

Shalit for 1,000 Palestinians

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The celebrations in Israel over the release of kidnapped soldier Gilad Shalit come after the Israeli government concluded that diplomatic rarity, an agreement with Hamas. It is as if the government had brought back an Israeli who had been sent to Mars.

Of course, other Israeli soldiers and civilians have been held captive in Arab states or abducted by terrorist organizations and other militant groups over the years. And Israel has been willing in the past to barter hundreds or thousands of detainees in exchange for the release of just a few of its citizens. But, for as long as I can remember, popular enthusiasm has never been so overwhelmingly supportive of such a deal as it is now, with the joy virtually exploding across the country after the news of Shalit's pending release began to circulate.

One reason for this outpouring of enthusiasm is clear: the Shalit family's remarkable ability to keep alive interest in his cause throughout the five years since his abduction. Indeed, the Israeli public consistently supported the idea of the government reaching agreement with Hamas for the soldier's release.

But many Israelis — on both the left and the right — opposed the exchange of one soldier for 1,000 or more Palestinian prisoners, some of whom perpetrated terrorist attacks that killed dozens of people.

Some consider the Palestinian prisoners' release a mistake, legally and ethically, and a shocking injustice to the families of their victims.

Others, more numerous, deplore the disparity in numbers in the swap. Unlike the first group, they would be ready to accept the release of one Palestinian prisoner — even if he were responsible for the most brutal terrorist attack — but not a thousand of them.

But there is another way to look at the disparity. Israel achieved remarkable results in the wars fought against far more populous Arab countries in 1948, 1967 and 1973. Its soldiers are well trained and rely on advanced technologies and military abilities that are superior to those of the Arab countries — and far better than those of Palestinian militant groups. By demanding the release of more than 1,000 prisoners in exchange for one soldier, Hamas is conceding the stark military reality of this imbalance: thousands of their prisoners, fighting with knives, explosive belts and primitive rockets, are worth only one Israeli soldier.

Israel is, of course, resigned to its numerical inferiority and will continue to train its soldiers in order to overcome this deficit. As a result, one prisoner in exchange for 1,000 Palestinian prisoners is neither a humiliation nor a surrender, but an acceptable agreement that acknowledges, even on behalf of the enemy, the military capacity of Israeli soldiers.

There are also those who vigorously oppose the prisoner exchange with Hamas because some of the released prisoners will return to terrorism against Israel, as has happened after past exchanges. The release of one Israeli soldier in exchange for such men could therefore endanger many lives in the future.

But many of the released prisoners will be transferred to the Gaza Strip, a territory that is completely separate from Israel, where they might join Hamas' militant forces but will not be able to execute terrorist attacks against Israel. Likewise, other prisoners will be expelled to the West Bank and will not come into contact with the Israeli population, neither in the settlements nor in Israel.

Indeed, those remaining in the West Bank will be under the close supervision not only of Israeli security forces — who know everything they need to know — but also of the Palestinian Authority.

In recent years, the Palestinian Authority has effectively prevented acts of terrorism and violence against Israelis, with the aim of stabilizing the situation in the West Bank to prepare for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The 70 or so prisoners who will return to the West Bank could also be influenced by the positive atmosphere created by the Palestinian Authority as it awaits the resumption of negotiations to achieve a two-state — and two-population — solution.

Finally, a gleam of hope might arise from necessity. Perhaps one or even two of the released Palestinians will be willing to cooperate — and to lead others into cooperating — with an enemy that had been their jailer. From South Africa to Burma, there are clear and positive

precedents for such a turn of events.

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