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Israel's scars after October 7: The return of the hostages and the national trauma

How the Hamas attack exposes social fault lines and calls old principles into question

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On January 26, 2026, the remains of Ran Gvili, the last Israeli hostage in the hands of Palestinian terrorists, returned to Israel. The police officer, who belonged to an elite unit, had been fighting Hamas on October 7, 2023, when he was killed by terrorists and abducted to the Gaza Strip.¹ With the return of his body, there are no Israeli hostages in the hands of Hamas for the first time since 2014. Now his family and the entire community can say goodbye. Ran Gvili symbolizes the two traumas Israel has suffered since October 7, 2023. The first trauma, the attack on October 7 that left over 1,200 dead, was followed by the second, the taking of 251 hostages, some of whom were held captive by Hamas for two years.² It is clear that October 7 was not the beginning, but rather a dramatic escalation of an already familiar pattern.

Hostage-takings before October 7, 2023

Kidnappings and hostage situations have been a part of Jewish life and the State of Israel for decades.³ Examples range from the hostage-taking at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich to the rescue in Entebbe in 1976, the Jibril Agreement of 1985, the whereabouts of Ron Arad, who crashed over Lebanon in 1986, and the abduction of Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah in 2000.⁴ More recent cases – such as the kidnapping of researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov in Iraq in 2023 – also demonstrate the continuing vulnerability of Israeli citizens.⁵ Hamas also resorted to hostage-taking before October 7, 2023. The most prominent example is Gilad Shalit, who was kidnapped in June 2006⁶ and exchanged in October 2011 for over 1,000 prisoners, including Yahya Sinwar, who orchestrated October 7.⁷ Similarly, Hamas has repeatedly withheld the bodies of fallen soldiers, as in the case of Hadar Goldin, whose body was abducted in the summer of 2014 and only returned in November 2025, after 4,119 days.⁸

Hostage-taking serves several purposes for terrorist organizations such as Hamas. On the one hand, it acts as a protective shield for their surroundings. Israeli forces must take care not to endanger them during military operations, which limits the military leadership. This was one of Hamas' calculations after October 7, 2023: targeted air strikes were only possible to a limited extent so as not to endanger hostages.⁹ The offensive on Gaza City in 2025 was also controversial because of the last surviving hostages, who were believed to be mainly there.¹⁰ On the other hand, hostages give terrorist organizations the opportunity to divide Israeli society with targeted video messages on social media, and previously through audio recordings and images. They activate memories of past traumas, create a lasting atmosphere of insecurity, and influence the debate in Israeli society. Targeted video messages also send a signal to Palestinian society, symbolizing the ability to act and

strength, and weakening internal opponents. In addition to serving as a protective shield and communication medium, Hamas systematically uses hostages in negotiations with the Israeli government. Hostages serve as a bargaining chip for Hamas to demand military, financial, or political concessions from the Israeli government or to exchange the hostages for terrorists held in Israeli prisons.¹¹

How has Israel responded to hostage-taking in the past?

According to the Talmud, Jews have a religious duty to use all available financial, political, or military means to free Jewish hostages ("Pidyon Shvuyim").¹² In the past, this often led to negotiations in which Israel released convicted terrorists or enemy combatants in exchange for a few of its own soldiers. This practice made Israel vulnerable: terrorist organizations recognized the high value of Israeli hostages and adapted their methods. In 1976, Prime Minister **Yitzhak Rabin** ordered the military rescue of the hijacked passengers in Entebbe, whereupon terrorist groups such as Hezbollah later took greater care to conceal their hostages. This resulted in a two-pronged approach for Israel: military operations are attempted even if they pose risks to hostages or soldiers; however, if a mission appears unrealistic, the path of negotiation is followed.¹³ The State of Israel's handling of hostage situations thus implements a religious duty. This has long since become a social norm: everything is done to rescue Israeli hostages.

