By OPHIR FALK
and BOAZ GANOR

With the return to the negotiation table comes the Pavlovian demand for the release of Palestinian terrorists from Israeli prisons. This is wrong. Beyond the injustice, such policies have proven counterproductive to peace. It seems that time and again the release of terrorists leads to more terror. Examples are in abundance: Terrorists released in 1985 in return for abducted soldiers formed the foundation for the first intifada in 1987. Inmates released as part of confidence-building measures during the Oslo process returned to terror and took part in, among other things, the 2000 intifada. Even a number of those recently released in the Schalit swap have returned to terror. Hundreds of innocent lives have been lost, and families shattered. All this is common knowledge and no one knows these facts better than Israel's prime minister, but after years of trying to kick-start a stagnant peace process, the “no choice” claim sets the tone. There is, however, an alternative to a carte-blanche release—an alternative that may increase the prospects for peace.

In contrast to common conception, Israel is not alone in confronting terrorism and dealing with radical inmates that eventually return to society. With the goal of finding a formula for deradicalization, a recent comparative study led by Kings College London reviewed the experience of 15 terror-riddled countries. Scholars from each country were asked to review and analyze the deradicalization programs of their respective homelands.

Most programs have failed— but one has succeeded. It turns out that the deradicalization of terrorists may be feasible.

Singapore, for example, has been able to apply a deradicalization program, directed by Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, that has reportedly rehabilitated dozens of dangerous Jama'ah Islamiya terrorists. Of the 60 Jama'ah Islamiya inmates that participated in Singapore's deradicalization program, 40 were deemed fit for release. None have returned to terror.

One of the pillars of the program is to hold conversations and debates between moderate clergy, Islamic scholars and inmates in an effort to persuade prisoners that the religious justification for their actions is wrong and based upon a distorted understanding of Islam.

For such a program to work with Palestinian prisoners who were subjected to years of incitement and hate against Israel, it would need to be applied in a neutral setting. Palestinian prisoners would need to be removed from the local rumpus. Putting these security inmates into a Singapore-style program outside the Middle East would surely present countless logistic and operational challenges that would be difficult to overcome. The alternative of unconditional release however, is unacceptable.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and anyone else truly interested in furthering the peace process should adopt this agenda and insist that security inmates take part in such a program prior to release. The international community should sponsor the program, giving the Europeans a chance to contribute constructively.

If the sides want to enhance the hope of a durable peace they should adopt Singapore's deradicalization model and insist on complete deradicalization of Palestinian inmates before any release.

The final-status peace negotiations will need to solve paramount matters; Jerusalem, demarcation of borders, full recognition of Israel as the Jewish state, the Palestinian demand of return and many more complex concerns. Some differences may be irreconcilable, but the deradicalization of convicted terrorists is a common objective for all peace pursuers, and can serve as a true building block to solve issues that seem unsolvable.

It is in the best interest for anyone interested in peace that released prisoners be productive citizens rather than destructive combatants. For the prospect of peace, give deradicalization a chance.

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