

# Israel's Notorious Hannibal Procedure

Army directive behind shooting of mental patient

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The fatal shooting by Israeli soldiers of an Israeli man earlier this week as he tried to scale a fence into the Gaza Strip was reportedly part of a drastic procedure the army was supposed to have phased out several years ago.

The Israeli media reported that Yakir Ben-Melech, 34, had bled to death after he was shot under the "Hannibal procedure", designed to prevent Israelis from being taken captive alive by enemy forces.

One critic, Uri Avnery, a former Israeli legislator and leader of Gush Shalom, a small radical peace group, defined the procedure as meaning: "Liberate the soldier by killing him".

The controversial directive, which was once one of the army's best-kept secrets, was drafted more than 20 years ago after the Israeli government had come under domestic pressure to release hundreds of enemy prisoners for the return of three captured soldiers.

Israel is currently involved in just such negotiations over Gilad Shalit, a soldier who has been held prisoner in Gaza by Hamas for more than three years. According to reports, he may be freed in the near future in a deal expected to see several hundred Palestinians released from Israeli prisons.

Israel was supposed to have stopped the Hannibal procedure after it withdrew its occupying army from south Lebanon in May 2000.

However, there is strong evidence that it has continued to be used, particularly during the events that triggered Israel's attack on Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and again last year during Israel's assault on Gaza.

Ben-Melech, a patient at a mental health clinic in nearby Ashkelon, tried to enter Gaza in the early hours of Monday in what his family believe was a bid to save Sgt Shalit. The army says guards fired several warning shots as he ran towards Gaza before shooting him in the leg.

Several Israeli military correspondents, apparently briefed by the army, reported that the Hannibal procedure had been invoked in Ben-Melech's case.

The use of the procedure was also confirmed by Zvika Fogel, a former deputy head of the army's Southern Command, an area including Gaza. He told the Reshet B radio station: "The Hannibal procedure is definitely the right procedure. We cannot afford now some soulmate next to Gilad Shalit."

However, in an apparent sign of continuing sensitivities on the issue, English-language

editions of Israeli newspapers did not mention the procedure. The Jerusalem Post, Israel's only major newspaper produced in English, excised a reference to the procedure included in an early report on its website, and the army's spokesman avoided answering questions about whether the procedure had been used in Ben-Melech's shooting.

Later explanations from the army focused instead on the threat Ben-Melech supposedly posed. One official told Ynet, Israel's largest news website: "The [border] guards had no way of knowing who he was and feared that his attempted infiltration was part of a larger-scale terror attack."

Ben-Melech's sister-in-law, Ilanit, responded that the army's account made no sense. "He ran in the direction of Gaza, not the soldiers, so why did they shoot him?"

The Hannibal procedure only came to light accidentally in 2003 after a slip-up by the country's military censor allowed a reference to remain in a report published by the daily Haaretz.

In a follow-up article, the newspaper revealed that the directive had been formulated in 1986 in the wake of a deal in which Israel had released more than 1,100 Palestinians for three Israelis. Gabi Ashkenazi, the current chief of staff, was among those who drafted the procedure.

The order, described as the most controversial in the Israeli army's history, was that "a dead soldier is better than a captive soldier", according to Haaretz. The directive reportedly created a furore in the army at the time, with some commanders and rabbis considering it immoral, though no mention of it was made public for many years.

It was last used officially in October 2000, five months after Israeli forces withdrew from south Lebanon, when Hizbollah captured three soldiers along the border. Attack helicopters fired on a vehicle in which it was believed the soldiers were being held.

The soldiers' bodies were returned by Hizbollah, along with a captured Israeli businessman, four years later in a deal that included the release of 400 Palestinians and 35 Arab nationals.

The procedure, according to Haaretz, was revoked in 2002, although several soldiers told the paper that they had been told to follow it despite its official annulment.

There have been a number of indications, in addition to the shooting of Ben-Melech, that the procedure is still in force.

It appears to have been invoked after Hizbollah captured two Israeli soldiers on the Lebanese border in summer 2006, an incident that triggered a month-long attack by Israel on Lebanon.

Eitan Baron wrote in a blog that his brother Yaniv, a 19-year-old tank driver, had been sent in hot pursuit of the Hizbollah team holding the two soldiers on a Hannibal procedure mission.

Yaniv Baron and four other crew members died when the tank ran over a mine and was then fired on by Hizbollah in what was widely assumed to be an ambush.

According to Mr Baron, Yaniv's battalion commander told the family after his death that the procedure had been invoked. "They [the tank crew] were familiar with the procedure, and without giving it a second thought, started driving," Mr Baron wrote.

Further revelations about the procedure emerged last January, during Operation Cast Lead, when the Israeli media reported that Israeli soldiers being sent into Gaza had been told to avoid capture at all costs.

Channel 10, a television station, quoted an officer from Battalion 501 of the Golani Brigade saying: "No troop member from the 501 battalion is to be kidnapped at any cost, nor in any situation, even if this means blowing up a grenade in his possession, killing himself and those trying to kidnap him."

An officer from the Givati Brigades was also quoted, citing the Hannibal procedure, adding: "We will not have two Gilad Shalits at any price."

During Operation Cast Lead, Hamas claimed that it had captured soldiers on two occasions but that the Israeli army had killed the Hamas fighters and soldiers in aerial attacks. Three Israeli soldiers were reported to have died in friendly-fire incidents.

A number of Palestinians, including children, have been shot by the Israeli army after getting close to the perimeter fence that surrounds Gaza. Last year Israel announced that it would shoot any Palestinian who entered a zone extending several hundred meters inside the fence.

**Jonathan Cook** is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is [www.jkcook.net](http://www.jkcook.net).

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