

The High Price Of Freedom

By Harry Wall

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Wall is director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith's Israel Office in Jerusalem.)

The release by Israel of over 1100 Arab prisoners, among them some notorious murderers -- for three Israeli POW's held captive since 1982 -- has posed a great challenge to a longheld Israeli tenet; never capitulate to the demands of terrorists. The nation which has paid an exorbitantly high price to defend itself against terrorism -- most tragically over 650 Israelis killed in the war of Lebanon -- is asking itself virtually an unprecedented question: "Why bother if we are going to turn these killers loose again?"

Israel is used to the grotesque imbalance of numbers in prisoner exchanges. As far back as the Sinai campaign of 1956, 5500 Egyptian POW's were traded for one Israeli pilot. In 1983, in exchange for six IDF soldiers held by the PLO in Lebanon, Israel released 4500 prisoners from Lebanon, along with 100 PLO members from Israeli jails.

Israel has always considered the return of soldiers captured in battle as a matter of highest principle. Apart from the humanitarian interests, as Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin told a startled nation, there is concern for military morale: that every Israeli soldier goes into battle with the reassurance that should he be taken hostage, his country will be unrelenting in securing his freedom.

But what made this exchange so different and controversial in Israel is that among the terrorists released are unregenerate killers and perpetrators of some of the most vicious attacks against innocent people. These include Kozo Okamoto, a member of the Japanese Red Army Squad that killed 27 at Ben Gurion Airport in 1972, terrorists responsible for the 1978 coastal road massacre, where 26 Israelis were gunned down, and many other murderers.

Prisoner exchanges in the past were usually marked by joyous outbursts. But this exchange triggered an unprecedented barrage of criticism, renewed appeals for capital punishment, and embroiled the coalition government in a controversy over amnesty for a convicted ring of Jewish terrorists.

While the Israeli government was apparently united on the exchange despite the high cost entailed, the reaction of the media, public opinion leaders, and most Israelis canvassed was decisively critical of the deal. Many voiced their view that Israel gave too much to Ahmed Jabril's popular front and, had the government been more patient, could have struck a better deal. Of particular concern was the release of hundreds of Palestinians to the West Bank and Gaza.

Several commentators felt the security risks did not justify the exchange and would undermine Israel's anti-terror effort. "After the release of hundreds of murderers who are allowed to remain among us, our leaders have lost their moral right to order soldiers to risk their lives in storming objectives," said Ze'ev Shiff, the respected military correspondent of Ha'Aretz, referring to the Entebbe rescue and other IDF counter-terror assaults. Terming the agreement "humiliating and frustrating," Shiff claimed the exchange is "another layer in Israel's psychological enfeeblement which began with the war in Lebanon."

Yediot Ahronot the country's largest daily newspaper, chided the Israeli POW's families for their incessant pressure for an exchange. Calling the release date "a holiday for the parents and the POWs, but a trying one for their country," the paper criticized the families for "preferring to endanger Israel's security rather than wait another year or two for their loved ones."

The government's decision, on the other hand, won some backing for giving preeminence to the ethical considerations involved. "Sensitivity

to human life is what differentiates Israel from its neighbors," opined Hatzofeh, the religious party daily. 'This extra sensitivity sometimes weakens Israel's bargaining position, . . . but stems from greatness,' said its editors.

Several security experts felt the heavy price paid by Israel in the exchange compromised the state in its stand against international terror. "Never again will Israel be able to condemn other countries for submitting to blackmail," said General (res.) Shlomo Gazit, former IDF chief of military intelligence. "We can no longer say Israel is in the forefront of fighting terror," he added.

Some officials in the defense establishment believe that the exchange will fuel further terror attacks against Israel. "Now, an Arab terrorist setting out on a killing spree knows if he is captured alive he will only sit in jail for a few years, until a prisoner swap is concluded," said a veteran counter-terrorist operator.

The controversial exchange gave rise to demands for the death penalty for terrorist killers. "Executions are preferable to the killing of prisoners by our own soldiers or the release of murderers out of surrender," said Ze'ev Shiff. Others, however, disagree on the deterrent value of capital punishment, noting the spate of suicide terrorist attacks in Lebanon recently.

