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Israel Is Experienced With Prisoner Exchanges and Their Consequences

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Over the decades Israel has freed 7,000 prisoners to secure a handful of its soldiers, pleasing the public but encouraging kidnap plots

Israel knows a few things about prisoner exchanges. Over the decades, its governments have released [more than 7,000 captives](#) in order to secure [the freedom of 16 Israelis](#) and, in some cases, the bodies of Israelis. It's a lopsided exchange rate — about 450 to 1 — that reflects the extraordinary value Israeli society places on its individual members. It also offers a perspective on the price the Obama Administration paid for the release of Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, the U.S. soldier was [released by the Taliban](#) over the weekend in exchange for [five senior Taliban figures](#) freed from Guantánamo.

“To be honest, I felt as an Israeli, as a security man, I felt proud for the United States,” says Avi Dichter, a former head of Shin Bet, as Israel’s internal security agency is known. “I’m glad they decided to bring him back, even if it’s five, 50 or 500. I think bringing him back is more important than any other issue. In my life, 43 years in the security business, either in the army or Shin Bet or government, I’ve never seen a terrorist, including an archterrorist, that he’s worth more than the nails of an Israeli soldier. That’s why I don’t believe the five are worth more than the nails of Bowe Bergdahl.”

But prisoner deals are just that — transactions, which in the law of supply and demand create a market for captives, one that Republican critics



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of the Bergdahl exchange [say will put more U.S. service members at risk](#). Indeed, Israel has seen a surge in plots to kidnap soldiers or civilians since its last prisoner exchange, the October 2011 release of a record 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Gilad Shalit, the captive Israeli soldier held in the Gaza Strip for five years.

The windfall from Shalit stirred militants to shift their energies toward abductions. In Gaza, [the chant was](#) “The people want a new Gilad,” as Hamas officials vowed to repeat their success. Militants burrowed toward Israeli military outposts and communities in what a leader dubbed “the strategy of the tunnels” aimed at reaching Israeli outposts and communities. In the past 20 months, Israeli forces [have stumbled on four](#) concrete-reinforced underground channels, each apparently intended to carry back a captive; that’s how Shalit was taken.

Kidnap efforts are also being made in the West Bank, and inside Israel, where 20% of the population is Palestinian. Israeli officials say the effort involves every Palestinian faction, and shows no sign of waning. In December 2012, Israeli security arrested four men [trying to pick up hitchhiking Israeli soldiers](#) in an SUV where investigators found rope, masking tape, ski masks and a toy gun. In the next nine months, officials detected another 37 plots, but in September a Palestinian man lured an off-duty Israeli soldier he knew from work to the West Bank, killed him and threw his body in a well. He [told investigators](#) his plan was to trade the body for the release of his imprisoned brother.

In the nine months since, the number of plots rose to 50, including 11 traced to Israeli prisons, where high-value inmates were orchestrating the plots, according to a Shin Bet statement.

Still, the exchanges are not only accepted by Israelis, but applauded. At the time, 80% of Israelis supported the Shalit deal, [according to polls](#). And while senior officials appointed a committee to explore ways [to avoid releasing such large numbers of prisoners in the future](#), nothing is known to have changed. The Mossad, Israel’s external intelligence agency, has an agent assigned full time to prisoner exchanges.

“It’s crazy to outsiders, but that’s how it is,” Rami Igra, who formerly held the job, [told TIME](#) when the Shalit exchange was taking shape. “We are a small nation, a fighting nation. We have to show the people that fight with us and for us that we as a community will do the utmost to bring them back home. It’s a battlefield value. It’s a very important value, and it has a lot of weight in our national security. Unfortunately the other side knows it, and they use it against us.”

Dichter, the former Shin Bet chief, points out that Israel has the means to have the last word. Hamas founder Sheik Ahmed Yassin was released twice from an Israeli prison, he notes, first in 1985 along with 1,149 others in an exchange for three Israeli soldiers, then, after being arrested again, for two Mossad agents caught trying to poison a Hamas official in Jordan in 1997. Finally, an Israeli Apache gunship fired a Hellfire missile at the

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partially blind cleric [as he was wheeled out of morning prayers](#). “When we had no option to detain him, we targeted him in 2004,” Dichter says. “So those who think there’s only one round — no, no, no. There’s many rounds.”

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