Intelligence for Special Counter-Terrorism Operations

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Abstract

Kidnapping civilians and soldiers has become a common modus operandi of terrorist organizations seeking to free their imprisoned activists. Intelligence is vital for preventing such acts, as well as for planning and executing special operations to free the hostages. Intelligence for such operations must be accurate, detailed, updated and timely. Excellent intelligence, combined with an inventive rescue plan and a well-trained special force, may permit a rescue operation with reasonable chances of success, thereby avoiding the need to comply with the kidnappers’ demands. The article reviews the Israeli experience in coping with the complex challenge of hostage taking. The discussion focuses on three prominent case studies: The famous Operation Entebbe of 1976, whose success is credited both to intensive intelligence preparations and a heroic execution by the elite Sayeret Matkal unit of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF); the failed 1994 rescue operation of IDF soldier Nachshon Wachsman, who was kidnapped by the Hamas movement; and the capture of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit by Hamas in 2006, an affair that was only concluded over five years later in a prisoner exchange deal, due to Israel’s failure to locate Shalit’s hideout and plan a practical rescue operation. These three cases demonstrate the great importance of high-quality intelligence for the success of the fight against terrorism in general and for hostage rescue operations in particular.
Introduction

Over the past few decades, terrorism and other forms of low-intensity political violence have become a widespread and global phenomenon, threatening the lives of millions around the world. The unique structural and operational characteristics of terrorist organizations, and particularly their choice of civilians as their target, enable these relatively small and poor organizations to present a complex challenge to many nations worldwide. The rise in Islamic terrorism since the 1990s has made this phenomenon even more challenging, and militaries and other security services around the world are investing enormous efforts and resources in the fight against terrorism. These efforts include, among others, the establishment and training of special counter-terrorism forces and the handling of large-scale intelligence mechanisms for obtaining information on terrorist organizations and their infrastructures, activists, and planned attacks.

Intelligence is undoubtedly one of the key factors determining the success of the fight against terrorism. However, collecting and analyzing counter-terrorism intelligence is among the most challenging sub-fields of intelligence. This article will begin by discussing the unique characteristics of counter-terrorism intelligence. The main body of the article will focus on the intelligence aspects of planning and executing special operations for freeing hostages taken by terrorist organizations. This topic will be analyzed on the basis of Israel’s rich experience in this field.

Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism

Successful and effective counter-terrorism policy requires excellent intelligence: accurate, detailed, updated, and timely. Intelligence is vital for preventing planned terrorist attacks, responding to developing terrorist incidents, and executing proactive counter-terrorism operations.

All types of intelligence collection methods may be relevant for the task of following terrorist organizations and their activists. However, among the various methods, SIGINT (signals intelligence) and HUMINT (human intelligence), as well as interrogations, are considered the most important ones for this task.

SIGINT – listening to terrorists’ phone calls and tracing their other means of communications (faxes, text messages, emails, etc.) – is one of the most important means employed by intelligence services in order to follow terrorists’ movements and reveal their future plans. Indeed, the mere holding of a cellular phone in a terrorist’s pocket is sufficient to allow intelligence services to determine his precise location (for example, in order to arrest or kill him). However, terrorists may avoid using cellphones or change their numbers frequently in order to evade the intelligence services’ surveillance.¹

Human sources are also extremely important for intelligence surveillance on terrorist organizations. However, ideologically-motivated terrorists, who are
often willing to sacrifice their lives, are not easily recruitable, even in return for large amounts of money or other personal benefits. The alternative method of infiltrating a secret agent into the organization’s ranks is also quite difficult, since those small and closed groups tend to be very suspicious and alert with regard to such surveillance attempts.²

Important pieces of information regarding terrorist organizations can also be obtained by interrogating arrested terrorists. However, ideologically-motivated terrorists often prove to be hard nuts to crack and may be thoroughly familiar with all types of interrogation tricks. Moreover, security services in democratic states are usually restricted in their ability to use violent interrogation means against terrorist suspects.³

In addition to these three intelligence collection methods, security services also obtain information on terrorist organizations’ infrastructures and activists by VISINT (visual intelligence, i.e. cameras, aerial photography, satellites, etc.), OSINT (open-source intelligence – newspapers, radio and TV broadcasts, internet sites including social media, etc.), and information exchange with the intelligence services of allies. High-quality intelligence is essential for routine counter-terrorism activities such as the arrest of suspects, the exposure of weapons hideouts or foiling future terror attacks. However, “regular” intelligence collection and research efforts may not be enough when special and complex counter-terrorism operations are being planned and executed.

Intelligence for Special Counter-Terrorism Operations

Special counter-terrorism operations may differ from routine counter-terrorism activities in their complexity, the scale of the forces involved or the importance of their goal. Therefore, they require the involvement of special forces better trained for various types of unconventional missions, such as airborne operations, covert intelligence operations behind enemy lines, targeted assassinations, and hostage rescues.

