



## 3 Israeli and 5 Thai hostages are freed in Gaza in exchange for Palestinian prisoners

UPDATED JANUARY 30, 2025 · 12:39 PM ET ⓘ

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Vehicles with the International Committee of the Red Cross arrive, while Palestinian militants and civilians stand by, for the release of Israeli hostage Agam Berger in Jabalia, Gaza Strip, Thursday.

Anas Baba/NPR

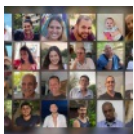
TEL AVIV, Israel — Three more Israeli and five Thai hostages have been released by Palestinian militants from captivity and returned to Israel, after being held for more than 15 months in Gaza.

The Israelis Arbel Yehoud, 29, Agam Berger, 20, and Gadi Mozes, 80, were handed over Thursday morning to representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Gaza, who transferred them to Israeli troops for the drive across the border into Israel.

Berger, an Israeli soldier, was paraded on a stage, wearing green fatigues similar to a

soldier's uniform, in the northern Gaza city of Jabalia — the scene of intense fighting and Israeli bombardment just weeks ago — before being handed over by masked Hamas gunmen to the Red Cross.

Islamic Jihad, a smaller militant group in Gaza that held Yehoud and Mozes, released the two Israeli hostages in a chaotic scene with crowds of shoving onlookers. The handover took place in front of the partially destroyed home of slain Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis.



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The Thai hostages had been [working in Israel as agricultural laborers](#) when they were taken captive along with the others in the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on southern Israel. The Israeli government said they were Thenna Pongsak, 36, Sathian Suwannakham, 35, Sriaoun Watchara, 33, Seathao Bannawat, 27, and Rumnao Surasak, 32. The five were met by Thai government officials upon their release. Three more Thai laborers remain in captivity, along with two nationals from Nepal and Tanzania, some of whom Israel has declared dead.

In exchange for the three freed Israeli hostages, 110 Palestinian prisoners and detainees were released from Israeli jails later in the day. The release was delayed by a few hours as Israel said it was seeking reassurances from the deal's mediators that the chaotic scenes at the release of Israeli hostages would not be repeated at future handovers.

Among the released Palestinians are [prisoners who had been serving](#) life sentences for deadly attacks on Israelis, including Sami Jaradat, sentenced for orchestrating one of the deadliest attacks of the Second Intifada — a 2003 suicide bombing on a beachfront restaurant in Haifa that killed 21 people. Most serving life sentences are set to be deported to other countries in the region.

The exchange is part of a multiphase deal between Israel and Hamas, brokered by the U.S., Egypt and Qatar, that began Jan. 19, with a six-week ceasefire. During that time, a [total of 33](#) of the remaining hostages in Gaza — some of whom are believed to be dead — are supposed to be returned to Israel in exchange for around 1,900 Palestinian prisoners and detainees.

Thursday's exchange was previously unscheduled. It was negotiated last weekend, after Israel said Hamas was supposed to release Yehoud — a civilian — on Saturday, [as one of the four women](#) returned to Israel on Jan. 25. As a result, Israel delayed allowing Palestinians to return to northern Gaza until arrangements for Yehoud's release were made. Mediators helped work out Thursday's release, and passage to Gaza's north for Palestinians began Monday.

Another hostage-for-detainee swap is planned for this coming weekend, as per the original schedule. There are 82 hostages remaining in Gaza, many of whom are believed to be dead, according to Israel.

In another development Thursday, Hamas confirmed its top military commander, [Mohammed Deif, was killed](#), without providing details. Israel targeted him in an airstrike in Gaza in July 2024, but Hamas had not previously confirmed his death.

Deif is believed to have survived multiple Israeli assassination attempts over the years. Last year, Israel's then-defense minister, Yoav Gallant, called Deif "the Osama bin Laden of Gaza."

*NPR producer Anas Baba contributed reporting for this story from the Gaza Strip.*

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