The release of so many dangerous terrorist by Israel generated pressure, and inevitably created a more favorable political climate for the pardoning of the Jewish terror conspirators. With the "Jewish underground" trials wrapping up soon, the Gush Emmunim settlers' lobby and other nationalists have mounted a campaign for the pardon of those Jews already convicted of terrorism against Arabs and release of those still facing proceedings. Their argument -- "why should Jews goaded into counter-terror sit in jail while the worst murderers are set free? -- has gained considerable support, particularly in Likud circles.

Several Likud officials, among them party leaders Yitzhak Shamir and Ariel Sharon, have called for the release of the Jewish underground members. Significantly, they did not receive the backing of former Prime Minister Begin who said that the prisoners' exchange and the Jewish underground issues ought not be linked. Peres was able to quell a brewing coalition crisis by threatening to resign over the clemency issue.

Despite the criticism in Israel over the release of the Arab terrorists, there was no widespread support for pardoning the Jewish underground. "It is one thing to give in to blackmail to save innocent lives. It is quite another to exonerate Israeli citizens who acted as vigilantes," said a Jerusalem educator.

Echoing this view, the Jerusalem Post editorialized that "the price of three Israeli soldiers has been painfully high, but it should not now be used as an excuse to rip up Israel's legal system."

Some people fear that the release of the terrorists will also fuel Kahanism and anti-Arab feelings in Israel. "The image of Israel as being 'soft on terror' is just the kind of issue that can win Kahane new followers," said one former Likud official.

Has Israel gone soft on terror? Surely in its intentions it has not, but what the implications will be only time will tell. "Each issue must be considered on its own merits," said Rabin, who as Prime Minister in 1976 gave the order for the Entebbe rescue. Israel's frustration and despair over the high cost of freedom for its captured soldiers should not be confused for lack of resolve to stop terrorism. This is an attitude Israel can ill afford. The debate over the hostage exchange will soon come to an end. The terrorist threat against Israel and its inhabitants, unfortunately will not.

Death Before Deliverance



Expiration by cancer ended Leningrad refusenik Arkady Yampolsky's 14-year wait for an exit visa. His brother Alexander (far r.) and friends place his ashes in the local Jewish cemetery, since the authorities cruelly forbid further burial of bodies in Jewish sacred ground. (Credit photo to -- Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, 210 West 91st Street, New York, N.Y. 10024. (212) 799-8900.)

Governor Announces Two Appointments To Senior Panel

CARSON CITY — Governor Richard Bryan announced the appointments of Leo Wilner and Corrine Gutierrez to the Advisory Committee to the state Aging Services Division's Las Vegas office.

Wilner has lived in Las Vegas since 1965.

He is a former executive director of the Jewish Community Center of Las Vegas and is active in Temple Beth Shalom and B'nai B'rith.

Gutierrez is an office manager and is a member of the Latin Chamber of Commerce and the Latin Association for Women.

She is also an officer in the League of United Latin American Citizens.

Las Vegas, Nv., Resident Receives Degree At Yeshiva University's 54th Annual Commencement

Dina Tzirel Levari of East Desert Inn Road in Las Vegas, Nv., received a Master of Social Work from Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work at its 54th Annual Commencement in New York City. Altogether, some 1,500 degrees and diplomas will be awarded during the University's Commencement season.

Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii) will be the feature speaker at the event. He will receive an honorary degree.

Other honorary degree recipients included two prominent Israelis -- Supreme Court Justice Menachem Elon and Consul General in New York Naphtali Lavie - Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian Barbara Tuchman, and Rene-Samuel Sirat, chief rabbi of France. Haim Zohar, secretary general of the World Zionist Organization, will receive the Mordecai Ben David Award for Service to World Jewry.

Yeshiva University, America's oldest and largest university under Jewish auspices, will celebrate its Centennial in 1986.

TEL AVIV (WNS) — The final count in the voting in the Histadrut elections gave the Labor Alignment 69.3%, Likud 23.5%, Hadash (Communist) Party 4.5%, and the Citizens Rights Party 2.3%. Earlier partial counts gave the Alignment 66.7%, Likud 21.4%, Hadash 4.1%, and Citizens Rights Party 2.7%. Slightly more than 56% of the eligible voters cast their ballots.