

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PRISONER SWAP BETWEEN HIZBOLLAH AND ISRAEL**

Hala Haddad

Recent PhD graduate in Political Science from University College London

---

Two years after the kidnap of two Israeli soldiers by Hizbollah forces and the war that followed as a result, both sides appeared in July 2008 to reach an agreement on the exchange of prisoners captured and killed during and prior to the July 2006 war. Such prisoner exchanges are not rarities, yet the July 2008 swap seems particularly significant. It sheds light on an array of issues that not only focus on the Israeli-Hizbollah conflict but also on the mindset of the Israeli government and on the historically volatile interactions between the different sects and religions that comprise the Lebanese government and population.

At first glance the swap appears to be much more in favour of Hizbollah than Israel. Israel hoped it would receive at least one of its soldiers alive. Instead both Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev returned in coffins.<sup>1</sup> Lebanon on the other hand welcomed back alive four Hizbollah fighters captured in July 2006 and, most significantly, it hailed the return of Samir Kuntar, imprisoned by Israel for 30 years after being charged with the murder of three Israelis, including a four-year-old toddler.<sup>2</sup> While Israel sees this man as a terrorist and child murderer, many Lebanese and Arabs see him as a wronged man who has over the course of three decades reflected and personified the injustices of

---

<sup>1</sup> The Economist, 19.7.08

<sup>2</sup> 'Israel, Hizbollah Ready for Prisoner swap', 16.7.08, CNN.com  
<http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/07/15/israel.swap>

Israel on the Lebanese and Arab people. As well as returning prisoners alive, Israel also returned around 200 bodies of fighters it has captured in the past three decades. So what were the intentions behind and results of the prisoner swap? How much have both sides gained and lost?

For the Israeli government, the message to its population and the world is one of moral obligation and commitment to secure the return of all its soldiers, dead or alive. The return of Samir Kuntar and the bodies of around 200 Arab fighters was a clear message from Tel Aviv to its neighbours, the west and its own population that moral integrity and respect for its citizens and soldiers were its main priorities.<sup>3</sup> The prisoner swap also carried the message that Israel was ready for dialogue with Hizbollah and its allies, such as Syria. This behaviour appears in line with and is perhaps an extension of the 'unofficial' negotiations carried out between Syria and Israel in Turkey in July 2008. At least 114 out of 200 of the prisoners released by Israel to Hizbollah have been transported to Syria for burial. The reason for this is because the dead prisoners were either Syrian or their families requested they get buried in Syria.<sup>4</sup>

This of course has come at a price for the Israeli government, which has been criticised from within for accepting what some see as a humiliating settlement that cheaply accepted Hizbollah demands.<sup>5</sup> Hizbollah on the other hand received, albeit decades after their death or capture, almost all the prisoners

---

<sup>3</sup> 'The Girl Screamed. I Don't Remember Anything Else', The Guardian, 19.7.08

<sup>4</sup> Syrian Television Broadcasting Network, 21.7.08

<sup>5</sup> Why does Israel Keep Agreeing to Prisoner Swaps?', 19.7.08, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasen/spages/1002722.html>

they asked for, their most valued being Samir Kuntar, who was welcomed back as a hero and victim by the entire Lebanese government<sup>6</sup>, the opposition, all the different religious representatives (Christian, Muslim and Druze) and even those that have fought one another for decades. The gathering of all these people was a reminder of the complexity of the multi-ethnic and profoundly sectarian mosaic of the Lebanese population. It also showed a rare moment of Lebanese unity, a moment of solidarity and togetherness despite the many issues that have divided this country throughout its history.

The most important and significant outcome of the prisoner swap for the Arabs, the Israelis and the world was that it was a symbol of goodwill, and of mutual efforts towards cooperation. These gestures may be far from actual peace but are nevertheless a step in the right direction.

---

<sup>6</sup> [Al-Jazeera News](#), 19.7.08