Most militaries worldwide, as well as many other security services, operate special forces that specialize in different kinds of unconventional missions, including counter-terrorism operations. Prominent examples in this context include the GSG9,⁴ an elite German police unit specializing in hostage rescue and counter-terrorism; the Italian Navy’s COMSUBIN,⁵ an elite commando force whose missions include naval special operations, ports security, and counter-terrorism; the Dutch Marine Intervention Unit (UIM, formerly known as BBE),⁶ which earned a global reputation following its 1977 operation to rescue 50 train passengers taken hostage by nine armed terrorists; and the Russian Spetsnaz,⁷ which badly failed in handling both the Moscow theater hostage crisis in 2002 and the Beslan school siege in 2004.⁸
The US military operates the Delta Force,9 an elite unit for hostage rescue and counter-terrorism. The Delta Force was established in 1977, based on the model of the British Army’s Special Air Service (SAS).10 Another well-known American special unit is the US Navy’s Sea, Air and Land Teams (SEALs), specializing in secret intelligence gathering operations and other small-unit maritime operations. Such was the CIA-led Operation Neptune Spear (May 2, 2011), in which a team of 40 Navy SEALs killed Al-Qaeda’s leader Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Operation Neptune Spear was made possible only following an intelligence breakthrough that revealed Bin Laden’s hiding place and the gathering of sufficient pieces of information for planning and executing this complex operation. As US President Barak Obama openly revealed during his speech to the American nation in which he announced the death of Bin Laden:

Last August, after years of painstaking work by our intelligence community, I was briefed on a possible lead to Bin Laden. It was far from certain, and it took many months to run this thread to ground… And finally, last week, I determined that we had enough intelligence to take action, and authorized an operation to get Osama bin Laden and bring him to justice.11

Intelligence for special operations such as Operation Neptune must meet several requirements. Firstly, it has to be as detailed as possible. Any piece of information, however esoteric it may seem, can prove useful in planning and executing the operation and may make the difference between success and failure. Secondly, pre-operation intelligence must be true and accurate, overcoming deception attempts by the enemy or simply wrong pieces of information acquired from different sources. To this end, intelligence analysts must crosscheck each detail and intelligence collectors must focus all of their efforts to achieve any available information from as many sources as possible. Thirdly, intelligence for special counter-terrorism operations must be as updated as possible. Indeed, intelligence efforts continue even after the operation has been approved, based on the available intelligence information, and even during its execution, when intelligence officers usually join the fighting forces. An important condition for the success of special operations is maintaining the secrecy of the preparations for the operation, and sometimes of the operation itself even after its execution, as well as concealing the identity of those who conduct the operation. Intelligence agencies must examine whether any hint of the upcoming operation has been leaked to the enemy, and sometimes also join or lead efforts to mislead the enemy prior to the operation. Special operations to rescue hostages taken by terrorists (or others, such as criminals) pose a very complex challenge both for special forces and for the intelligence services. Firstly, a crisis involving hostages usually comes as a surprise and is limited in time. Therefore, all intelligence and operational
preparations for an optional rescue operation must be undertaken as quickly as possible, requiring the concentration of all efforts (i.e. directing all intelligence sources for assisting this unplanned mission on behalf of other important yet less urgent daily missions).

Secondly, hostage rescue operations appear to have a low chance of success (i.e. of freeing at least most of the hostages alive), since terrorists have learned the lesson of similar past incidents and guard their captives very closely. Naturally, the chances are even lower when only a single person is taken hostage. This requires a very creative rescue plan, which must be based on excellent intelligence information. Without sufficient intelligence, political leaders may consider other alternatives to end up the crisis, such as complying with the kidnappers’ demands (usually, freeing their imprisoned comrades).

The complexity of a rescue operation may be even greater when the hostages are being held abroad or in a territory that is not under the state’s control. This requires the intelligence to quickly acquire information about possibly unfamiliar territory, while special forces must plan not only the operation itself, but also discrete and safe routes to and from the destination. Over the years, special forces and intelligence agencies around the world have developed skills and knowledge in the planning and execution of hostage rescue operations, based on their experience and on past successes and failures. Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that Israel, which has faced continuous, multiple, and severe terror threats over a protracted period, is considered one of the leading experts in the world in this field.

The Israeli Experience – First Challenges

The State of Israel has faced terror challenges ever since its establishment in 1948. Until the mid-1960s, however, terror attacks on Israeli targets were mainly sporadic and unorganized. The first anti-Israeli terror organization was the Palestinian Fatah, which was established in 1959 but began its violent acts only in 1965. Its activity against Israel escalated following the 1967 Six-Day War, in which Israel took the Gaza Strip from Egypt and the West Bank and East Jerusalem from the Kingdom of Jordan. The beginning of Israeli military control over some one million Palestinians living in these territories at the time resulted in the establishment of several Palestinian terrorist organizations which, together with the Fatah, acted against Israel under the umbrella of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The rise of Palestinian terrorism was reflected not only in the quantity of attacks against Israeli targets, but also in their quality and audacity.

