



PERSPECTIVES

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Why the Schalit Decision Makes Military Sense

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Schalit prisoner exchange was a rational and sensible recognition of the need to reaffirm society's commitment to the welfare of its soldiers. The injunction to "leave no man behind," which has been internalized by all Western armies, reinforces the mutual commitment that soldiers and their governments make to one another. The obligation of the state is even more pronounced in Israel's case, as the IDF is a conscript army, in which far from all draft-age youngsters in fact serve.

No sooner was the Schalit prisoner exchange concluded than pundits began criticizing it in the Israeli press. "A strategic defeat of the first order, a harsh blow to our national security," thundered Ben Caspi in *The Jerusalem Post*. "A sacrifice of the common interest to individual concerns," complained Professor Yedidya Stern of the Israel Democratic Institute in *Makor Rishon*. Even *Haaretz*, generally critical of anything that carries the merest whiff of so-called 'militarism', warned that the harm caused to Israel's posture of deterrence by the Schalit exchange was enormous and perhaps irrevocable. Israel's enemies would deduce that neither its public nor government had the will to bear sacrifices and could therefore be blackmailed time and again.

Before we allow ourselves to be carried away by this wave of near-hysteria, it is best to recall some of the salient facts of the Schalit case. Once these are given their due weight, other conclusions can be drawn. Specifically, it can be demonstrated that the decision to repatriate Schalit, even at the price of freeing so many convicted terrorists, does not deserve to be caricatured as a weak-kneed capitulation to public sympathy for the Schalit family. Certainly, such sympathy was a contributory factor. But, beyond this, the deal was a

rational and sensible recognition of the need to reaffirm society's commitment to the welfare of its soldiers. As such, it made sound military sense.

Basic to the argument are two observations. First, when taken hostage, Schalit was on active military duty; he belonged to that special class of citizens who are soldiers. Second, relationships between societies and their soldiers have, ever since the dawn of civilization, been founded on an implicit contract. The forms of that contract have necessarily changed over time and in Western societies have certainly become more apparent since the advent of democracy. In essence, however, the obligations which the terms of those contracts impose on armed forces and the societies that they swear to defend have remained remarkably consistent and span religions and cultures.

Most obviously, this is the case with respect to the obligations that the contract imposes on soldiers. As has been the case throughout military history, today too soldiers commit themselves to make every effort to defend the security of the state in whose name they serve, even at the risk of killing other human beings and endangering their own lives. At the same time, they undertake not to use the power placed at their disposal in order to usurp the prerogatives of government, nor to resort to the use of force against external enemies without due authorization from the civilian echelons who are their ultimate masters.

On the other side of the coin, governments that raise and maintain armies (and with very minor exceptions, all governments have felt it necessary to do so) likewise enter into a set of parallel obligations vis-à-vis their soldiers. For one thing, they undertake not to place the soldier's life at unnecessary risk by embarking on military adventures that are avoidable and/or redundant. Second, they undertake not to order soldiers to carry out missions that are patently immoral or illegal. Third, they promise to ensure that soldiers are provided with the equipment required to facilitate the accomplishment of the military mission and to make available budgetary resources for that purpose. Finally, and perhaps above all, governments and commanders promise that they will do all in their power to ensure that soldiers who carry out their duties are returned safely to their homes or, if killed on active duty, that their bodies will not be left on the battlefield to rot or be mutilated.

It would be hard to exaggerate the resonance of this last obligation, which is epitomized in the injunction "Leave no man behind." Indeed, the phrase and the creed it conveys have been traced as far back as the great literary epics of classical Greece and Rome.¹ Not surprisingly, therefore, its influence on the strategic culture of most Western armed forces is immense. It has become a central pillar in a tradition that considers the promotion and preservation of

individual combat motivation to be a key ingredient of battlefield success.² More than mere sentiment, this slogan gives expression to the belief that wars are won by the side whose soldiers are most committed to fight and to the corollary belief – that among the factors influencing the commitment displayed by soldiers is their confidence in the promise that their comrades, commanders and government will fulfill the obligation to do everything possible to ensure their return to hearth and home – dead or alive. Absent that assurance, troop morale could plummet to depths that would impair the combat effectiveness of the entire force.

The need for governments and commanders to cultivate the confidence of their soldiers is especially pronounced in the case of conscript armies. Primarily, this is because of the nature of the circumstances in which conscripts are drafted into service. They do not enlist of their own volition. They are compelled to do so. Certainly, many conscripts consider that obligation to be a duty and a privilege – as, for instance, did the vast majority of conscripts who fought, on all sides, during World War II. Nevertheless, precisely because they are conscripts, they still possess an intrinsic moral right to demand that their governments display particular consideration for their welfare and for the sensitivities of their families. Traditionally, democracies have appreciated the importance of that circumstance, and in so doing have made measurable contributions to the military effectiveness of their forces.³

Saving Private Ryan (1998), the fictional Spielberg movie that relates the fortunes of a US army unit ordered to locate and extricate from Normandy in 1944 a soldier whose brothers have all been killed in battle elsewhere, vividly captures the operational lengths to which societies and armies feel they must go in order to fulfill their contracts with their soldiers. In the film, fulfillment of the mission to save Ryan and bring some relief to his bereaved mother supersedes every other consideration, including – in a cruel paradox – the safety of the soldiers who are dispatched to carry it out. All members of the unit, is the implication, are prepared to obey the command to risk their lives on this operation, which possesses no other strategic importance. They do so because they are certain that, were the roles reversed, Ryan would be expected to abide by the same rules.

