



## Israel at War

Thursday, February 20, 2025

**Day 503**

### Latest Updates

*“Agony. Pain. There are no words.*

*Our hearts — the hearts of an entire nation — lie in tatters.*

*On behalf of the State of Israel, I bow my head and ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness for not protecting you on that terrible day. Forgiveness for not bringing you home safely.*

*May their memory be a blessing.”*

- Israel’s President Isaac Herzog, earlier today

**Israel has experienced a highly traumatic day with the return of the bodies of four of the hostages, including, it seems, the two young Bibas boys and**

their mother. This follows an extremely difficult week that saw the marking of 500 days in captivity for the hostages still held by Hamas. [See our statement here.](#)

[See here](#) for the Jewish Federation's statement on the 500 days of war.

[Click here](#) for today's leadership message.

## Hostage Bodies

- Today is an extremely difficult and emotional day in Israel, and across the Jewish world, marked by deep sadness and grief.
- Four bodies of hostages have been returned to Israel by Hamas. The identity of one of the four, that of Oded Lifshitz, has been formally confirmed using forensic evidence. Oded was 84 years old and had been a life-long peace activist, frequently volunteering to bring sick Gazans to hospitals in Israel.
- The other three bodies are believed to be those of Shiri Bibas and her two young sons, Ariel and Kfir. The Bibas boys, Ariel, 4 years old, and Kfir, just 9 months old, when they were kidnapped, had become a global symbol of the hostages. With their distinctive red hair, their faces became known across the world, particularly through heart-wrenching footage of their terrified faces as they were taken captive. The family's father, Yarden, was released by Hamas two weeks ago. At the time of this writing, the extended family is awaiting forensic confirmation that the bodies returned are indeed those of the mother and her two young sons. Shiri's parents, Margit Shnaider Silberman, 63, and her husband Yosef José Luis (Yossi) Silberman, 67, (also life-long peace activists) were killed at their Nir Oz home on October 7. They are now survived only by their daughter, Dana.
- Despite Israeli and international pleas for a respectful hand-over, earlier today, Hamas held a ceremony steeped in propaganda where the four bodies were transferred to the Red Cross. Each of the four coffins had a photo of the person whose body was believed to be inside, alongside a sign for the two adults with wording proclaiming their "date of arrest."

- On the stage, a large poster portrayed Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a vampire above pictures of the four hostages; the poster denounced Israel and blamed it for the deaths of the four.
- Hundreds of Gazans flocked to the ceremony, many bringing their own children, who watched as music blared.
- The Red Cross handed the bodies over to the IDF, which draped the coffins in Israeli flags, **and held a short ceremony**, including the reciting of Psalm 83 by the IDF Chief Rabbi, which opens with the words:

*O God, do not keep silent; be not quiet, O God, be not still.  
See how your enemies are astir, how your foes rear their heads.  
With cunning, they conspire against your people; they plot against those you cherish.*

*"Come," they say, "let us destroy them as a nation, that the name of Israel be remembered no more."*

- From there, the coffins were taken for forensic confirmations. En-route, thousands of Israelis silently lined the streets, holding flags and paying their respects.
- Volker Turk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that the parading of bodies in Gaza is abhorrent and flies in the face of international law, "Under international law, any handover of the remains of deceased must comply with the prohibition of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, ensuring respect for the dignity of the deceased and their families."
- Prime Minister Netanyahu stated, "On this day we are all united. We are all united in unbearable grief. We all ache with pain that is mixed with rage. We are all furious at the monsters of Hamas." He added that Israel must "settle the score with the vile murderers — and we will settle the score. We will bring back all our hostages, destroy the murderers, eliminate Hamas, and together — with God's help — we will secure our future." Watch video [here](#).

## Hostage Negotiations

Mark Segel

- On Monday, Israelis marked 500 days since October 7, with a particular focus, as always, on the remaining hostages. Many people, led by the hostage families, observed a 500-minute fast to note the day. Israeli leaders, the media and the entire public were heavily focused on the milestone, expressing disbelief that so many hostages were still being held after so long.
- A combination of factors, including demands by the Trump Administration, led to a newly negotiated hostage-release schedule. Under the new timetable, four bodies were released today, instead of in ten days' time, and six hostages, instead of just three, will be released this coming Saturday. The following Saturday, a further four bodies will be released, completing Phase One of the ceasefire agreement.
- Discussions continue on Phase Two, which is set to include the release of all the remaining hostages, and an almost complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza.
  - Israel's negotiating team is now led by Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer, one of Prime Minister Netanyahu's closest confidantes, replacing Mossad Head Dadi Barnea who had led the team until now.
  - Dermer's views are understood to be more in line with those of the rest of the government, many of whose members are highly skeptical, if not opposed, to the deal's second phase.
  - For example, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has explicitly stated that he would leave the government if a new deal includes an end to fighting Hamas. Such a move would collapse Netanyahu's coalition and likely trigger new elections.

## Hostages

- Last Saturday, a further three hostages were returned as part of the deal between Israel and Hamas. Once again, the three emerged looking weak and in poor health. Subsequent testing in Israeli hospitals showed signs of malnutrition and other injuries, although all three were in stable condition.
- The three were:

- Yair Horn, 46, who was kidnapped with his brother Eytan, who is not scheduled to be released in Phase One of the hostage deal. Watch Horn's reunion with his father [here](#).
- Russian - Israeli Sasha Tropanov, 29, who was visiting his family at Nir Oz on October 7 with his girlfriend.  
Tropanov's father was murdered on October 7, while he himself was kidnapped along with his grandmother, his mother and his girlfriend. The three women were released in the November 2024 exchange.
- Tropanov, who holds dual Russian-Israeli citizenship, was held by Islamic Jihad terrorists. The Russian government had been applying pressure to have him released. Just before the release, Islamic Jihad released a propaganda video depicting Tropanov walking along the Gaza beach, skipping stones on the water and holding a fishing rod.  
Tropanov had been shot in both legs when he was abducted, and the wounds were not properly treated while he was in captivity. Watch his emotional reunion with his grandmother [here](#).
- Sagui Dekel Chen, 36, who holds dual American-Israeli citizenship, did not see daylight for almost the entire duration of his captivity, 498 days. On October 7, Dekel Chen was in the safe room of his house on Kibbutz Nir Oz, with his wife who was in the seventh month of her pregnancy, as well as with their two young daughters. He went out to fight the terrorists as his wife and daughters sheltered in the safe room for many hours, awaiting his return. Dekel-Chen's wife gave birth to a baby girl, their third, two months after he was kidnapped, but he was unaware of any of these details until a day before his release. See [this photo](#) of him on the night after his release reading a bedtime story to his daughters for the first time in nearly a year and a half. Watch his reunion with his sisters [here](#).
- Last week, Jewish Federations hosted a special webinar with Professor Amir Yaron, Governor of the Bank of Israel (Israel's equivalent of the US Federal Reserve Chair) to gain expert insight into the economic impact of the October 7 War. Yaron previously served as a Professor of Banking and Finance at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Watch the recording [here](#).

## For Further Reading

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- [Trump's Initiative for the Resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza—A Feasibility Assessment](#)
- [A Large Majority of Israelis Support Proceeding to the Second Stage of the Ceasefire Agreement](#)
- [The October 7 War is Only the First Act](#)
- [The New Lebanese Government – Details and Implications](#)
- [Where Will the Hostage Deal Lead?](#)
- [The Question Nobody's Asking: Is it Even Possible to Rehabilitate the Gaza Strip Under Existing Conditions, and if Not, What Then?](#)

Am Yisrael Chai!

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