Thus, for example, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was the first Palestinian terrorist organization to hijack an Israeli airplane in July 1968. The passengers of El Al flight 426 from Rome to Tel Aviv were held
hostage in Algiers for no less than 39 days until their release in exchange for the release of 24 terrorists imprisoned in Israel. This hijacking marked the beginning of a wave of additional hijacks and attempted hijacks of Israeli airplanes and of other airplanes flying to and from Israel by the PFLP and other Palestinian organizations over the following years. However, the 1968 hijack to Algiers was the only one that ended in Israeli compliance with the kidnappers’ demands.

Thus, on May 8, 1972 an airplane belonging to the Belgian Sabena airline was hijacked by the Fatah-affiliated Black September organization on its way from Brussels to Tel Aviv. The airplane landed in Tel Aviv, and the Government of Israel pretended to agree to negotiate with the terrorists, who demanded the release of hundreds of their friends from the Israeli prison. However, this was just a deception designed to buy time until the Israeli military’s elite Sayeret Matkal unit was ready to launch a rescue operation.

Sayeret Matkal, Hebrew for General Staff Reconnaissance Unit, was established in 1958 and is considered Israel’s most elite commando unit. Since its primary mission is intelligence-gathering operations behind enemy lines, the unit is directly accountable to the Directorate of Military Intelligence (AMAN) of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Following the rise in Palestinian terrorism in the late 1960s, Sayeret Matkal was also charged with special counter-terrorism operations, including gaining control over hijacked aircrafts. Thus, in the Sabena crisis, the unit’s combat personnel, dressed up as aircrafts technicians, succeeded in undertaking a 60-second operation that astonished the world. They outwitted the hijackers, killing two of them and arresting the others, and released the passengers, most of them unscathed.14

The Black September organization was also responsible for the murder of eleven Israeli athletes during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany. In the early morning hours of September 5, eight terrorists from the organization easily penetrated the Olympic village, took the Israeli athletes hostage, and demanded the release of over 200 prisoners jailed in Israel. Following negotiations between the terrorists and the German authorities, the kidnappers and the athletes were transferred by helicopters to the local airport, where a failed rescue attempt by the German police ended in the death of all the athletes. Although the German police had no experience in such complex hostage rescue operations, the German authorities refused an Israeli request to send Sayeret Matkal to Munich in order to lead the rescue operation.15

In fact, even Sayeret Matkal, despite its impressive success in rescuing the Sabena hostages, still lacked at that time a clear and consistent practice for rescuing hostages, as was demonstrated all too clearly during the Ma’alot massacre less than two years later.

On the early hours of May 13, 1974, three terrorists from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) managed to cross the Israeli border from Lebanon. Over a period of two days they headed toward the small town of
Ma’alot in the Western Galilee. Reaching Ma’alot, the terrorists succeeded to kill several Israeli citizens before reaching an elementary school. They took hostage a group of 102 high school students and ten teachers who had spent the night there on a school trip.

On the morning of May 15, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan reached Ma’alot and ordered Sayeret Matkal to prepare for a rescue operation. However, the Israeli government, headed by Golda Meir, hesitated and preferred to first consider negotiating with the terrorists, who had demanded the release of dozens of their comrades imprisoned in Israel. Meanwhile, Sayeret Matkal continued to plan a rescue operation, based on limited intelligence obtained through observations of the school and questioning several hostages who had managed to escape from the building.

Sayeret Matkal was finally given permission to act just before the terrorists’ ultimatum was about to expire. Unfortunately, due to several operational mistakes by the breaking forces, the original plan was disrupted and the rescue operation failed, resulting in the death of 21 pupils and the injury of many others.

Following Sayeret Matkal’s failure in Ma’alot, the unit’s manpower strength was increased by 40 combatants and a new full-scale doctrine was developed for handling hostage-taking scenarios. As Muki Betser, one of the unit’s legendary commanders, explained:

> The recruits learned a whole new set of skills and tools. They learned to break into a room crowded with hostages, identify the terrorists, and selectively shoot to kill terrorists while avoiding hostages. The specialized teams learned how to take over houses, apartment buildings, ships, trains, planes, buses—any target that terrorists might capture…. We constantly practiced on models and real targets… Basic methodologies for snipers, communication networks, sabotage substances, and combat means needed to be developed. In quite a short time we put together a doctrine, which we kept improving all the time and the unit continues to improve to this day.17