This stance has been clearly communicated by senior representatives of the Israeli government. **Yitzhak Rabin**, then Israel's defense minister, said in May 1985, shortly after the release of IDF soldiers under the Jibril Agreement: "...the fate of every soldier is a of the highest value."¹⁴ **Ehud Olmert**, then Prime Minister of Israel, said in July 2008, after the Israeli government had concluded an agreement with Hezbollah to return several hostages: "Even if the captured soldiers are returned and buried, we should be proud, because we have a moral obligation to bring the soldiers home – not just to send them into battle."¹⁵ **Benjamin Netanyahu**, then as now Prime Minister of Israel, said on the day of Gilad Shalit's release, October 18, 2011:

"I saw the need to bring home someone whom the State of Israel had sent to the battlefield. As a soldier and commander in the IDF, I took part in many dangerous missions. But I always knew that the Israeli government would do everything in its power to bring me or any of my comrades home if we were captured. As prime minister, I have now put this into practice. As a leader who sends soldiers out every day to defend Israeli citizens, I am convinced that mutual responsibility is not just a slogan, but a cornerstone of our existence."¹⁶

In addition to the government, Israeli society also mobilizes its resources to support relatives and draw attention to the fate of the hostages. For example, after Gilad Shalit was kidnapped, there were regular expressions of solidarity in Israel. The highlight was a 12-day march from Shalit's home in Mitzpe Hila in northern Israel to Jerusalem, in which 200,000 people took part.¹⁷

Nevertheless, this stance was also questioned. During his second term as defense minister (2007-2013), Ehud Barak convened a committee headed by Judge Meir Shamgar to review Israeli policy on hostage situations. Barak warned that Israel's willingness to negotiate made the country vulnerable to blackmail and encouraged kidnappings.¹⁸ The committee therefore recommended fixed rules: a new Knesset committee should approve the start of negotiations by a two-thirds majority. These negotiations should be led by the defense

minister, with the prime minister deciding on the outcome. The exchange ratio should be a maximum of 1:3 and living prisoners should not be exchanged for dead Israelis ("living for living"). However, no such law was passed.¹⁹

The Hamas attack and the trauma of Israeli society after October 7

Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, triggered two traumas in Israeli society. The perception of its own military strength and deterrence was replaced by personal vulnerability. The media coverage of images of violence, the failure of the secret services, and the delayed arrival of the security forces shook confidence in the state. The people in the kibbutzim and villages that were attacked had to defend themselves because the security apparatus was not present.²⁰

The second trauma was caused by the hostage situation. From October 7 onwards, 251 hostages were in the hands of Hamas, including living and dead, children and seniors, women and men, Israelis and foreigners, Jews and non-Jews.²¹ The trauma of the hostage situation primarily affected the hostages themselves and their relatives and friends. The ongoing hostage situation also became a collective burden for society as a whole, as it was linked both to the special cultural responsibility in dealing with hostages and to the constant reminders of the attack on October 7.

Hamas repeatedly made clear what goals the terrorist organization was pursuing with the hostages. It used the hostages to exert psychological and military pressure on Israel's government and society.²² Hamas repeatedly threatened further suffering for the hostages if Israel carried out military operations, such as on October 10, 2023, when Hamas spokesman Abu Ubaida threatened to kill one hostage for every Israeli bomb dropped on Gaza.²³ Hamas later intensified its threats and deliberately distributed hostages across the Gaza Strip to make military rescue attempts more difficult.²⁴ As described above, Hamas' goal was to pressure Israeli society to exert greater pressure on its own government to force negotiations with Hamas;²⁵ to release convicted terrorists²⁶ and to strengthen its own position vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority²⁷.

New lines of social division

Israeli society was already polarized before the attack on October 7, 2023, for example by the debate on judicial reform. The Hamas attack brought Israelis together. Aid for those affected, massive voluntary army service, and a government of national unity caused polarization to decrease in the short term.²⁸ However, this cohesion did not last long. Two civil society organizations founded after October 7, 2023, which focused their work on the issue of hostages, are examples of this.

