

HOW A GENERATION OF TERRORIST LEADERS WAS FORGED IN PRISON

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When Yahya Sinwar returned to Gaza in 2011 after more than two decades in Israeli prison, he was despondent.

He had been freed as part of a deal that exchanged 1027 Palestinian convicts for one Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. Sinwar thought the terms were not good enough.

Yuval Biton, 58, a former head of Israel's prison intelligence service, referring to two Hamas leaders explained: "He said the Shalit deal was a bad deal because they left behind Hassan Salameh and Mahmoud Issa."

Salameh, who oversaw bombings in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in the 1990s, remains in an Israeli jail. Issa, Hamas founder of the al-Qassam military cell in Jerusalem, was freed last week.

To free hostages, Israel has released 1700 Palestinians seized from Gaza during the war and freed 250 Hamas and Fatah members serving life sentences for suicide bombings and shootings over the past 40 years.

Few understand the trade-offs of the Gaza ceasefire deal better than Dr Biton, who won Sinwar's confidence during the Hamas leader's time in jail. While in Hadarim prison, Sinwar wrote a novel about a Palestinian who dreams of waging jihad against Israel from a sprawling tunnel network under Gaza.

Mika Kobi, who spent 150 hours in a room with Sinwar as the former head of interrogation for Shin Bet, the Israeli domestic intelligence agency, said: "He prepared the massacre of October 7 in prison."

Sinwar appeared to acknowledge as much in an interview with an Italian journalist in 2018. "Prison builds you," he said.

After his release in 2011, Sinwar climbed through the ranks of Hamas, and eventually orchestrated the October 7, 2023, attacks. He was killed last year but his story illustrates the risks of freeing Hamas members.

Among the 250 Palestinians serving life sentences who have been released are 157 Fatah members and 65 from Hamas. "These are dangerous people," Mr Kobi said. "They are murderers"

From its foundation in 1948, Israel has been willing to sanction unbalanced prisoner swaps. This has given Hamas a perverse incentive to kidnap more hostages as a way of securing the release of Palestinians. Issa had been in prison since 1993 for overseeing the abduction of Staff Sergeant Nissim Toledano, a soldier who was killed by his captors after the Israeli government rejected a proposed swap.

Others freed by Israel during previous prisoner exchanges include Sinwar's mentor, Sheik Ahmed Yassin, the paraplegic imam who founded Hamas and was assassinated in 2004.

This time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has withheld some of the biggest names that Hamas hoped to release in an effort to avoid a repeat of the Sinwar debacle. Marwan Barghouti, 66, dubbed the "Palestinian Mandela" by his supporters but regarded as a terrorist by Israel, remains in jail.

A member of Fatah, he is one of the few politicians believed to have enough support to unite Palestinians under a single banner and it was a testament to his influence that Itamar Ben-Gvir, the Israeli Security Minister, decided to taunt the country's most famous prisoner on a visit to his cell in August.

In the video of Barghouti released by Ben-Gvir in August, the Fatah politician appeared gaunt and frail. His family claimed he was beaten unconscious last month, treatment that appears to be consistent with the harsher conditions facing Palestinian prisoners since October 7.

A UN report last year found prisoners had been sexually assaulted and B'tselem, an Israeli human rights organisation, has described the country's jails as "a network of torture camps".

A gamble that Israel has made is to release only 96 of the hardcore prisoners back to the West Bank and Gaza, compared with 154 who were deported via Egypt.

"The mistake now that Israel has made is to release them abroad to Egypt, Qatar and Turkey," Biton said. "It's better to release them to Gaza and the West Bank, where they are under your eyes."

It is not always clear which prisoners could pose the greatest threat. According to Mr Kobi, Saleh al-Aroui was regarded as a fairly minor figure when released abroad in 2007, living in Turkey and Lebanon. He went on to become head of Hamas in the West Bank and was instrumental in planning the October 7 attacks.

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