Another consequence of the Ma’alot massacre was the establishment of a special police unit named YAMAM (Hebrew acronym for Special Central Unit), which specializes in counter-terrorism and hostage rescue. YAMAM was established following the recommendation of the Horev commission of inquiry appointed to investigate the Ma’alot massacre. The commission recommended that the Israel Police, which is responsible for internal security, should develop capabilities to handle hostage taking scenarios inside Israel, similar to Sayeret Matkal whose mandate of action is essentially outside Israel’s borders (as well as inside the Palestinian Territories).18

However, in the subsequent hostage-taking events – the DFLP attack on the Israeli northern town of Beit She’an in November 197419 and the Tel Aviv Savoy Hotel attack in March 197520 – Sayeret Matkal was also charged with the task
of freeing the hostages. These two incidents again demonstrated the difficulties characterizing both the intelligence gathering and the preparation and execution of a rescue plan in such short time and in complex circumstances, in which the captors usually enjoy a clear advantage over the rescuing forces and can kill the hostages at any point.

Hostage rescue operations are always very challenging, even if the hostages are being held in the territory of the state launching the operation. However, an even more challenging situation emerges during operations to rescue hostages held abroad, as in the famous instance of Operation Entebbe in 1976.

Operation Entebbe

Air France flight 139, which made its way from Tel Aviv to Paris on June 27, 1976, was hijacked by four terrorists who boarded the airplane during a scheduled stopover in Athens. The terrorists – two of whom belonged to a faction of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the other two to a German leftist terrorist group – diverted the airplane, after another stopover in Benghazi, Libya, to its final destination: Entebbe, the main airport of Uganda.

The first few hours following the hijacking found AMAN, Israel’s military intelligence, casting about in the dark, trying to find out the hijackers’ affiliation and objectives. After a few uncertain hours, open sources reported that the plane had landed in Entebbe. Although Uganda had severed its diplomatic relations with Israel in 1972 and its leader, Idi Amin, had adopted a hostile approach toward Israel, AMAN did not see the country as a target for intelligence gathering.\(^{21}\)

Despite AMAN’s lack of familiarity with Uganda, its officers, together with the Air Force intelligence and the Mossad, Israel’s foreign security service, succeeded over the next few days in collecting fragments of information. They were able to provide a detailed intelligence picture that enabled the planning and execution of a heroic overseas rescue operation. A few years ago, the IDF and Defense Establishment Archives released – with a few redactions – the IDF’s operations log, including its intelligence part, in Operation Entebbe (codenamed “Operation Thunder Ball.”)\(^{22}\) This important historical document, together with the published memoirs of Israeli political and military leaders at that time\(^{23}\) and of officers who participated in the operation,\(^{24}\) paint a fascinating picture of the intelligence preparations for this ambitious special operation.

Basic information on Entebbe and its surroundings was derived from tourist maps of the region, purchased by AMAN’s officers in a bookstore. Air Force intelligence located a Jeppesen Flight Guide that provided basic details on the airport, including navigation and landing information. However, Entebbe Airport had been expanded over the previous years, and the air intelligence officers suspected that the data derived from the Jeppesen Guide were not necessarily updated.
Further valuable, though again not updated, information on the airport was obtained by questioning of IDF officers who had visited Entebbe until 1972, when Idi Amin cut off all diplomatic and military ties with Israel. Among those officers were Israeli Air Force officers who had trained their Ugandan counterparts and were very familiar with the old terminal at the airport, where the kidnapped passengers were now being held. General information about the Ugandan army, which was guarding the airport, was provided by Muki Betser and other Sayeret Matkal officers who had trained the Ugandan special forces until 1972.

Very important information was also obtained from an Israeli-British passenger who managed to outwit the kidnappers and was released during the stopover in Benghazi after pretending to be pregnant and ill. The questioning of this passenger by British intelligence provided valuable information that was forwarded to AMAN and the Mossad regarding the number of kidnappers, their weapons, the way they kidnapped the airplane, and how they treated the passengers.

On June 30, the airplane kidnappers released all the non-Israeli passengers of flight 139. The freed passengers were flown to Paris, where they were questioned by the French security services, accompanied by representatives of AMAN and the Mossad. The Mossad was also very helpful in supplying, at the last minute, updated visual information on the airport and its runways through an agent who rented a light plane and circled above the airport while taking pictures. These pictures corroborated the intelligence picture of the airport obtained from other sources, and convinced the Israeli government to approve the rescue operation.

Operation Entebbe began on July 3 with the takeoff of four Hercules aircrafts from an Israeli air base in Sharm el-Sheikh in the Sinai Peninsula, then held by Israel. The four military transport aircrafts carried almost 200 combatants from different IDF units, including 66 Sayeret Matkal combatants whose main mission was to break into the airport’s old terminal, kill the kidnappers, and rescue the 105 hostages.

