

World

MIDEAST

A video, a prisoner swap and a whiff of hope

Held captive by Hamas for 3½ years, Staff Sergeant Gilad Shalit appears alive and well; Israel frees 19 Palestinian women



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HEBRON, WEST BANK

Israel heaved a collective sigh of relief yesterday as the nation watched the first visual evidence that Gilad Shalit, a young Israeli soldier abducted and held captive for 3½ years in Gaza, is alive and surprisingly well.

Seen in a two-minute 40-second video that showed him holding up a Gaza newspaper of Sept. 14, Staff Sergeant Shalit appeared clean-shaven and healthy. Smiling occasionally as he read from a sheet of notepaper held behind the newspaper, the 23-year-old soldier assured his family and a country of supporters that he was still going strong.

"I want to tell you that I feel well, in terms of health, and the *mujahdeen* of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades are treating me wonderfully," he said. The brigades are Hamas's military wing.

He appealed to the Israeli authorities to act quickly to win his release. "I hope that the current administration, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, won't waste this opportunity to achieve a deal," he said.

The video was shown on Israeli television just as the country prepared to celebrate the festival of Sukkot, a week-long holiday that marks the Jews' 40 years in the wilderness after Moses led them from Egypt.

To many Israelis, the 1,195 days since they had last seen then-Corporal Shalit alive had been a wilderness of its own.

To obtain the video, Israel yesterday released 19 female Palestinian prisoners, and another is to be released tomorrow.



Captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit is seen in this video grab released yesterday by Israeli television. Meanwhile, a newly freed Palestinian prisoner, second from right, is hugged on her arrival near the West Bank city of Jenin. MOHAMED TORKOMAN/REUTERS



row. None had been convicted of killing any Israelis, and all were to be released within the next two years.

It seemed to many Israelis to be a steep price for a brief video — they argue that it will invite further abductions — but it's only a fraction of Ha-

mas's demand that 1,000 of its people be released in exchange for Staff Sgt. Shalit. Israel says it holds about 7,200 Palestinians in its jails; Palestinian leaders say the number is closer to 11,000.

But a young soldier on the front lines in Hebron, a tense, divided town south of Jerusalem, disagrees. "If I were in Shalit's situation, I'd expect Israel to do everything it could to get me back," said Brent Rudolph, 21, a native of Vancouver and now an Israeli citizen and member of Israel's armed forces.

"Israel never leaves a soldier behind," he said at his post, standing guard outside a controversial Israeli settlement in downtown Hebron. This is another place where several exposed Israeli soldiers have been attacked in the past.

Staff Sgt. Shalit — he was promoted to sergeant during his captivity — was abducted on the night of June 25, 2006, while on guard outside the Israeli kibbutz of Kerem Shalom, one of the communities nearest the Gaza border.

Palestinian militants report-

edly tunnelled under the frontier and surfaced near Staff Sgt. Shalit and his colleagues. In a fire fight, two Israeli soldiers were killed, five others were wounded, and Staff Sgt. Shalit, then 19, was taken back through the tunnel.

For more than three years, the country seemed almost as one in solidarity with the young man. He was depicted on ubiquitous bumper stickers, flags bearing his image were waved at rallies, a vigil still is being held outside the residence of the Prime Minister. He was the subject of negotiations conducted through Egypt — Israel will not make direct contact with Hamas — and the topic of discussion at international summits.

One Palestinian earlier this year complained: "All this fuss for one soldier? We've got 11,000 prisoners in Israeli jails; where's the outcry for them?"

Yesterday, a few of those prisoners were released, and the expectation is for many more, soon.

"My government will not

give up on your freedom," said Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniyeh in Gaza, referring to those still in prison. Calling it "a great triumph for the resistance," he said, in words reminiscent of Israel's, that Palestinians are a people "who do not forget its prisoners."

Hamas appears the big winner in all of this. Not only are they gaining the release of many of their prisoners, and winning support from the public for doing so, but they have been humanized by the way they have apparently cared for Mr. Shalit.

The young man appeared fit and healthy, with no evidence of any abuse or wounds.

The prisoner release wasn't Hamas's only victory yesterday. An 11th-hour decision by the Palestinian Authority to withdraw its resolution before the UN Human Rights Council is seen here as an example of the Palestinian leadership of Mahmoud Abbas bowing to pressure from the United States and to threats from Israel.

The resolution had called for the Human Rights Council to refer to the UN General Assembly a report on the recent Gaza conflict that found that Hamas, and particularly Israel, had violated humanitarian law in waging the conflict. Israel has objected strenuously to the report's findings, especially the accusation that it had intentionally endangered the lives of thousands of Gaza civilians, and to the recommendation that the matter be referred to the International Criminal Court.

On Wednesday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that if the resolution was passed it would mean the death of the peace process.

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