

Negotiating with Terrorists: Shalit May Be Coming Home

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Jews worldwide are doubtless thrilled to hear **that Gilad Shalit may be on his way home soon**. The prayers of millions may be on the verge of being granted.

Amidst the elation, however, many are doubtless also wondering how and why it is that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has agreed to swap prisoners with the terrorist group Hamas, apparently breaking, bending or changing Israel's long-standing policy: you don't negotiate with terrorists.

[W]e - Israel, the legitimate Palestinian government, the Arab world, and the entire international community - cannot afford to appease or reward Hamas. (**Tzipi Livni**)

Israel has never, nor will it ever, negotiate with Hamas, as long as it refuses to accept the three principles set forth by the international community. (**Ehud Olmert**)

No country can be expected to negotiate with a terrorist organization sworn to its destruction. (**President Obama**)

Yet PM Netanyahu has just run afoul of all three of these pronouncements from leaders who can hardly be accused of being more right-wing than he.

Questions upon questions present themselves. Will the Israeli public be so ecstatic to

have Gilad back that they approve of this deal? If so, how will they respond the next time international leaders demand that Israel sit down with a Palestinian Authority leadership team that includes Hamas? How then could anyone simply say, we don't negotiate with **terrorists**? Is there to be an exception for hostages, and if so, what if this causes Hamas to take more hostages? Or what if they don't? Could it not be said that every Israeli and every Palestinian is already, in a way, a hostage to **this war**?

These are not easy questions, and they deserve a conversation beyond easy responses. It would be useless simply to declare that this deal proves that nations should *always* be willing to negotiate with terrorists who murder civilians, and equally useless to dismiss this particular deal in this particular situation out of hand, merely because it cuts against the grain of a general principle. Geopolitics is chess, not checkers, and the search for an answer that works in every situation is a search destined to fail.

Yet this kind of simple-minded attitude, it seems to me, generally characterizes American Jewish discourse about the Middle East. Either you're an Israel-booster, eager to refute any criticism, eager to show that Israel is always right, and that the answer to all provocations must be strength, or you're a peacenik convinced that Israeli military action is always wrong, and that all violence is one simple, easily comprehensible "cycle of violence." The missing voices are the voices of nuance and complexity -- voices held hostage within our minds to the natural desire of all of us to fit into a pre-packaged political camp.

This development -- a hardline Prime Minister negotiating with Hamas and agreeing to a deal that releases a thousand Palestinian prisoners -- may turn out to have been brilliant, or it may turn out to have been disastrous. (Only time, and perhaps an enormous amount of it, will tell.) Either way, I think this news should upend our habits of knee-jerk reaction in dialogue on Middle East questions. It should remind us to examine each question in its particulars, and not just in its abstractions.

And either way, if and when Gilad Shalit returns to Israel alive and free, it should be a cause for enormous celebration.