Immediately after the landing of the first Hercules in Entebbe, Sayeret Matkal combatants began driving toward the old terminal in a vehicles convoy, headed by a black Mercedes (ostensibly carrying Ugandan President Idi Amin who was supposedly coming to visit the captors and their hostages). With the help of detailed and accurate intelligence, the Israeli combatants succeeded in killing all the terrorists and freeing the kidnapped passengers, most of them unscathed. The rest of the Israeli participating troops successfully gained control over the airport and neutralized any possible interference by the Ugandan military until the takeoff of the kidnapped passengers and their rescuers back to Israel.

The Entebbe operation claimed the lives of three kidnapped passengers, as well as one Israeli soldier – Sayeret Matkal commander Yonatan Netanyahu. In honor of Netanyahu, the Israeli official name of the operation was switched to “Operation Yonatan.”
Operation Entebbe/Yonatan demonstrated once again the crucial importance of detailed and accurate intelligence for the success of complex special operations. It also demonstrated the determination shared by all Israeli governments not to accede to terrorists’ demands and to prefer a hostage rescue operation whenever possible.

The Nachshon Wachsman Affair

The Entebbe Operation was the last hostage rescue operation to be carried out by Israel abroad. In other hostage crises that have occurred since the 1970s outside Israel’s borders, especially in Lebanon, Israel was obliged to negotiate with the terrorists, consent to their demands, and sign prisoner exchange deals. This choice was usually the result of the absence of a realistic rescue option, either due to lack of intelligence or to the low chances of success (i.e. of freeing most of the hostages alive). In fact, the Entebbe hostage crisis was unusual in the high number of hostages involved. In most other similar incidents in Israeli history, only a few persons – or even a single individual – were taken hostage. In such cases, the risk of failure is usually much higher.

Such was the capture during the 1982 Lebanon War of three Israeli soldiers by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), an organization headed by Ahmad Jibril. Three years later, Israel had no option but to sign a prisoner exchange deal with the PFLP-GC, nicknamed “the Jibril Agreement.” According to the agreement, which provoked intense public debate, Israel freed 1,150 prisoners, mainly Palestinians convicted of committing terror acts, in return of the three captured soldiers.

The high price paid by the Israeli government in the Jibril Agreement emphasized again its commitment to bring Israeli hostages back home. This commitment is even stronger when it comes to captured IDF soldiers, due to the Israeli ethos that the military does not abandon soldiers wounded or taken hostage on the battlefield. Accordingly, on January 2004 Israel agreed to free hundreds of imprisoned terrorists in exchange for the bodies of three IDF soldiers, as well as a live Israeli citizen captured by Lebanese Hizballah. Four years later, in 2008, Israel returned to Lebanon five Lebanese terrorists and 197 bodies of activists from Hizballah and other terrorist organizations in exchange for the remains of two Israeli soldiers captured by Hizballah in July 2006, in the initial incident that sparked the 2006 Lebanon War.

Negotiating with Islamic terrorist organizations such as Hizballah or Palestinian Hamas is always more difficult than negotiating with organizations holding a secular ideology, such as Fatah or the Palestinian fronts. Moreover, the task of collecting intelligence about Islamic organizations is also much more difficult, since – as stated before – these fanatic closed groups tend to be very suspicious and alert with regard to any kind of surveillance attempts (such as HUMINT). Hamas, which was established in 1987, also adopted the modus operandi of
taking Israeli soldiers captive as a tool for freeing its activists from Israeli prison. Such was the case of IDF soldier Nachshon Wachsman, who was kidnapped on October 9, 1994 by four Hamas activists who pretended to be Israeli settlers and offered him a ride in their car. Two days later, a message from Hamas reached the Red Cross offices in Gaza, claiming to hold the missing soldier. On the following day, Hamas in Gaza released a video tape showing Nachshon Wachsman under Hamas captivity. In exchange for Wachsman’s release, Hamas demanded the release of 200 of its prisoners from Israeli prisons, including Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin.

The mission of finding the captured soldier was entrusted to Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency, which with the assistance of the IDF holds responsibility for the war against terrorism, and especially its intelligence aspects. However, Shin Bet mistakenly assumed that Wachsman was held in the Gaza Strip, while he was actually taken to a hideaway near the Palestinian city of Ramallah in the West Bank, not far from Jerusalem.31

Although Shin Bet directed most of its intelligence efforts toward the Gaza Strip, it recognized the possibility that Wachsman might be being held in the West Bank or around Jerusalem. The agency’s assessors assumed that the kidnappers had rented a car for carrying out their mission and began to check the issue at car rental agencies in the Jerusalem area. As part of this examination, it was found that a few days before a car had been rented by a prominent Hamas activist, who was immediately detained for a Shin Bet interrogation. Although no direct evidence linked the detainee to the kidnapping, Shin Bet was authorized to use aggressive interrogation methods against him, since the kidnappers’ ultimatum deadline was about to expire.32

