



# COMMENTARY

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## The Shalit Deal: Background and Consequences

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The Gilad Shalit deal has led to the release of over one thousand Palestinians convicted for terrorist offenses for one Israeli soldier, who had been kidnapped by the Hamas over five years ago. During those years, Hamas refused any visits by the Red Cross to the captive soldier. At the same time, the protests in Israel against the Israeli government grew and the protestors demanded his release at almost any price. Almost all the media in Israel—both written and electronic—supported the protestors and their demands. At the same time, the security authorities in Israel made it clear that in their estimate, there were no military options to release Gilad Shalit, who was held in Gaza in total isolation. Under these circumstances, the manoeuvring options of the Israeli Prime Minister in this case were very limited. Netanyahu had to make a choice, and indeed he did.

Netanyahu's decision to authorize the deal has become possible mainly because of his awareness of his currently growing political strength. At the same time, the Israeli Prime Minister is also aware of the fluidity of the present circumstances and the need to take advantage of his currently favourable position, which might come to an end unexpectedly.

Netanyahu's enhanced political position derives from various factors, foremost among them is probably the fact that the relations between Israel and the US, which have been made much tenser since President Obama came to power, have been dramatically improved in recent months. The major controversies which characterized the relations between the two states in the past two years have not evaporated. However, they have become much less relevant due to the continuous freeze in the peace process.

The US no longer presents Israel with demands to freeze the build up of settlements in the West Bank. There are no calls for Israel to carry out gestures to the Palestinian Authority. President Obama's recent speech at the United Nations reflected the fact that the US in fact accepts the basic Israeli positions regarding the renewal of the peace process with the Palestinians. Practically, this means that the conclusion of the Palestinian aspiration to have a state of their own can be fulfilled only through direct negotiations with Israel, and that those negotiations should begin without any preconditions presented by one side to the other.

The Obama administration has also practically accepted another major Israeli demand with regard to the peace process—namely, that just as Israel should recognize the state to be established in the occupied territories as a state which belongs to the Palestinian people, so too should the Palestinian Authority recognize Israel as a Jewish state. Netanyahu could not have expected a more favourable US position towards Israel than the present one.

Indeed, one cannot ignore the fact that the apparent present pro-Israeli positions of the Obama administration may be attributed to his desperate attempts to win the sympathy and support of the Jewish community in the US as the presidential elections rapidly approach. However, it seems that the change in the US position has occurred even before the beginning of the election period. This, among other things, reflects the awareness of the US of its limited power in advancing the peace process, and its limited ability to convince the parties to accept its positions by exerting pressure on them.

Netanyahu's strength derives also from the continuous tranquillity along the northern and southern borders of Israel. Since the end of the second Lebanon war, the northern border is very calm. Although the war was not handled in an efficient manner—there indeed were many faults in various operations—the Hezbollah is certainly deterred by Israel. This is reflected in the first place by the fact that since the end of the war there has not been any significant shooting against Israel from Lebanon. The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, is hiding in different shelters in Lebanon fearful of Israeli attempts to kill him. The southern border with Gaza has also been relatively quiet in recent months. Following the last confrontation along the border, Hamas seems to be fearful of further escalation and is carrying out significant measures in order to stop the launching of rockets against Israel by extremist terror groups.

Israel's relations with Egypt seem quite stable. The new leadership in Egypt has managed as of now to thwart all the demands of radical Islamist groups to eliminate the peace with Israel. The Egyptian security forces have carried out quite intensive strategic cooperation with Israel in recent months, especially against terror cells in Sinai. The relations with Jordan are also stable, notwithstanding the frequent harsh criticism of Netanyahu by King Abdullah. Even the relations

with Turkey, which have been tense since last year, have slightly improved. In the last few weeks, there have been no offensive statements by Turkish leaders against Israel. Syria is in a most severe internal turmoil and poses no real threat to Israel under the present circumstances.

Internally, the coalition which forms the Israeli government seems very stable, and unless dramatic events occur, it seems that the coming elections will be held on schedule—two years from now. The mass demonstrations calling for "social justice" that took place in recent months and seemed to endanger the internal political stability, seem to be fading away. Basically, Israel's economy seems very stable. The storms occurring in the US and Europe are hardly felt in Israel. The standard of living of the Israeli people is rising quite fast each year. All polls undertaken in Israel in recent months indicate that a very big majority of Israelis state their satisfaction with living in Israel.

These sets of factors significantly enhanced Netanyahu's self-confidence and enabled him to authorize the Gilad Shalit deal. He was well aware of the fact that he was undertaking a very bold decision on an issue that touches the most sensitive nerves of many Israelis, especially those many families whose lives have been shaken by terror operations in Israel. As of now, all the polls undertaken clearly indicate that most Israelis support the deal, notwithstanding reservations with regard to the release of terrorists convicted for horrible acts of terror inside Israel.

At the same time, the Gilad Shalit deal clearly reflects the awareness of Hamas that its ability to further exert pressure on Israel is limited and that it could not fulfil all its aspirations with regard to this deal. Hamas was in fact forced to show flexibility—not less impressive than the flexibility Israel had to demonstrate. The Hamas leaders most probably feared that their manoeuvring abilities vis-à-vis Israel would decrease in the future due to the following main developments:

- A. The turmoil in Syria has gravely shaken the political position of Hamas. The main base of Hamas is located in Damascus, and Syria is a leading supporter of the organization. The apparent weakening of the Syrian regime certainly has severe implications for the Hamas. In fact, there were reports that it is contemplating removing its base from Damascus to another Arab capital.
- B. Iran's power—another major supporter of Hamas—is also decreasing due to its growing isolation in the international community, severe controversies within its leadership, its alleged disability to proceed towards the fulfilment of its nuclear project, and the danger that national anti-government protests will be resumed.

- C. The ability of Hamas to pose a military threat to Israel has sharply decreased due to Israel's determination to take advantage of its overwhelming superior firepower and inflict upon Gaza painful strikes each time rockets are launched against Israel. At the same time, the impressive improvement of Israeli's ability to neutralize many of the rockets launched against it through the use of a highly sophisticated technology has also contributed its share to the pragmatic attitude of Hamas in this deal.

The Gilad Shalit deal has certainly enhanced the power of Prime Minister Netanyahu and Hamas. If terror is not resumed and the present tranquillity along the southern border were to continue, this deal could possibly encourage each party to think of other—albeit naturally limited—understandings which might serve the interests of both sides.

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