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Israelis, Palestinians Exchange Prisoners

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1,150 Arabs Swapped For Three **Israelis**

Israel May 20 freed 1,150 Arab prisoners at widely separate locations, in a complicated exchange with a Palestinian guerrilla group to obtain the release of the last three known **Israeli** prisoners of war captured during the invasion of Lebanon.

The main exchange took place at Geneva airport, where 394 guerrillas were flown in from **Israel** and the three **Israeli** soldiers were flown in from Damascus. After the swap, the Arabs boarded a plane for Libya and the **Israelis** flew home.

At the same time, 150 Arabs were released at Quneitra in the Golan Heights, and 606 were released in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The exchange came after two years of bargaining between **Israel** and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), the pro-**Syrian** guerrilla faction commanded by Ahmed Jibril that had been holding the **Israeli** POWs.

The two sides had negotiated with each other through the International Committee of the Red Cross and through Herbert Amry, Austria's ambassador to Greece. Amry was a close associate of former Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, who had helped initiate the exchange.

In other lopsided prisoner exchanges since **Israel**'s invasion of Lebanon, some 4,500 Palestinians and Lebanese had been traded for six **Israeli** POWs in November 1982, and more than 300 **Syrians** had been exchanged for six more **Israelis** in June 1984. [See 1984 [Lebanon: Cabinet Adopts Unity Plan](#), 1983 [Lebanon: PLO, **Israel** Trade Prisoners](#)]

Two elements of the new swap were unique, however: many of the Palestinians released had been serving life sentences in **Israeli** jails for murder and other serious crimes of terrorism, and about 600 of them were allowed to go free inside **Israel** and the occupied territories rather than being deported. A furor was raised in **Israel** over the terms of the exchange.

Freed Prisoners Profiled

The released Arab prisoners were said by **Israeli** officials to fall into three categories.

One consisted of 121 Palestinian guerrillas captured during the Lebanon war, many of them from the PFLP-GC. A second group of 150 prisoners was described as mostly Lebanese who had been transferred to **Israel** after the Ansar detention camp in southern Lebanon was closed. [See 1985 [Lebanon: **Israelis** Speed up Withdrawal](#)]

The biggest category was made up of 879 prisoners freed from **Israeli** jails, most of them Palestinians from the occupied territories. At least 79 of the men were convicted of being directly responsible for killing **Israelis**, the New York Times reported May 21, and 380 of them were serving life sentences. It was the release of this group that caused the greatest controversy in **Israel**.

Included in this group were:

- Kozo Okamoto, the only surviving member of a pro-Palestinian Japanese Red Army suicide squad that killed 26 people in the 1972 Lod Airport massacre in Tel Aviv. He was freed in Geneva. The Japanese government May 21 said it had urged **Israel** not to release Okamoto, and said it would seek to bring him back to Japan to stand trial for murder. [See 1972 [Sadat Asks Soviet Military Advisers to Leave Egypt...Israel Convicts Japanese Guerrilla](#)]
- The only two surviving members of a PLO terrorist squad that killed 33 **Israeli** civilians in the 1978 coastal road attack north of Tel Aviv. They also were freed in Geneva. [See 1978 [Israeli Forces Strike at Palestinian Strongholds in](#)

[Lebanon in Retaliation for Al Fatah Terrorist Attack on **Israel**; **Israeli** Civilians Die in Raid](#)

- Ziad Abu Eain, who was convicted of planting a 1979 bomb in Tiberias that killed two Jewish youths. He had been extradited to **Israel** from the U.S. in 1981 in a move that aroused strong Arab criticism. He was freed and allowed to return to his family's home in Ramallah on the West Bank. [See 1982 [**Israel**: Extradited Palestinian Sentenced](#)]

(Abu Eain was one of a number of Arab prisoners who had been expected to be released but were instead held back by **Israel** during the 1983 prisoner swap. That action was cited as one of the reasons for the lengthy negotiations preceding the most recent exchange, and the complexity of the transfer itself, which took all day. The Palestinians were said to have sought ironclad guarantees that the **Israelis** would not deviate from the terms of the deal at the last minute. [See 1983 [Middle East: Red Cross Scores **Israel** on POW Swap](#)])

The three **Israeli** soldiers, held captive since 1982, were: Sgt. Hezi Shai, Pvt. Nissim Salem and Pvt. Yossef Groff. Their release reportedly left four **Israeli** soldiers unaccounted for--either dead or possibly held captive by **Syria** or a Palestinian group--from the Lebanon invasion.

Furor in Israel

The May 20 Arab-**Israeli** prisoner exchange provoked protests in **Israel** and appeared to be shaping into a controversy that threatened the country's fragile national unity government.

Israeli radio reported that Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, leader of the Likud bloc, had asked Prime Minister Shimon Peres to have the cabinet consider granting amnesty to the 19 suspected "Jewish terrorists" still on trial for anti-Arab violence. Shamir was reported to be willing to break up the Labor-Likud coalition over the issue. [See 1984 [**Israel**: Anti-Arab Terror Trial Resumes](#)]

Shamir, fellow Likud minister Ariel Sharon and many Jewish West Bank settlers were said to feel that it was not fair for the suspected **Israeli** terrorists to remain in prison after the freeing of guerrillas convicted of some of the most notorious terrorist crimes in **Israel**'s history.

"It is inconceivable that the worst murderers be freed while the Jews are left behind bars," Sharon said. Both he and Shamir had voted for the prisoner exchange, which had been approved unanimously by the inner cabinet.

The main defense of the **Israeli** government's decision was given May 20-23 by Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who said that despite its reputation of never negotiating with terrorists, **Israel** had always done whatever was necessary to get back any **Israeli** soldier or civilian being held captive.

"No doubt the price was high," he said, "but I ask every **Israeli** citizen, If his son was in captivity, how would he expect me to behave?"

Rabin noted that because the **Israeli** POWs had been held near Damascus, a realistic military option for rescuing them had not existed. He also said that after three years of negotiations, there was no reason to think that **Israel** could have gotten a better deal from the PFLP-GC.

Observers in **Israel** said that the government appeared to have been chiefly motivated by two things in agreeing to the exchange. One was the desire to bring home all of its soldiers when it completed its Lebanon withdrawal, due in the next several weeks. The other was the emotional involvement of senior **Israeli** officials with the families of the POWs.

Critics charged that, by meeting regularly with the families, the officials had lost sight of the larger policy issues involved in the prisoner swap.

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