The gamble paid off. The detainee, who turned out to be the person who rented the car that was used by the kidnappers, shared valuable details with his Shin Bet interrogators regarding the kidnapping, the kidnappers, and the hideaway where Wachsman was held near Ramallah. This breakthrough marked the beginning of a race against time to prepare an option of a rescue operation, as detailed by Shin Bet’s then acting director Carmi Gillon:

> At this stage, both Sayeret Matkal and the police’s YAMAM unit were tasked with planning a rescue operation. Shin Bet’s mission was to supply them with the intelligence necessary for preparing a plan having high chances of success... Intelligence in such operations must be as detailed as possible, and indeed it was. However, due to the tight schedule – it was only seven hours before the kidnapers’ ultimatum was due to expire – the operational forces had no time to perform a preliminary dry practice on a model...33

Eventually, the political and military leadership preferred Sayeret Matkal over YAMAM to perform the rescue operation.34 A couple of hours before H-hour, Shin Bet’s lookouts surrounding the house where Wachsman was being held identified
an anonymous person approaching the place. The decision to let him enter the house turned out to be extremely important, as detailed by Carmi Gillon:

After he left the house and moved away, we detained him for an onsite interrogation. He turned out to be a collaborator of the cell that kidnapped Nachshon Wachsman… In his interrogation he told us that Wachsman was safe and sound… He gave us very important intelligence on what was happening inside the house, where exactly Wachsman was sitting, details on the interior of the house, etc. We immediately passed all this information to Sayeret Matkal, which finalized its preparation toward the raid on the house.35

Unfortunately, however, excellent intelligence is no guarantee for the success of an operation, especially when only one person is taken hostage as in the Wachsman affair. On the evening of October 14, shortly before the kidnappers’ ultimatum was due to expire, three cells of Sayeret Matkal combatants raided the house, hoping to surprise the kidnappers, who most probably did not suspect that their hideout had been exposed. However, due either to an operational mistake or an inaccurate intelligence detail, the combatants failed to explode the steel front door in a single shot. As a result of this unexpected delay, the Israeli combatants reached Wachsman’s room in the second floor after 40 seconds – time enough for the terrorists to regain their composure and kill the hostage. In addition to Wachsman himself, the failed operation also claimed the life of Sayeret Matkal combatant Nir Poraz.

Although the chances of freeing Wachsman alive in such difficult circumstances were slight from the outset, Israel’s leaders preferred a rescue operation over complying with the kidnappers’ demands. However, a rescue operation is not always an option, as was demonstrated a decade later in the Gilad Shalit affair.

The Gilad Shalit Affair

Although Hamas did not secure its goal of freeing his prisoners from Israeli jails in the Wachsman affair, the movement did not abandon this modus operandi. Moreover, Hamas was inspired by the kidnapping of three IDF soldiers by Hizballah in 2000, an affair that ended, as mentioned above, with a prisoner exchange deal between Israel and the Lebanese organization.

Since the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, the area became a safe haven for Hamas, analogous to the freedom of action enjoyed by Hizballah in Lebanon following the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000. Hamas became still more confident following its surprising victory over the Fatah in the Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006. Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that Israeli intelligence began to receive general alerts about the organization’s intentions to kidnap an Israeli soldier through one of the underground tunnels the movement was trying to dig beneath the Israeli-Gazan border fence.
Despite these alerts, Hamas succeeded in its plan. On the early morning of June 25, 2006, the movement attacked several IDF targets inside Israeli territory, including a tank occupied by three soldiers from the Armored Corps. The attack claimed the lives of two of the Israeli soldiers, while the third, Corporal Gilad Shalit, was injured, captured by Hamas, and transferred without any difficulty to a point deep inside the Gaza Strip.

The incident led Israel to launch a military operation in the Gaza Strip that lasted intermittently for five months, during which Shalit was not located. Meanwhile, on July 12, 2006, Israel launched a war against Hizballah in Lebanon following an incident in which two IDF soldiers were captured by the Lebanese organization. In both cases, Israel initially refused to negotiate with the terrorists who demanded the release of their comrades from Israeli prison in exchange for the captured IDF soldiers.

Immediately after the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit, and during the next 1941 days he spent in Hamas captivity, Shin Bet and AMAN invested enormous efforts to locate the place where he was being held. Those efforts included both signal and visual surveillance of Hamas activists in the Gaza Strip, as well as the activation of a vast network of human sources and collaborators in an effort to locate any clue that might lead to the kidnapped soldier. However, the Israeli intelligence coverage in Gaza had been impaired by the disengagement plan in 2005, and encountered further difficulties following Hamas takeover of Gaza in June 2007. Moreover, Hamas maintained absolute secrecy with regard to Shalit’s location, even inside the movement, and invested intense efforts in foiling any Israeli attempt to collect information on the captured soldier, including the exposure of Palestinian inhabitants who allegedly worked for Israel.

