

Political

update: Israel-Hezbollah prisoner exchange – 17 July

Key points:

- Israel exchanges convicted murderer and four Hezbollah gunmen for the remains of Israeli Defence Force reservists Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev.
 - Celebration rallies in Lebanon and West Bank condemned as reprehensible and atrocious by Israeli government.
 - While Israelis were mourning the death of the two soldiers, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas congratulated the family of convicted murderer Samir Kuntar.
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Latest developments

- The bodies of Israel Defence Force soldiers Staff Sergeant Eldad Regev, 25, and Sergeant Major Ehud Goldwasser, 30, were returned to Israel on Wednesday morning (16 July) 735 days after the soldiers were kidnapped in a cross border raid from Lebanon on 12 July 2006.
- Israel exchanged the bodies for the return of convicted murderer Samir Kuntar who has been in an Israeli prison for thirty years since killing a father and his four year old daughter in 1979. He was returned together with four Hezbollah gunmen caught during the Lebanon war. They were greeted by the Lebanese leadership and thousands of Hezbollah supporters in Beirut.
- The swap was completed when another coffin, containing body parts belonging to IDF soldiers from the Second Lebanon War, was transferred to Israel, in return for the transfer of 197 bodies of Lebanese and Palestinian gunmen to Lebanon.
- After examination of the bodies, Israeli Medical Corps officials said Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser were killed in the initial assault on their border patrol and were never held captive alive. The soldiers were buried in military cemeteries today (17 July).
- Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party organised a rally in Ramallah to celebrate the release of Hezbollah terrorist Samir Kuntar. Abbas welcomed the prisoner exchange congratulating the family of Samir Kuntar and sending his condolences to the Lebanese families receiving their loved ones' bodies.
- Hamas is now expected to exact an even higher price for the release of Corporal Gilad Shalit, who is widely thought to be alive, than was paid for the handover on Wednesday of the two dead soldiers.

Israel

- Hezbollah refused to reveal any information on the condition of the soldiers and only the image of their coffins confirmed that they were dead. Their families had publically clung to the hope that their sons would walk across the border. Tzvi Regev, the father of Sergeant Regev said "we will continue to hope until we can hope no more."
- Outside the Goldwassers' home dozens of mourners gathered to light memorial candles and say prayers. Prime Minister Olmert and Defence Minister Barak met the soldiers' families at a memorial ceremony at the Shraga army base on Wednesday (16 July). Barak spoke at both of the funerals today (17 July). In his eulogy to the fallen

soldier Goldwasser, Barak told mourners that during the two years since the abduction, Israel had been willing to “pay the highest price” for the soldiers’ return. “If the worst will happen to any of you,” he told soldiers attending the funeral, “Israel will make every possible and legitimate effort ... to bring you home.”

- Israeli President Shimon Peres denounced the red carpet treatment given to the prisoners returned to Lebanon, contrasting the behaviour of mourning Israelis with Lebanese “dancing and drumming.”
- The IDF has raised its level of alert along the Lebanese border out of concern that Hezbollah will use the period following the swap to attack Israel.

Lebanon

- The five men returned to Lebanon were flown to Beirut airport where they were greeted by Lebanese President Michel Suleiman and ministers from the newly formed government.
- The Lebanese government declared Wednesday (16 July) a national day of celebration and tens of thousands of people celebrated at a rally in Beirut. A banner strung over the crowd read: “God’s Achievement through Our Hands.”
- Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah came out of hiding to appear at a southern Beirut stadium alongside Samir Kuntar. Kuntar vowed to continue his ‘resistance’ against Israel.
- Ashark Alawsat, a leading Arab newspaper, ridiculed Hezbollah’s perceived victory stating that the deal “cost Hezbollah over \$7 billion, more than 1,200 dead and 4,500 wounded Lebanese citizens.” (17 July).
- Hezbollah’s commander in south Lebanon, Sheik Nabil Kaouk, said the Israeli government’s approval of the prisoner swap with his organisation shows Israel’s “humiliating failure in confronting the [Hezbollah] resistance militarily and politically” (7 July).
- Ziad Abu al-Enain, Director General of the Ministry for Prisoner Affairs in the Fatah Government in the West Bank said this morning:

“The Palestinians congratulate Hezbollah and its leader. We send our best wishes to all the Lebanese people and to all the Palestinians upon the completion of the deal and the release of heroes, headed by the prisoners’ leader Samir Kuntar.” (17/07/08)

Background

- The kidnapping of IDF reservists Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser by Hezbollah during a cross border raid on July 12 2006 sparked a month long war between Israel and Hezbollah in which over 1,200 Lebanese and 159 Israelis were killed.
- This prisoner swap came after nearly two years of intense negotiations by German mediators.
- The Israeli cabinet voted to approve the prisoner swap on 29 June and President Peres officially pardoned Samir Kuntar (15 July) to enable the prisoner exchange with Hezbollah. Kuntar had been imprisoned in Israel since 1979 for murdering a father, his four-year-old daughter and an Israeli policeman in Northern Israel.
- Israel has a conscript civilian army and is committed to the return of all soldiers, dead or alive, from battle. Prime Minister Olmert said on Wednesday (16 July) that Israel had “moral and ethical obligations” to its soldiers.
- As part of the deal Hezbollah handed a report to the Israeli government (12 July) with information on the fate of Israel Air Force navigator Ron Arad, whose plane crashed in Lebanon in 1986. Transportation Minister Shaul Mofaz said there was no proof to

Hezbollah's assertion that Arad had been killed when he tried to flee on May 4, 1988 during the battle of Maidun in Lebanon. Olmert described the report as "absolutely unsatisfactory."

- This prisoner exchange represents the final phase in a history of such swaps between Israel and Lebanon. There are no longer any Hezbollah gunmen in Israeli prisons. Over the past 30 years Israel has released around 7,000 prisoners to secure freedom for 19 Israelis and to retrieve the bodies of 10 others.
- The capture of prisoners has long been used as a political bargaining tool in the Middle East. Israel is still attempting to secure the return of IDF reservist Corporal Gilad Shalit, who was kidnapped into Gaza from Israel by Palestinian militants on 25 June 2006.