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Captured in Our Hearts

The bungled Lebanon war made us forget the mistakes that led to Gilad Shalit's abduction with its strategic implications. Chief of Staff Ashkenazi is responsible for freeing Gilad and restoring IDF deterrence and public confidence

Professor Zachi Shalom (4/15/2007)

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IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi is already facing a series of critical tests in the immediate term. Ashkenazi, who was appointed after a war wracked by failure in Lebanon hasn't enjoyed even one day's grace. Hizbollah's frantic armament and redeployment on the northern border (as reported to the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee by the head of the Research Department, Brig. Gen. Yossi Baidaz) overshadow Israel's already limited achievements in the Lebanon war.

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Beyond that, Hizbollah's accelerated activities, both on the front close to Israel and in the deeper hinterland of Lebanon, embody a real threat of renewed military confrontation in the short term. A time bomb is ticking in the field and all that's needed to ignite the fire is a critical event along the border. The timely [discovery of explosive devices on the Lebanon border](#) several weeks ago almost certainly prevented a serious escalation in the north. If the devices had injured IDF soldiers, Israel would have had no choice but to respond, and the ramifications are hard to assess. There is no guarantee that explosive devices with similarly deadly potential won't be discovered in future. Therefore the danger of a flare up occurring at any time in the north exists even if we can assume, with a high degree of probability, that at the present stage, neither side is interested in a major eruption.

Neither has the danger of a re-eruption on the Palestinian front disappeared from sight, despite the Palestinian unity government and relative quiet in this sphere. The ongoing hostilities between rival factions inside the PA and the [ceremonial meetings under American sponsorship between Israeli and PA leaders](#) tend to make us forget the threat of a major attack occurring and a resurgence of the intifada. The fact that such an intifada has not broken out over the construction of the bridge near the Temple Mount should not reassure us. Bubbling under the surface if Palestinian society, are rivers of boiling lava which could erupt at any moment.

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Moral Responsibility for Captives

SO, it looks the new Chief of Staff's first test is not necessarily strategic but rather moral and ethical. It involves his duty to do something to bring home the captive IDF soldiers, chiefly Gilad Shalit who is being held in the Gaza Strip by a radical faction whose precise identity Israel doesn't seem to know. Shalit's eight month captivity coupled with the fact that the Red Cross has not been allowed to visit him and that Israel lacks all official credible information about his health is both troubling as well as seriously undermines the morale of Israel's security services. The IDF's continued "acceptance" of this situation poses a significant and cumulative threat to the general public and to the IDF soldier's confidence in the army and its senior command.

The Chief of Staff is the supreme commander of the IDF soldiers, including Gilad Shalit. He bears the highest responsibility for his release. The prime minister and defense minister can have political and other calculations relating to the measures relating to gaining Shalit's freedom. The Chief of Staff bears not only the command responsibility for his release, but also a moral responsibility as having placed Gilad where he was when he was captured. This doesn't mean that the Chief of Staff should look at the wider band of considerations relating to the steps relating to Shalit's release. However, I think that the need for his release is the highest priority from the Chief of Staff's perspective.

It may be worthwhile considering an historical example similar to the question we are dealing with. In 1968, the head of the Mossad at the time, Meir Amit, wrote a blunt letter to prime minister Levi Eshkol regarding the release of prisoners being held in Egypt (these were members of an undercover network who were sent to carry out operations in Egypt in the latter half of the 1950s. Members of the network were captured and sentenced to long prison terms). Amit pointed out the serious implications of the fact that even though Israel had thousands of Egyptian prisoners both during the Sinai Campaign in 1956 and in 1967, it had not acted with determination to release the Israeli agents as it should have. Amit went on to stress the fact that he, as head of the Mossad, had a persona and command responsibility for their fate and that he could not accept that nothing serious was being done to release them. The current Chief of Staff has a similar duty.

A Tactical Failure with Strategic Implications

The capture of Gilad Shalit was due to operational and intelligence failure by the IDF. The last Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz, set up an investigation team under Maj. Gen. Giora Eyland (res.) to investigate the reasons for the failure and deliver the necessary conclusions. Indeed, the team submitted its report as requested. Today, months after the calamitous incident, the grave failures of the Lebanon war seem to have dwarfed Shalit's abduction by Gaza terrorists.

Beside the operational failure, Shalit's capture also made a negative "contribution" to Israel's power of deterrence, whose impact is hard to assess. Promptly following the abduction, senior Israeli leaders, and primarily prime minister Ehud Olmert, made it clear that Israel was demanding Shalit's unconditional return and that it would not negotiate a prisoner exchange to achieve this. As we know, Israel has since conducted intensive negotiations for the release of Gilad Shalit in exchange for a large number of Palestinian prisoners—apparently close to 1,400. This about turn in the face of stubborn Palestinian insistence

that Shalit would not be released without a major deal involving the release of Palestinian prisoners has seriously damaged the Israeli leadership's credibility and the commitments it takes upon itself. As we know, credibility is extremely important in shaping power of deterrence.

Moreover, another dangerous and even worse consequence of the disastrous capture of Gilad Shalit concerns the overall strength of the Israeli security system and the IDF in particular. We are talking about the insidious but relentless undermining of the public's confidence in the commitment of the leadership and IDF commanders to protect IDF soldiers who risk their lives in critical wartime missions. Note that similar criticism has been expressed off and on by parents of the three soldiers kidnapped on the northern border in May 2000, the family of Ron Arad, Gilad Shalit's parents, and the parents of the soldiers abducted by Hizbollah.

Only incomprehensible insensitivity prevents these painful criticisms from raising a serious storm in Israeli society. Added to this is a dangerous mix of disquiet over the Lebanon war, which emerged as forthright criticism of the IDF leadership's lack of adequate concern for soldiers' lives in battle. Such criticism was expressed both by ordinary soldiers and senior commanders, mostly during the investigation of senior officers' conduct in the war, including that of Brig. Gen. Gal Hirsch: there were many complaints about the unnecessary endangerment of soldiers by the decision against intensive bombing of areas occupied by Hizbollah soldiers and that the IDF was ordered to continue operating in Lebanon even after the ceasefire, causing large IDF casualties for extraneous reasons mostly concerning with the prime minister's prestige.

We don't have the tools to judge the reliability of these claims. But we can assume they will be dealt with meticulously in the Winograd Committee report. However, such accusations have produced serious cracks in the public's faith in the security system and the IDF—cracks with far reaching implications affecting the strength of the entire security system, especially the IDF.

Taking a Heavy Toll

Gabi Ashkenazi's appointment as Chief of Staff offers him an opportunity to tell the Palestinians and via them, everyone else, including the Israelis, that the rules of the game have changed, and that the IDF will not put up with this situation regarding its prisoners, primarily, Gilad Shalit. To advance Shalit's release, the Chief of Staff must inform the politicians that the IDF cannot accept business as usual with the Palestinian Authority as long as Gilad Shalit is held in their area of jurisdiction. The IDF must take practical steps to prove that it has the ability and the resolve to seriously damage the human and material assets of the Palestinian Authority, with the emphasis on Hamas. There is no question that the authority's leadership has a price beyond which it is not willing to pay for Shalit being held in its territory.

The IDF under Ashkenazi must try its hardest to show the public in general and specifically the families of the abducted soldiers that it is doing something to establish this cost threshold for the Palestinian Authority—the sovereign authority where Gilad Shalit is being held. If, when all is said and done Gilad Shalit is not released, it will still have been important in helping restore IDF deterrence and reviving the public's feeling that the IDF will pay almost anything to free captive soldiers. This feeling, it seems, is presently missing among large sections of the

population.

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