Less than 24 hours after the Hamas attack, relatives of abducted hostages founded the *Hostages and Missing Families Forum* (Hostage Forum for short). Over the past two years, the forum has organized rallies in Israel, supported the hostages' relatives, and raised awareness of the hostages' fate worldwide. The organization argued that military means would not free the hostages but would endanger their survival. From this, the forum derived the political demand to free the hostages through negotiations with Hamas.²⁹ Opposition politicians such as Micky Levy (Yesh Atid) support the demand. On January 9, 2024, he said in the Knesset: "I say this in my own name, and I say this in the name of my party: any price, any price. ...at any price, any price, bring them home now."³⁰ When the government

resumed fighting in March 2025, the organization accused the government of abandoning the hostages and going against the principles of hostage rescue that had previously applied in Israel.³¹

Another organization, however, welcomed the resumption of fighting. The *Tikva Forum*, also founded by relatives of abducted hostages several months after October 7, 2023, rejected negotiations with Hamas and called for maximum military pressure on Hamas. It saw military pressure as the only way to free the hostages and warned against political concessions.³² The forum thus opposed the state's previous stance of mobilizing all means to free hostages. Instead, they demanded that Israel's security be put first and that the threat posed by Hamas be eliminated.³³ In January 2025, the forum called on the religious Zionist members of the government, led by Bezalel Smotrich, and Otzma Yehudit, led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, to leave the government if a hostage deal was reached that did not immediately free all hostages.³⁴ In April 2025, representatives of the Forum held a personal meeting with Ron Dermer, then Minister of Strategic Affairs and Prime Minister Netanyahu's right-hand man, demanding that maximum pressure be exerted on Hamas and that no agreements be accepted that did not include the release of all hostages.³⁵ In October 2025, the Tikva Forum organized a joint prayer on the grounds of the Nova Festival with Amichai Eliyahu, Minister of Religious and National Heritage and member of Otzma Yehudit, and his father, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu.³⁶

The events of October 7 thus revealed not only deep wounds, but also the renewed and, in some cases, intensified fragmentation of Israeli society.³⁷ This is reflected not least in the serious social debates surrounding compulsory military service for the ultra-Orthodox.

Outlook: Israel, the upcoming elections, and the consequences of October 7.

The Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and the war in Gaza will shape Israeli politics for many years and decades to come like few events before.

Israel is currently engaged in heated debate about how to deal with the Hamas attack on October 7. Institutions such as the armed forces and the domestic intelligence service have already conducted their own internal investigations, but a state commission of inquiry has not yet been established. A majority of the population is calling for such a commission. The government has so far refused to convene one under the current legal guidelines. In Israel, the government decides to establish a commission of inquiry, but its members are appointed by the Supreme Court. This is to ensure political independence. The current government argues that since the government wanted to limit the rights of the judiciary with its judicial reform, the court will not select members impartially. The government is therefore proposing a commission whose members are elected by a two-thirds majority of the Knesset.³⁸ It remains to be seen whether an agreement will be reached before the elections in fall 2026.

Israel is once again discussing the findings of the Shamgar Committee. In December 2025, Ohad Tal, a member of the Knesset for the Religious Zionism party, introduced a bill to enshrine the committee's findings in law. Binding principles for negotiations with terrorists are intended to reduce incentives to kidnap Israelis. Opposition leader Yair Lapid had already proposed something similar.³⁹ Netanyahu also spoke in favor of enshrining the committee's findings in law.⁴⁰ In this context, tougher measures such as the possible death

penalty for terrorists are also being discussed, but their introduction remains controversial.⁴¹ It remains to be seen to what extent this will change Israel's principles that all resources must be used to free hostages.

The Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, not only caused heavy losses but also deepened social divisions in Israel. Polarized reactions to military action and negotiations shape long-term trust and political culture. The coming years, but above all the upcoming elections, will be decisive in determining whether Israel develops strategies to strengthen cohesion and internal resilience, also with a view to external challenges – or whether the division itself becomes a permanent security risk.

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