Could Israel Have Done It Better?

Experts differ over whether Algeria’s botched rescue could have been handled differently.

Whenever a botched rescue results in the deaths of many hostages, there are those who wonder whether Israel, which unfortunately has much experience in such operations, could have done better. In the case of the recent raid on Algeria, it depends on who you ask.

While Lt. Col. (Ret.) Doron Avital argues the raid in Algeria was not adequately planned and appeared to have not been carried out by elite commandos, Dr. Eli Karmon, a senior researcher who specializes in terrorism and guerrilla warfare in modern times, claims the Algerians had many reasons to act swiftly as possible, and that Israel in such conditions wouldn’t have necessarily been more successful.

The hijacking — led by a Mali-based al-Qaeda offshoot known as the Masked Brigade — served as a reminder of how complex hostage rescue operations can be, especially when the captives are foreigners.

Algerian helicopters and special forces stormed a gas field in the stony plains of the Sahara last Thursday to wipe out Islamist terrorists and free their many Western and local captives, but over 60 of the hostages died in the gunfire.

Avital, a former commander of the elite IDF Sayeret Matkal unit, said the Algerians took the wrong approach.

"Such a hostage situation requires that the authorities first seal the compound, make contact with the abductors and ensure that the situation is stable before moving forward with a rescue operation," he said. "It was a fiasco. They wanted to get it over with quickly, and their approach took a heavy toll."

Algeria’s Concerns

But Dr. Karmon disagrees. One must understand the Algerian military’s logic when it comes to Islamist terrorists, and this requires knowledge of Algeria’s history, he says.

Algeria’s army-dominated government has been hardened by decades of fighting Islamist terrorists, which is why the country, which is still recovering from the brutal Islamist insurgency in the 1990s that cost the lives of between 100,000 and 150,000 of its citizens, declared from the outset that it would not negotiate with the terrorists.

In order to stop the advance of the Islamist wave and to prevent an Islamist takeover, the Algerian ruling party held an election in March, which it won, amid some controversy, ousting the extremists.

Determined to show its people that it will not concede to Islamist terrorists at any price, the government acted with full force, without holding any negotiations that could be mis-understood as political weakness, Karmon says. This explains the decision to act quickly, without all the necessary intelligence for a successful operation.

"The death of hostages, even if it could involve serious diplomatic repercussions, is less important than the stability of the Algerian regime, whose main goal is survival," Karmon says. "I am not saying the Algerians went according to the book, but they had to work fast."

Another important factor, emphasizes Karmon, is that from the point of view of the Algerian authorities, it was crucial to prevent any attempt by the terrorists to blow up the important BP gas field, which produces 10 percent of Algeria’s natural gas exports.

"Gas and oil exports are the main source of revenue for the Algerian government," notes Karmon, "and the economic factor therefore weighed heavily in the decision to act quickly."

What’s more, the captors’ leader, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, is notorious for high-ransom kidnappings. In 2009, Germany and Switzerland paid his group $88 million for the release of four Westerners, and Algeria had no intention of paying such ransoms.

In addition, the Algerians wanted to prevent political pressure from foreign governments worried about the fate of their citizens.

"Every day that passed, the pressure increased, forcing the Algerians to act quickly without the necessary preparation and intelligence," says Karmon.

French-trained special forces known as the GIS, but they are action-driven, and typically do not include negotiators, who are on the front line of Western hostage situations, Galeotti says. In successful rescue operations, you want to go as far as you can using negotiators. “Good opera-tors realize that in a complex environment, the high-adrena-line rescue mission is rarely the best option,” he explains. “It is the last, worse case.”

But Karmon strongly disagrees.

“Although negotiating is the ideal way to deal with such a crisis, in the Algerian case it was impossible,” he argues. "The decision-makers knew that many of the hostages were already strapped with explosive belts, and some had already been killed. In such a situation, no country — even Israel — would have held negotiations, the only option was to act as quickly as possible."

His view is supported by Norway’s Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide, who said Norway supported the military raid by Algeria even though its citizens were killed in the operation. “In this situation it was necessary to quickly intervene and rescue as many hostages as possible,” Barth Eide said.

This view was backed by French President Francois Hollande, who acknowledged that Algeria had no choice but to storm the complex, saying that when there’s a hostage situation with cold-blooded terrorists who are ready to kill, “a country like Algeria responds in a way which, to my eyes, is the most suitable.”
Negotiations with the hostage-takers was not possible, Hollande said, adding that he found Algeria’s handling of the situation as “the most appropriate” response.

Who Wants Foreign Help?

Some condemn Algeria for shrugging aside foreign offers of help. These critics point out that the United States sent an unmanned surveillance drone to the BP-operated site, but it could do little more than watch the massacre, as Algeria rejected American help.

