has not backed down from Hamas's brutal attacks.

In my conversations with Hamas leaders, I have pushed them to release the women, children, elderly and sick as a humanitarian gesture. Hamas rejected the idea. I believe that Israel is open to accept a small deal in exchange for such a group, so I proposed to my Hamas contacts that they trade them for the 33 Palestinian women and 170 Palestinian minors currently in Israeli prisons, according to Addameer. Hamas rejected that, too. Right now, Hamas's focus is achieving a comprehensive cease-fire.

There are still official talks taking place. Qatar is speaking with Hamas and the United States is speaking with Qatar and Israel. This is too convoluted and complex. There need to be direct talks between Israel, Qatar and Hamas, and no one else. Not the United States, and not Iran. The agreement of Hamas to release the two Americans was apparently negotiated by the Qataris and assisted by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The United States still has a role to play. It should continue to pressure Qatar, which should give an ultimatum that if hostages are not released within, say, 24 hours, all of Hamas's leaders will be expelled from Qatar, where many are based. I don't believe that Qatar will agree to that — and certainly not without an Israeli cease-fire — but the American government and others have leverage over Qatar and it should be used.

There is still a small chance and a limited window of opportunity before the ground assault begins to attain the release of some of the hostages through this kind of agreement. After the invasion begins, it will depend on Israeli special forces to try to save them.

Some will again see their homes; others may not.

At the other end of this war, I hope that the trauma and suffering we are all feeling on both sides of the conflict will spur us to figure out how to share this land that belongs to both Israelis and Palestinians. Maybe our collective suffering and pain can be channeled to focusing on how to live together rather than killing each other. That will be a long

process and cannot include the leaders on both sides who have brought us to where we are.

We need a new generation of leaders with new vision, new hopes, new dreams and the ability to lead. I hope that many of the hostages, together with their families, will soon be able to join the voices calling for change.

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