Former Shin Bet director Ami Ayalon, who served as a minister in the Israeli government and a member of the security cabinet, claimed in December 2007 that “an intelligence failure has prevented any possibility of a military operation to free Shalit.” Other sources claimed that Israeli intelligence had several times identified Shalit’s location, which was changed periodically. However, the absence of an operational plan with a reasonable chance of success, together with the bitter memory of the Wachsman affair, led to the rejection of the military option.

During the years Shalit spent in Hamas captivity, several international mediation initiatives, as well as a number of private Israeli ones, attempted to find a solution to the affair. Despite its declarative objection to negotiating with Hamas, the Israeli government cooperated with some of those initiatives, though not without hesitation due to the high price Hamas demanded in exchange of Shalit. Meanwhile, Shalit’s family launched a public campaign, both in Israel and abroad, to free their son, while Israeli public opinion was divided over the price that Israel should pay for one captive soldier.

Eventually, public pressure and the Israeli ethos that all IDF soldiers shall be brought back home tipped the scales. In October 2011, the Israeli government
agreed to sign a prisoner exchange deal with Hamas that was, as in previous cases, very asymmetrical – the release of one soldier, Gilad Shalit, in exchange for over one thousand Palestinian prisoners.

Conclusion

As the historical review above clearly shows, the price Israel has paid in prisoner exchange deals has grown dramatically over the years. Recognizing the great sensitivity in Israel for the lives of its citizens, and especially its soldiers, the motivation of terrorist organizations to kidnap Israelis has grown, forcing Israel to agree to extremely asymmetrical prisoner swap deals.

In 2011, following the capture of Gilad Shalit and Hamas’s disproportionate demands in exchange for his release, the Israeli government established a special commission, headed by former Supreme Court President Meir Shamgar, to draft new criteria for the release of future captives. Although most of the commission’s recommendations remain confidential, it has been claimed that the commission advocated a tougher approach, according to which only a few terrorists are to be released from Israeli imprisonment in exchange for one Israeli captive.

However, due to the public pressure characterizing such cases and politicians’ dependence on public support, it is reasonable to assume that in the future, too, Israel will have to pay a high price in order to free its captives. Accordingly, it is preferable for Israel to invest considerable efforts in preventing future kidnapping incidents. In the event that Israeli civilians or soldiers are captured by terrorist organizations, it is better to create a rescue operation feasibility. However, handling hostage crises is a very challenging task, as illustrated by the three case studies summarized above. The rich Israeli experience in this field demonstrates how important intelligence is for the success of hostage rescue operations, although even the most detailed and accurate intelligence cannot guarantee the success of such operations. There is also a need for a clever, daring, and inventive rescue plan, including a strong element of surprise, as well as an excellent and professional special team to carry out the plan. Another crucial factor is decisive political and military leadership capable of taking calculated risks. And of course, a little help from “Lady Luck” can always make a dramatic difference.

Endnotes:

1. For elaboration on the importance of SIGINT for the war against terror see: Matthew M. Aid, “All Glory is Fleeting: Sigint and the Fight Against International Terrorism,” Intelligence and National Security, Vol. 18, Issue 4 (2003), pp. 72-120.

2. For elaboration on the importance of HUMINT for the war against terror see: Gary Berntsen, Human Intelligence, Counterterrorism, & National Leadership: A practical Guide


5. Italian abbreviation for Diver and Raider Command Group.

6. Dutch abbreviation for Special Assistance Unit.

7. Russian abbreviation for Special Purpose Military Units.

8. An informative and detailed review of special forces around the world and famous special counter-terrorism operations during the twentieth century can be found in: Peter Harclerode, Special Soldiers: Special Forces in the War against Terrorism, Cassell Military Paperbacks (London: Cassell & Co, 2000).

9. Its formal and full name is the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta.


13. For a review of the Palestinian terrorist organizations that have acted against Israel since 1967 and during the 1970s and 1980s, see: Ariel Merari and Shlomi Elad, The International Dimension of Palestinian Terrorism, Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies (JCSS), Tel Aviv University, JCSS study no. 6 (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Post, 1986); Yonah Alexander, Palestinian Secular Terrorism: Profiles of Fatah, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Ardsley, NY: Transnational Publishers, 2003).

14. For a review of the history of Sayeret Matkal through the early 1990s and its prominent operations, including the release of the Sabena hostages and other operations that will be mentioned hereinafter, see: Samuel M. Katz, The Elite: The True Story of Israel’s Secret Counterterrorist unit (New York, N.Y.: Pocket Books, 1992).

15. For a detailed description of the 1972 Munich massacre see: David Clay Large, Munich 1972: Tragedy, Terror, and Triumph at the Olympic Games (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012). As part of the lessons learned from the Munich massacre, the German elite police unit GSG9, which was mentioned before, was established in 1973.

