

Nine million hostages

written by David M. Weinberg | 17.02.2025

Like all Israelis, I have shed buckets of tears in recent weeks watching the scenes of Israelis kidnapped (and to a great extent tortured) by Hamas returning to their families. Tears of joy and tears of horror. But mostly tears of relief.

Like all Israelis, I hope and pray that “stage one” of the deal negotiated by the Biden administration will be completed in full, including the additional tranches of live hostage releases planned for the coming weekends (which also include return of eight bodies of killed Israelis).

I hope and pray that President Trump’s new plan to evacuate all Palestinians from Gaza, Hamas’ ongoing drip-drip torture tactics against Israel, and Israel’s clear intention to yet drive Hamas leadership out of Gaza – don’t upset completion of the hostage-for-terrorist release deal in the near term. Managing these contradictory impulses and aims remains extraordinarily difficult.

Still, for obvious reasons, stages two and three of Biden’s Israel-Hamas deal were never realistic. Hamas never is going to release all Israeli hostages because they are the terrorist organization’s self-protection insurance policy and its most effective weapon for tearing Israeli society apart from within.

Israel is not going to lock-stock-and-barrel withdraw all IDF troops from Gaza and all-together forgo the security perimeter it has created inside Gaza, nor “permanently end” the war against Hamas – including interdiction of weapon shipments into Gaza and real-time strikes on Hamas terrorist offenses – as stipulated in Biden’s outline – because Israel cannot lose this war. It will not rest until Hamas’ military and dictatorial-ruling strength in Gaza is more decisively destroyed.

To this one must now add Trump’s decision to re-work the architecture of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by denying the annihilationist orthodoxies of the Palestinian national movement and its radical Islamist-jihadist supporters around the world; and rejecting the notion that “only” a unified Palestinian state in Gaza and Judea and Samaria and Jerusalem is the path to peace.

Hamas, of course, has no interest in playing along with Trump’s attempt to reset

regional diplomacy or with Israel's desire to see Trump's gambit succeed.

And it is clear to anybody looking beyond the hostage issue at the broader strategic picture that Biden's long-term outline for Hamas-Israel truce is both unwise and unrealistic.

In this regard, colder calculation and less emotional thinking in Israeli society are necessary. The increasingly shrill and even violent demand by protesters that the Netanyahu government cut "any" deal for "all" the hostages to be released "now" is perhaps understandable from a personal perspective (especially when it comes from hostage families) but it is questionable from national and strategic ones.

I certainly do not accept the most recent slogan of protesters that brands the government a "war criminal" government unless it "immediately" (and miraculously) obtains the release of "all hostages now, now, now, now!"

The streets of Tel Aviv and the front pages of almost all newspapers are plastered with this new slogan: "A government that doesn't obtain all hostage release now is a war criminal government." This echoes the worst defamatory language of Israel's enemies everywhere: the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

According to this unbalanced internal discourse, amplified by around-the-clock television reporting that is uniformly vicious towards Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his right-wing/haredi coalition, the Israeli government is now guilty of war crimes not only against the Palestinians but against its own people.

According to this unbalanced internal discourse, the 76 remaining Israeli hostages held alive and dead by Hamas in Gaza are not the only hostages. All nine million Israeli Jews have been taken hostage by Netanyahu. Hostage to his personal political fortunes, hostage to his Trump-fed "delusions" of total victory.

IN MY VIEW, this is going many steps too far. Not every deprecatory assault is acceptable in the political campaign to drive Netanyahu out of office. Not every slanderous slogan is kosher even in the struggle for hostage freedom.

And if we are talking in terms of nine million hostages, I say that nine million Israelis must not be taken prisoner in further reckless deals with Hamas that will neither work for the hostages nor bring security to the entire country.

This is the place to recall the dangers of the “stage one” deal already being implemented and the even more wild dangers of potential stage two and three deals: the release of thousands more of Palestinian terrorists.

The released terrorists assuredly will strike again, with God-only-knows how many Israeli casualties in the future. Their release certainly will incentivize future kidnappings, pour gasoline onto the terrorist fires already raging in Judea and Samaria, and catapult Hamas towards its intended takeover of Judea and Samaria.

I know this to be a fact because this has been the case with every previous terrorist release. Israel repeatedly has erred by letting terrorists loose to murder more Israelis.

And each time, in advance of every deal, the Israeli “security establishment” arrogantly and falsely has assured Israeli politicians and the public that it “will know how to manage the situation,” i.e., how to track the terrorists and crush any nascent return to terrorist activity without too much harm done.

But this has never proven to be true. Every deal involving the release of terrorists has led to much bloodshed - planned and conducted by these released terrorists.

In short, dealing Palestinian terrorists for Israeli hostages might be the most necessary thing in the world to do, but it also is a difficult thing to do. The cost will pay out over a prolonged period, and it will be steep. This is important to keep in mind.

THEREFORE, a bit of self-discipline is incumbent on everybody in Israel when demanding that the Netanyahu government cut “any” deal at “any” price on “any” terms for “all” the hostages, who “must” be released “now, now, now.”

(Bang the drums, block the roads, strike the ports and airports, and scream “now, now, now” at the top of your lungs in Knesset too.)

Again, many Israelis will say that hostage release deals are sad but necessary; that it is the government’s moral obligation to free as many hostages as possible, as soon as possible, despite high prices; that the suffering of our hostages and their families is intolerable.

Many will say that giving freed hostages one big national hug is the greatest

triumph of all, something so necessary for Israel's collective spirit and its resilience over the long term. Even if Hamas retains power and survives to fight another day.

This is a legitimate perspective, as far as it goes.

As such, I am glad that as he took office Trump pushed through implementation of Biden's "stage one" - so that I and all Israelis can rejoice a bit in the hostage lives that have been saved. I look forward to shedding additional buckets of tears of relief as more Israeli hostages are released soon, as healthy as possible.

But nobody has the right to declare skeptics of the current deal, and those of us concerned about imprudent next stage deals, to be "war criminals." Nobody has the right to take me and nine million other Israelis hostage in an untamed campaign of complete character assassination.

It may be politically incorrect these days to question the tactics - never mind the goals and total discourse dominance - of the movement for hostage release, "now, now, now." I have been told that it is "brave" and even "unwise" to pen an op-ed column like this. But I think some restraint and rethinking is necessary.

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