

Israel-Palestine War: Captives' Families Left Wondering if War Is the Only Priority

As the situation becomes ever more febrile in Israel, even the fate of the missing has been subjected to political polarisation

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In today's tense [Israel](#), it seems no issue is protected from political polarisation – not even the near-sacrosanct concern of Israelis whose relatives are being held captive in the Gaza Strip.

Several families of captives are camped outside governmental offices in central Tel Aviv's Kirya, hoping their presence will maintain pressure on authorities to secure their loved ones.

Israel says 199 people were taken to Gaza on 7 October, during the surprise [Palestinian attack](#) that killed around 1,400 Israelis.

Since the attack, Israel has bombed Gaza relentlessly, killing at least 3,000 [Palestinians](#). Hamas, who led the 7 October attack, claims some Israeli captives have also been killed in the bombing.

The group of families in Kirya is tight-knit and supportive. But on Monday, a man they did not recognise appeared in their midst, accusing them of being left-wingers trying to harm the government.

He said they were part of the protest movement, which before the outbreak of war had staged weekly demonstrations against the government's judicial reforms in that exact spot.

The presence of Yishai Hadas, a prominent anti-government protester, may have contributed to this framing. However, according to the parents of one captive, Hadas sat with them of his own accord, simply to show solidarity.

Police stationed nearby quickly overpowered the troublemaker and detained him for further

questioning. Yet it wasn't the first time that the families' united front had been challenged.

A day earlier, another unfamiliar man had appeared among them just before a meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and representatives of the families.

It was Zvika Mor, the father of a young man taken to Gaza, who claimed that captives should not be returned at the expense of Israel's war effort against Hamas.

The overriding message coming from the captives' families has been that Israel should put the well-being of the Israelis being held in Gaza above all else.

Mor, meanwhile, insisted that the Israeli assault on Gaza should take priority, adding that he is willing to sacrifice his son for this purpose.

Michal, one of the group of relatives in Kirya, told Middle East Eye:

"We don't know who he is and he has the right to think that way, of course. But no one knows him, and we have a bad feeling that he was planted by someone from the government. It's a very unpleasant feeling."

Demanding Attention

Avihai Brodetz, whose wife and children are captives of Hamas, was the first person to stage this sit-in outside Tel Aviv's governmental offices. On Saturday, his was joined by more than 1,000 others - captives' families and friends, as well as supportive strangers - in a protest.

The wall of the Kirya offices is plastered with photos of Israelis believed to be held in Gaza, or people who are simply still missing.

Relatives and friends of the captives are here to try and tell anyone they can about the people being held in Gaza, hoping attention will encourage the government and the world to work harder for their release.

One of those captives is Abigail, a three-year-old girl, whose parents were killed in a kibbutz near the boundary with Gaza.

"Little Abigail was playing outside when Hamas entered the settlement and started shooting everywhere," says Michal, a relative holding up the girl's photograph.

"Her parents were killed immediately, so the neighbours took her to their home, but later Hamas came to them too and they were all taken to Gaza."

Relatives like Michal express dismay at the lack of action and communication from the government.

"Do they want the world to exert a lot of pressure? Is there a deal brewing that we don't know about?" Michal asks.

"But for now, they are there. Children, women, old people - it's crazy, really crazy. I wonder if anyone [in the government] understands that this is really happening, really happening here and now, that they are all there in Gaza."

Nathan, whose friend is being held in Gaza with her children, says:

“Now everyone is busy with the war, and no one up there has a free ear for our pain.”

Also at the gathering is a 22-year-old woman named Shir. Her friend Romi, whom she met in the army, is among the captives.

Romi was one of around 4,000 young Israelis attending a rave outside the Reim kibbutz when it was attacked by Palestinian fighters. The bodies of 260 Israelis were recovered from the site of the party.

“The feeling is hard, there is no one to talk to, we lost our sense of personal security,” Shir says.

“ Hamas came here, entered our villages and communities and our homes, murdered and took prisoners – who could have imagined that such a thing would happen to us? Even in the script of an action series, this was unthinkable.”

Some in Israel believe the government is focused only on the military campaign. Others think it is hoping international pressure will help free the captives, many of whom are citizens of foreign countries.

When asked about her position, Shir hesitates.

“Personally, I feel that we have not had a government for a very long time. There is no one to talk to, no one listens to us. The prime minister has not even taken responsibility in all the speeches he has given since Saturday,” she says, adding that the captives do not seem to be the government’s first priority.

Shir is due to study medicine in Poland soon. She’s not sure she’ll ever come back.

“It is not safe here, it is impossible to raise children here. There is no future and I know that the situation of the Jews in the world is also not safe – there is no way out.”

Prisoner Swap

Shira, the mother of Liry, an 18-year-old soldier taken to Gaza, says she’s camped out in Kirya so the government cannot ignore them.

“ Hamas has thousands of prisoners in Israel, including minors and women and adults, let them have them,” she says.

Shira’s daughter had just started her military service in Nahal Oz, a kibbutz near Gaza.

“I know for sure she was kidnapped,” says Shira, who has seen footage of Liry in Gaza.

“We identified her and the army confirmed that it was her. She came in handcuffed, in pajamas but healthy and unharmed,” Shira adds.

“I think the government needs to understand that Hamas took our hostages in order to reach a deal to release their captives. It is quite clear. So go ahead, set them free.”

Shira believes Israeli public opinion is behind them.

“It crosses political positions, religious and secular people – everyone is with us.”

But just a few metres away is another encampment of captives’ families where the message is quite different.

In this place are four families, mostly settlers, including Mor. They are calling for the war not to be obstructed by attempts to free captives like their relatives.

Separating the two camps are two armed police officers. One tells MEE:

“There are a lot of emotions here, so we are providing security.”

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Featured image: Relatives of captive Israelis comfort each other in Tel Aviv, on 14 October (Reuters)

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