

Blog Post on Gilad Shalit

[In my last contribution to the preceding round, I said I'd now turn to the Israeli Arab question. But that is, obviously, an ongoing issue, whereas rescue of Corporal Gilad Shalit is an immediately urgent question. Accordingly, I turn here to that matter, postponing consideration of the Arab question for another time.]

Negotiations between Israel and Hamas (via Egypt) regarding the freeing of Corporal Gilad Shalit, now a Hamas prisoner for more than two years, continue. It is difficult to know whether a resolution is close or even whether it is likely. There are considerations that point in different directions, and even thinking about the matter is complicated by the anguished debate that surrounds the recent negotiations with Hezbollah that led to the return of the bodies of Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser and the freeing of Samir Kuntar and others.

The context: Now that Israel has returned an especially odious terrorist (plus four lesser villains, plus nearly 200 bodies) in exchange for the bodies of two soldiers - an exchange that has provoked endless commentary and controversy - there is no reason for Hamas to settle for less, nor is there reason for the Israelis to be less forthcoming. Shalit is after all alive. Moreover, he is a very useful deterrent for Hamas: So long as he remains their captive, Israel is at the very least inhibited from launching a massive military attack on Gaza. Nor is it easy to see how Prime Minister Olmert and his colleagues can refuse the price that Hamas evidently has thus far demanded, or the still higher price that many now expect will be demanded.

At the same time, I vividly recall that when I was in Israel last month, all the talk shows were focused almost exclusively on the impending prisoner exchanges (Hezbollah and Hamas), and the prevailing mantra was "at any price." There were those who called for a less sentimental approach, but the weight of public opinion was clearly in the other direction: Israel does not abandon its boys; Jewish tradition requires *pidyon shvuim*, the redemption of captives; we owe it to the families.

It is doubtful people really meant at *any* price, since it was easy enough to imagine genuinely intolerable demands. Still, if one hundred for one, why not five hundred, a thousand, more and still more? All sorts of dangers there: If you're ready to pay a very high price, do you not thereby create an incentive to still more kidnappings?

Quite cleverly, Hamas has included among those whose freedom it demands in return for Gilad Shalit leaders of both Hamas and Fatah, which means that it will be able to claim a victory that has so far eluded Mohammad Abbas.

This last is of particular importance, since among those on the Hamas list is Marwan Barghouti, widely recognized as currently (yes, even from an Israeli prison) the most significant Palestinian leader. Barghouti accepts a two-state solution, supports the peace process - and belongs to Fatah. And he is Fatah. As a free man, he instantly becomes the favorite to succeed Abbas. And from Israel's standpoint, that should be thought a

good thing, for Barghouti, unlike Abbas, is most likely able to mobilize “the Palestinian street” behind his policies, even to restore Fatah to its popular primacy.

But: If it is Hamas that has achieved Barghouti’s freedom, is it not Hamas that gets the credit? Does that change the equation?

Enter a very interesting proposal put forward the other day by Gershon Baskin in the pages of the Jerusalem Post. Dealing with precisely this question, Baskin urges Israel to preempt - that is, to free Barghouti *now*, handing him over to Abbas, denying Hamas the benefits of being his liberator.

Interesting and imaginative as is the Baskin proposal, it is doubtful that Israel’s leaders have the courage to undertake so bold a move. The Israeli street would howl in protest, and the point of the act would be vitiated were the leaders to explain their clever reasoning.

So: What price ought Israel be prepared to pay to bring Shalit home?