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Shalit and the Region

EVEN BY MIDDLE EAST STANDARDS, THE RUSH OF recent events has been dramatic: from the uncovering of an alleged Iranian plot to assassinate Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Washington, to the steadily escalating bloodshed in Syria, to Gaddafi's final bloody demise, to Tunisia's first free election, where the Islamic Ennahda party outpolled all other parties by a wide margin.

The Israel-Hamas deal which freed IDF soldier Gilad Shalit in return for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails was briefly a hot topic in the region as well, until it was superseded by the dramatic footage of Gaddafi's final moments. Nonetheless, it is worth reflecting on some of the Arab public and media reactions to the swap, as well as on the implications for various regional parties.

Many Arab commentators and ordinary Arab citizens were extremely perturbed by the Western and Arab media's focus on Shalit, while Palestinian prisoners seemed generally faceless, and secondary to the main story. Uniformly, the Arab public views Palestinian prisoners as captives fighting for a just cause, not, as Israelis view them, as terrorists convicted of murdering innocent civilians. Commentators even claimed that Palestinian prisoners are subjected to harsher treatment than Shalit had received.

For some Egyptians, the interview of Shalit on Egyptian television, prior to his release, epitomized this excessive concern with Israel's celebrity soldier, even as Israelis expressed outrage over the interview for very different reasons. Moreover, one Egyptian pundit noted with outrage, it was Shalit's fellow soldiers who had "killed our soldiers" (referring to the outcome of Israel's pursuit of Palestinian gunmen into Egyptian territory in August, following their cross-border attack on Israeli vehicles).

The ratio of the exchange – 1,027 to 1 – came in for considerable commentary as well. The Beirut-based columnist Hussam Kanafani called it a historic achievement, while emphasizing the need for "more than one Shalit... that empty Israeli prisons of all freedom fighters."

Others felt uncomfortable, noting that it seemed to cheapen the value of Arab lives. But the well-known al-Jazeera TV interviewer Faisal al-Qasim, writing in "Gulf News," redirected what he acknowledged as a political and moral humiliation. It was Arab regimes, he said, who are responsible for the fact that "Israel's Shalit eclipses Arab *shalloots*" (translation: something shabby and of little value). For Arab regimes, he declared, an Arab person "is as valueless as an onion's peel." As they didn't care about their own downtrodden people, why should they care about an Arab captive in an Israeli or other foreign jail, he asked? Hopefully, he concluded, "the new Arab revolutions might one day liberate Arab people from despotism and turn them from *shalloots*" into "Shalits."

As for the regional implications of the deal, one may make a number of observations. Consumed with its internal upheaval, Egypt has largely been absent from regional affairs for many months. Its suc-

cess in brokering the agreement, after so many years of failed efforts, marked the first real foreign-policy achievement of the ruling Military Council, winning plaudits across the board, at home and abroad. Egypt has always defined itself as a regional heavyweight and the natural leader of the Arab world; the deal offers a bit of renewed, and badly needed "proof" of its importance to the Egyptian public, other regional actors, and Western powers.

Regarding Egyptian-Hamas relations, sealing the deal was clearly deemed mutually beneficial. For Hamas, the timing of its embrace of Egyptian efforts was propitious, as the Syrian uprising, spearheaded by Hamas's kindred spirits, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, has badly shaken Hamas's status in official circles in Damascus and Tehran. It also showed up Hamas's rival, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who had increased his public standing by his UN recognition initiative.

Although Mubarak's Egypt had always maintained contact with Hamas, the relationship had been full of animosity. Now, with Hosni Mubarak and Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman gone, and with Hamas requiring an additional, alternative source of backing to Syria and Iran, it was only natural for Hamas to cooperate with Egyptian mediators in order to finalize the prisoner exchange. This link will undoubtedly grow stronger following the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's guaranteed success in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

One likely outcome will be renewed Egyptian attention to the Israeli-Palestinian theater. This is likely to be expressed, initially, by Egyptian efforts to heal the rupture between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

Egyptian-Israeli relations also received a positive bounce from the deal, after having been badly damaged in recent months. Israeli officials were quick to praise Egypt's role, and Defense Minister Ehud Barak made sure to concurrently apologize for the death of six Egyptian soldiers in the August border incident. The improved atmosphere also enabled Egypt and Israel to agree on a detainee exchange of their own – Israeli-American Ilan Grapel, who had been arrested in Cairo in June on charges of spying, in return for 25 Egyptian citizens held in Israeli jails for a variety of offenses.

As for the bigger regional picture, both Israeli and Arab commentators speculated that Israel was motivated to complete the deal in order to focus its energies on Iran's nuclear program. Regardless of whether or not this was true, it is a fact that the US is now ratcheting up its own diplomatic and economic sanctions against Iran, and again cautioning Israel against any military action without first consulting Washington.

Stay tuned.

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