

Captured soldier Gilad Shalit freed in Israeli-Palestinian prisoner exchange

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Yesterday Hamas released captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit to the Egyptian government in exchange for the release of 1,027 Palestinians detained by Israel. Shalit had spent five years in captivity, after being captured in a June 2006 attack near the Gaza border.

Shalit gave a brief interview to Egyptian Nile TV, and Egypt then transferred him to Israeli custody. After receiving confirmation that Shalit was in Egyptian hands, Israel began releasing a first group of 477 Palestinian prisoners to points in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. The remaining 550 prisoners are to be released in two months.

In his TV interview, Shalit—who looked thin and frail after five years of detention in a hidden location in the Gaza Strip—thanked those who had worked to secure his release, adding that he had missed his family and friends. Asked whether he supported the freeing of all the over 4,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, he said: “I would be very happy if they were all freed, so they could go back to their family and their lands. ... I hope that this agreement will lead to peace between Israel and Palestine, and that the two sides will now cooperate.”

Shalit flew to Israel and was reunited his family later in the afternoon, at the Tel Nof airbase. His release set off celebrations in many cities in Israel, just as the freeing of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners was welcomed throughout the West Bank and Gaza.

Over 200,000 people gathered in a mass celebration on Katiba Square in Gaza City to greet the convoy of eight buses carrying the prisoners being released to the Gaza Strip. Ismail Haniyeh, the prime minister of the Islamist Hamas regime in Gaza, welcomed the release of prisoners as a “page of light in Palestinian history,” adding, “We need to make more pages like this one.”

The joy of the release was tinged with sadness for

many detainees who still cannot return home, or whose lives have been shaped by decades spent in Israeli prisons. Only 265 of the 477 Palestinians now being released are returning home. The other 204 are being banished, 164 to the Gaza Strip although their families are in the West Bank, and 40 to Turkey, Qatar, or Syria.

Many relatives of Palestinian prisoners are unsure whether their loved ones will be freed, as the press has circulated conflicting lists of Palestinians slated for release in the second group of 550. One man whose daughter was released told the *New York Times*: “Today, the wife of one life prisoner was told that her husband would not be coming out. She was emotional and crying, so I comforted her and told her that the deal was in two stages and that nobody knows the names of those in the second stage.”

Raeda Omjamal, the wife of Hamas military official Rawhi Mushtaha who is now scheduled to be freed, had known him for only eight months when, in 1988, Israeli forces seized him and sentenced him to 124 years in prison. He sent her a note advising her to divorce him and move on—personal visits between them were prohibited—but she refused: “I decided to stay because I thought that was my destiny.”

She regretted that they could no longer have children, adding: “I’m filled with joy, but there’s also anxiety and worry. I’ve been waiting for him now longer than I lived at home with my family.”

The current prisoner exchange deal is similar to the one Hamas militants offered Israel shortly after Shalit’s capture. At the time, Hamas proposed to release him in exchange for approximately 1,000 prisoners, including all female and underage Palestinians held in Israeli jails. However, Tel Aviv refused—even when in 2007 Hamas released an audiotape of Shalit who asked Israel to agree to a swap deal, as his health was deteriorating

and he required hospitalization.

Instead, the Israeli regime twice launched military assaults on Gaza, in 2006 and 2009, killing thousands and devastating the area but failing to find Shalit. Israel also attacked Lebanon in 2006 with the support of the US Bush administration; Israeli fighter jets also overflew state buildings in the Syrian city of Latakia to threaten Syria over its support for Hamas.

Tel Aviv's recent about-face on prisoner-exchange proposals is rooted in the political crisis sweeping the Middle East. After revolutionary struggles by the Egyptian working class toppled US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak in February, mass protests against social inequality erupted in Israel this summer. Amid rising popular anger with years in which politics has been dominated by war and internal repression, right-wing Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu was desperate to undertake an action, like the Shalit prisoner exchange, that would have popular support.

Netanyahu's calculations are driven not by desire for peace with the Palestinians, however, but plans for further imperialist interventions in line with Western and particularly US policy. Some of these concerns were laid out in an October 17 column by Sefi Rachlevsky in *Ha'aretz*, titled "The link between Shalit's release and Iran's bomb."

He wrote: "For a determined leadership, a deal to free a kidnapped Israeli is like a candy bar waiting on a shelf. In contrast to peace and most other issues, the timing of such a deal depends entirely on Israel's leadership, and public enthusiasm is guaranteed. One word—yes—and the deal is done. ... The Gilad Shalit deal can't be viewed in isolation. The timing stemmed from three factors. One is the summer's social protest."

The second reason Rachlevsky noted was that by doing a popular deal with Hamas, Israel is weakening the rival secular Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas recently embarrassed Tel Aviv and Washington by proposing a UN vote on recognizing Palestine as a state, forcing the US to veto the measure.

Rachlevsky cited the "damage" the Shalit exchange does to Abbas and to "chances of a peace agreement and a withdrawal from the territories. The deal strengthens Hamas and weakens Abbas, thus reducing the diplomatic prospects. And for Netanyahu, that's a worthy end."

Closer ties between Hamas and Israel would also help isolate the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad—currently targeted by Turkey and the Western powers amid protests in the country—and Iran. Both Damascus and Tehran have sought to bolster Hamas and the Lebanese group Hezbollah against Israel, to deter an Israeli attack on Syria or Iran.

Relations with Iran are particularly tense, amid reports that Iran has produced substantial amounts of enriched uranium for a possible nuclear bomb, and outlandish US allegations that Iranian intelligence was involved in a bombing plot in Washington, DC. (See "US steps up sanctions and threats against Iran over alleged terror plot")

Rachlevsky concluded: "It seems the real story is an attack on Iran. ... The real issue is legitimacy. Even an extremist leadership needs legitimacy to endanger tens of thousands of its citizens," as an Israeli government decision to attack Iran's nuclear program would do. He went on to propose that improved relations with the Palestinians might allow Israel also to formally declare its ownership of nuclear weapons so as to deter an Iranian attack.

Such comments over Shalit's release only demonstrate that despite the sentiments of masses of Palestinians and Israelis, who welcomed the prisoner exchange, the Israeli regime carried out this action, not for humanitarian reasons, but to free its hands for further acts of aggression and provocation.



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