- Following the Munich massacre, Israel’s foreign security service, the Mossad, launched a series of overseas secret operations to assassinate all the terrorists involved in the planning and
execution of the massacre; see on this topic: Alexander B. Calahan, Countering Terrorism: The Israeli Response to the 1972 Munich Olympic Massacre and the Development of Independent Covert Action Teams, thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, Quantico, VA., April 1995 - http://fas.org/irp/eprint/calahan.htm

16_ For Moshe Dayan’s account of the events of that day, see his autobiography: Moshe Dayan, Story of My Life (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Steimatzky’s Agency, 1976), pp. 480-487.


19_ On November 19, 1974, three terrorists belonging to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) infiltrated into Israel from Jordan, broke into an apartment in Beit She’an in northern Israel, and barricaded themselves inside. The incident, which claimed the lives of four Israeli citizens, ended after Sayeret Matkal combatants stormed the building and killed all the terrorists. See: Moshe “Muki” Betser, Secret Soldier, pp. 222-225.

20_ On the night between March 5 and 6, 1975, a group of eight Fatah terrorists from Lebanon managed to land by boat on the Tel Aviv beach, took over the Savoy Hotel, and took most of the guests and staff hostage. During Sayeret Matkal’s rescue operation, two of the unit’s combatants and eight hostages were killed, while five other hostages were released alive.

21_ Gadi Zohar, who served at that time as an intelligence analyst at AMAN’s Terror and Palestinian department, indicated that his first reaction when hearing the hijackers’ final destination was “where the hell is Entebbe;” see: Gadi Zohar, “Intelligence for Operation Yonatan (Entebbe) (1976),” in Amos Gilboa and Ephraim Lapid, eds., Silent Defender: An Inside Look at Sixty Years of Israeli Intelligence, translated from Hebrew by Elizabeth Yuval (Springfield, NJ, Jerusalem and Ramat Hasharon, Israel: Gefen and Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, 2012), p. 87.


24_ Such as the operation’s chief intelligence officer Amnon Biran and Sayeret Matkal combatant Muki Betser: Amnon Biran, “Uganda Plan” (in Hebrew), MABAT MALAM, a journal for intelligence and security affairs of the Israel Heritage and Commemoration Center (IICC), no. 60 (June 2011), pp. 36-39; Moshe “Muki” Betser, Secret Soldier, pp. 230-269.


26_ With the exception of the Air France flight crew, who refused to leave with the other non-Israeli/Jewish passengers and insisted on staying with the hostages.

27_ As detailed by Muki Betser: “The envelope came from the Mossad, containing photographs shot from a light plan over Entebbe airport that week. The pictures were snapshots, raw data with no legends or explanations about the buildings in view. But they confirmed everything we knew;” see: Moshe “Muki” Betser, Secret Soldier, p. 255.
The Israeli Hercules aircraft made their way to Entebbe along a flight path determined by the Israeli Air Force and its Intelligence Department. Part of the flight was at a height of no more than 30 meters to avoid radar detection by hostile Arab forces.

In addition to the four Hercules aircrafts, two Israeli Air Force Boeing aircraft also participated in the operation, one serving as a field hospital and the other as a command post carrying the Deputy Chief of Staff, Air Force Commander, and other high-ranking officers.

In addition to another passenger who had been transferred to a local hospital a few days before and was murdered by the Ugandans following the Israeli rescue operation.


Ilbid, pp. 219-220.

Ilbid, p. 221.

This decision, which may have been influenced by the fact that YAMAM commander was out of the country during the days of the affair, contributed to the creation of a rivalry between these two special units. However, this rivalry may have faded over the passing years, as claimed in 2011 by YAMAM commander: “The State of Israel needs more than one unit tasked with the mission of hostage rescue and fighting terrorism... There is a true partnership between us and the IDF’s special forces, including full exchange of information;” see: Anat Bashan, “No Scenario is Impossible” (in Hebrew), Marot Hamish'tara, No. 241 (November 2011), p. 6.

ICarmi Gillon, Shin Bet between the Schisms, p. 222.


ISaleman Al-Shafhe, Captive, pp. 58-59.

IOne of the prominent private initiatives that eventually brought to a breakthrough that ended the ongoing Shalit affair was led by Gershon Baskin, an Israeli peace activist, whose continuous efforts to free Shalit were depicted in his book “The Negotiator.” The book contains letters and documents that were exchanged as part of the secret communication channel between Baskin and significant figures in Israel, in Hamas, and around the world: Gershon Baskin, The Negotiator: Freeing Gilad Schalit from Hamas, with Ilene Prusher (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2013).


IThe commission deliberately submitted its recommendations only after Shalit returned home, in order to ensure that its findings would only affect future prisoner exchange deals.