Israel’s Avital said that Germany acted similarly during the 1972 Munich massacre, when 11 members of the Israeli team were taken hostage and later killed. “We wanted to act but didn’t get consent from the Germans,” Avital said. “We barely managed to send the chief of the Mossad there. But in these kinds of situation it is customary not to violate the sovereignty of the host country.”

But Dr. Karmon explains that in the Algerian government’s bid to bring back a sense of security to the country, agreeing to foreign intervention would have been the worst step for the nation’s moral. Here, the army had the opportunity to show the population that it means business.

Avital notes that although foreign countries often reject outside help, Israeli commando units operate globally. With hundreds of Israelis residing in African countries for business and scores more taking their vacations there, Israeli forces are prepared to respond to situations involving Jews.

“Israel has an indubitable capability to rescue Israeli hostages in Africa,” Avital said. “Sayeret Matkal often operates outside Israel’s borders, so it has the platform to reach far-away places. In a Western country no one would let us operate, but if it’s a country that is torn apart by civil war, or is in the midst of a border dispute, it is definitely within our reach.”

Beware, This Is a Surprise!

The deadly outcome in Algeria suggests that reconnaissance efforts conducted prior to the operation were lacking, argues Alik Ron, a former Israeli Police chief.

“You have to achieve the element of surprise; that’s the foundation,” he stresses.

But here again, Karmon defends the Algians. When did the Israelis use the element of surprise? He asks rationally.

Surprise is practically impossible when operating on home turf, he continues, unlike when operating on foreign ground, like in Entebbe.

“The unique element of surprise was only possible in the ingenuous Entebbe operation. Who would have thought that Israeli forces could attack over 3,000 kilometers away?” Karmon explains. “And remember that even in Entebbe, which, according to all opinions was an excellent success with the safe release of 105 Israelis, there were casualties: The commander, Yoni Netanyahu, as well as three other Israeli hostages, lost their lives in the operation.”

Israel Isn’t an Example

While Avital says Israel would have performed better, Karmon has his doubts.

Karmen points out that Israel doesn’t have a good track record when it comes to rescue operations, with the Maalot massacre, the Savoy attack and Nachshon Wachman’s murder being only some of the botched rescues.

“We can’t claim to be an example,” concludes Karmon.

On May 15, 1974, three armed Palestinian terrorists entered Israel from Lebanon. After killing five people, they headed for the Netiv Hevi Elementary School, taking 105 children hostage. A unit of the Golani Brigade stormed the building, and although the three terrorists were killed, 25 hostages, including 22 children, were killed in the shooting, and 68 more were injured.

Less than a year later, on the night of March 4, 1975, eight Palestinians landed by boat on the Tel Aviv beach and took over the Savoy Hotel. The Sayeret Matkal stormed the hotel, killing seven of the perpetrators and capturing one. Five hostages were freed, while eight hostages and three soldiers were killed.

More recently, Nachshon Wachman, Hy”d, was kidnapped in 1994 and held hostage by Hamas for six days.

After interrogating the driver of the car that picked him up, the Israeli forces learned that Wachman was being held in Bir Nabala, a village under Israeli control and only 10 minutes away from his home in the Ramot neighborhood of Jerusalem.

In an operation carried out by Sayeret Matkal, a commando team attempted to gain entry to where Wachman was being held. However, they came under heavy fire from the terrorists, killing the team commander, Nir Poraz.

When the commandos finally entered the room, they found Wachman had already been killed.

Karmon adds that the world has a history of botched rescue missions, with Munich, Tebran, Moscow and Beslan being among the more famous ones, demonstrating how rescue missions are among the most difficult to carry out successfully.

The Munich rescue operation is a prime example of a fast-moving situation that turned into a tragic fiasco.

In the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, 51 Americans were held captive for 444 days. In a botched rescue operation eight U.S. soldiers were killed when a gigantic storm engulfed their helicopters.

In 2002, Chechen terrorists stormed a Moscow theater and took 850 people hostage. Russian forces pumped gas into the theater and then stormed it. They killed all 39 captors, and 129 of the hostages died — almost all of them from the gas.

In 2004, terrorists took over a school in Beslan, in southern Russia, where they held 1,200 children, teachers and family members. On the third day an explosive booby-trap that the attackers had rigged went off by accident, prompting troops surrounding the school to start firing, in the ensuing chaos, 331 hostages and soldiers died.

It appears that people have an unrealistic view of hostage situations, thinking that special forces can simply swoop in and rescue victims.

“The wild card is that you can never train for how the kidnappers will react. That is what makes it so difficult,” said Rick Nelson, a former U.S. Navy intelligence officer who advises the Center for Strategic and International Studies and teaches at Georgetown University. “A decision to rescue is inherently high-risk.”