Seen in that context, the military logic behind the Schalit repatriation becomes even more incontestable. After all, Schalit was not merely a soldier who, like any other soldier, has a right to demand that his welfare be a prime consideration. Nor was he even just a conscript, whose expectations of special consideration are even more justifiable. He was also a conscript soldier in an army that, contrary to its own ethos, can by no stretch of the imagination be considered a truly representative national fighting force.

Never an entirely accurate reflection of reality, the image of the Israel Defense Force (IDF) as a "people's army" has over the past couple of decades become increasingly false. True, the legislation requiring the enlistment of all 18-year old Israeli citizens, female as well as male, still remains on the statute book. However, figures released by the IDF prove that in many instances the relevant laws have virtually become dead letters.⁴ In fact, one in every four Jewish Israeli males of service age receives a legal discharge from service (the vast majority of exemptions are given on the grounds that "the study of the *Torah* is their profession"). Some 40 percent of the annual female cohort likewise receives legal discharges due to their religious lifestyles. And, 14 percent of all drafted soldiers receive an honorable discharge after just one year of duty. Enlistment, then, far from being a *rite de passage* to full citizenship, is well on the way to becoming a minority phenomenon.⁵

Statistics such as these have led some observers (the present author included) to advise that Israel face up to realities, abandon conscription altogether and make official the IDF's shift to a professional army.⁶ But, for a variety of reasons, the realization of that vision still seems far off. It certainly was not a practical option when Schalit enlisted and, as required by law, reported for duty at the IDF's induction center. In so doing, he joined what was already becoming an increasingly rare breed.

It is precisely that characterization which gave Schalit and his family every right to expect special consideration when he fell into captivity whilst on active service. The charge that the price paid for his repatriation places numerous civilians at risk of further outrages by released terrorists is devoid of all validity. Soldiers, too, are citizens, and, because they undertake extraordinary commitments, their welfare and sensibilities warrant extraordinary measures. *A fortiori* is that the case when the soldiers are conscripts – even more so when soldier-conscripts are fast on the way to constituting a minority of the citizenry.

Had Netanyahu's government not agreed to an exchange for Schalit when the opportunity arose, its decision might certainly have assuaged the feelings of the commentators who spout platitudes about the importance of 'national pride'. But it would also have threatened to undermine the confidence in the IDF of the very youngsters who carry the practical burden of guaranteeing Israel's security and of the families who educate their children to shoulder that burden.

Notwithstanding continued high rates of enlistment among most sectors of the Israeli Jewish population, cracks in the wall of societal support for the IDF

have become increasingly evident ever since Israel's military first began to sway on its pedestal of near-infallibility in 1973. Confidence was further undermined by evidence of incompetence and lack of preparedness during the 2006 Second Lebanon War. It cannot but have been further damaged by the disgraceful failure of the IDF and other Israeli security services to obtain any hard information about the whereabouts of Schalit, who for over five years was held captive by a ragtag bunch of gun-slingers, located not a stone's throw from some of the most sophisticated intelligence-gathering devices ever known to man.

It is against that background that Schalit's repatriation makes sound military sense. True, it was an admission of failure – and perhaps of guilt too, and hence a blow to Israel's self-esteem. On the other hand, the deal was an essential requisite for the maintenance of troop morale, an asset of supreme strategic value.

Hard-headed realism requires us to master our emotions and not allow our hurt pride to master our sense of proportion. Undeniably serious though they are, the deficiencies and potential dangers inherent in the Schalit deal carry far less strategic importance than does society's duty to honor its obligations to its soldiers. After all, in the long run, even the most horrendous of random terrorist outrages pose far less of a threat to Israel's security than does the possible erosion of combat motivation amongst Israel's military personnel.

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¹ Elizabeth D. Samet, "Leaving No Warriors Man Behind: The Ancient Roots of a Modern Sensibility," *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 31 (2005): 623-649.

² Leonard Wong, "Leave No Man Behind: Recovering America's Fallen Warriors," *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 31 (2005): 599-622.

³ Dan Reiter & Alan Stam, "Democracy and Battlefield Military Effectiveness," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 42 (1998): 259-277

⁴ For fuller details see: Stuart A. Cohen, "The False 'Crisis' in Military Recruitment: An IDF Red Herring" BESA Perspectives No. 33, July 23, 2007;

<http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/perspectives33.html>

⁵ Amongst the reserve component such is indeed already the case. Fully 90% of all IDF reserve duty is today performed by just 10% of the available manpower pool.

⁶ Stuart A. Cohen, *Israel and Its Army: From cohesion to confusion* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 164-174.