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Do Not Hold Israel Hostage

Hamas seeks to use captives as human shields. The international community shouldn't let them.

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Oct 27 2023

Over 220 Israeli citizens, soldiers, and foreign residents have been held in Gaza since Hamas's horrific raid on October 7. Some, particularly those severely wounded in the initial attack, have likely died, with their corpses being held for ransom. Many, however, are alive, as widely shared videos of gloating Gazans confirm.

Israel has long cared deeply for captives and made lopsided deals to bring its soldiers home. In 2011, for example, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government released 1,027 Palestinian prisoners to secure from Hamas the release of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, who had spent five years in captivity. Yet 2023 poses an unprecedented dilemma for Israel. Never before has it fought on enemy territory when so many of its own people could be endangered by its bombs and bullets.

Some argue that Israel must adjust its military actions to ensure it does not harm captives held in unknown places (likely underground tunnels) within the Gaza strip. Others say that Israel should not let itself be held hostage by Hamas's tactics and must proceed based on military calculations alone. I am inclined to side with the second view, partly because we don't know how our military strikes will affect the captives, but largely because the captives' safety must be considered in the context of protecting all Israeli citizens' security.

Consider a few aspects of this dilemma, which show why Israel should prioritize military victory.

Should Israel delay a ground invasion to allow international negotiators time to win the release of some hostages? It has been nearly three weeks since Israel was attacked and massed its soldiers on the Gaza border, but Israeli ground troops have yet to cross the fence. Some media outlets claim that Israel is waiting to see if Qatar-U.S. negotiations result in the freeing of more hostages. Four hostages have been set free so far, including two Americans and two Israeli senior citizens. Cryptic reports mention a prospective deal to release a larger number of captives, perhaps up to 50.

These delays play into Hamas's hands. The longer Israel waits, the more the world forgets the atrocities that brought this conflict. The story becomes the captives, not the necessity of destroying Hamas.

Even if Hamas slowly releases some captives, they will be sure to get something in return, and they are unlikely to make concessions to Israel. Without Western pressure, Hamas likely will prioritize releasing those captives who are foreign citizens (including many Southeast Asian field workers) or dual citizens with Western passports. This "selection" process will outrage many Israelis, and rightly so.

Israel may need time to plan its ground invasion and continue air strikes that weaken Hamas's resistance. Yet it cannot allow its military and diplomatic plan to be held hostage by these negotiations, in which Hamas holds the power.

Another key matter is Israel's negotiating tactics. Should Israel supply fuel or release Palestinian prisoners in exchange for terrorists?

Israel continues to supply water, medicine, and food as a humanitarian gesture to Palestinians, even as Hamas has not given the International Red Cross access to the captives. Israel rightly refuses, however, to allow into Gaza fuel necessary for rocket launching or to ventilate Hamas's elaborate underground tunnel network. UN leaders protest that Gazan hospitals are running out of fuel—a tragedy brought upon it by Hamas, which, according to the IDF, continues to maintain its military fuel supply. In fact, UNWRA, the UN relief organization for Palestinian refugees, has accused Hamas of stealing its fuel supply, intended for civilians. Hamas ensures that any relief fuel will go to its militants, and Israel cannot play into that trap. The UN should stop outrageously demanding that Israel provide a dual military-civilian resource as part of “humanitarian” gestures.

The lopsided release of prisoners in the past has only further endangered Israeli citizens. According to Israeli newspaper reports this week, more than half of those Palestinians released in the Shalit deal returned to terrorist activity. Those released terrorists included Yahya Sinwar, who now leads Hamas's military activity in Gaza. Israel has encouraged this hostage-taking by offering such beneficial deals to its adversaries in the past. This must stop, even amid the challenge of facing tearful families.

The final consideration may be the most difficult. Should Israel change its military plans so as not to endanger the captives? Urban warfare within Gaza will endanger the captives, in part because Israel will not know if its attacks will land on hidden captivity spots. Some suspect that Hamas will use the captives as human shields. After all, they've done it with Palestinians, so we have no reason to believe that they wouldn't do the same with Israelis, including children.

Of course, Israel will utilize reconnaissance units to try to free the captives. If feasible, it should use any military means to secure their successful release, even at the expense of Palestinian civilian casualties. Yet it cannot allow its military response to be defeated by Hamas's hostage-taking. The security of all Israelis—those held captive and those back home in Israel—depends on allowing the IDF to achieve a decisive victory.

Hamas has committed terrible war crimes that shock humanity. We cannot allow this moral travesty to be compounded by allowing their captive-taking to dictate the terms of a response.

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