



WORLD NEWS

Hamas releases 3 frail-looking Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners under Gaza ceasefire

1 of 28 | The three male civilians were freed Saturday in exchange for dozens of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel as part of a ceasefire in Gaza that has paused the war in the Gaza Strip. Their release prompted cheers from those watching

BY WAFAA SHURAF, MOHAMMAD JAHJOUH AND [TIA GOLDENBERG](#)

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DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Hamas-led militants released three gaunt, frail-looking Israeli hostages and Israel freed nearly 200 Palestinian prisoners Saturday in the latest exchange of a ceasefire that has paused 16 months of [war in Gaza](#).

The hostages' condition and scenes of Hamas forcing them to speak in a handover ceremony sparked outrage in Israel and could increase pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to extend the ceasefire beyond its current six-week phase.

Netanyahu has signaled he would resume the war, even if that means leaving dozens of hostages in captivity. "President Trump completely agreed with me: We will do everything to return all the hostages, but Hamas will not be there," Netanyahu said after the exchange.

Civilians Eli Sharabi, 52; Ohad Ben Ami, 56; and Or Levy, 34, were among about 250 people taken during the Hamas-led attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, that sparked the war.

Israelis' joy turned to shock and tears when they saw their emaciated state.

Later Saturday, Israel released 183 Palestinian prisoners, some also appearing gaunt and weak. The Red Crescent said seven were taken to hospitals. Many Palestinians released during the ceasefire have appeared emaciated, and [have alleged abuses](#) in custody.

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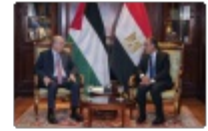
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It was the fifth exchange since the ceasefire began Jan. 19. Twenty-one hostages have now been freed.

The Red Cross said it was "increasingly concerned about the conditions surrounding release operations" and urged all parties to ensure releases are dignified and private.

A dozen more hostages yet to be freed in first phase

An Israeli Health Ministry representative, Dr. Hagar Mizrahi, noted "severe malnutrition" and a "significant decrease" in body weight in the hostages released, as families again feared for the dozens of others still held in Gaza. Not all are alive.

"If anyone had any doubt about how urgent it is to bring everyone back ... today we got a wake-up call," Moshe Or, brother of hostage Avinatan Or, told a weekly rally in Tel Aviv.

Gal Hirsch, Netanyahu's coordinator for hostages, said that "we will not remain silent about this. A message has been passed on to the mediators, and action will be taken accordingly."



This combination of undated photos provided by Hostages Family Forum show Or Levy, Eli Sharabi and Ohad Ben Ami, all of whom were abducted and brought to Gaza on Oct. 7, 2023. (Hostages

Hamas' military wing said it had made efforts to preserve the hostages' lives "despite the (Israeli) bombardment."

The ceasefire's first phase calls for the release of 33 hostages and nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners, the return of Palestinians to northern Gaza and an increase in humanitarian aid to the devastated territory. Israel says Hamas has confirmed eight of the 33 hostages are dead.

U.S. President Donald Trump's [stunning proposal](#) to transfer the Palestinian population out of Gaza could complicate talks over [the second and more difficult phase](#), when Hamas is to release dozens more hostages in return for a lasting ceasefire. His proposal was [welcomed by Israel](#) but [rejected by Palestinians](#) and most of the international community.

Hamas may be reluctant to free more hostages if it believes the U.S. and Israel are serious about

depopulating Gaza, which rights groups say would violate international law.

Netanyahu on Saturday directed a delegation to go to Qatar to discuss the ceasefire agreement's technical details, and the security Cabinet will meet about negotiations on the truce's second phase, according to an Israeli official who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss details of the talks.

Hostages learn of loved ones' fate

Sharabi and Ben Ami were captured from Kibbutz Beerli, one of the farming communities [hardest hit by the Hamas attack](#), while Levy was taken from [the Nova music festival](#).

They are only now learning the fate of some family members, according to Israeli media. Sharabi's [wife and two teenage daughters](#) were killed, and his brother Yossi died in captivity. Levy's wife was killed. Ben Ami's wife, Raz, was released during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023 that saw more than 100 hostages freed.

"It's over, it's over," Levy's brother Michael said as they embraced.

"I left XXL, I came back medium," Ben Ami said as he hugged his daughters. One of them, Ella, told Israeli channel 12 that "it took me a moment to realize that this was my father."

The Palestinian prisoners released include 18 serving life sentences for deadly attacks on Israelis, 54 serving long-term sentences and 111 Palestinians from Gaza detained after the Oct. 7 attack but not tried for any crime. All are men, ages 20 to 61.



Hamas fighters take up positions ahead of a hostage release in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, Saturday, Feb. 4, 2025. Photo (Abdel Karim Faleh)

Virtually every Palestinian has a [friend, relative or acquaintance](#) who has been imprisoned.

Seven of the released prisoners were transferred to Egypt. Others were transferred to Palestinian custody in the occupied West Bank, where cheering supporters welcomed them. Some had been detained over offenses ranging from bomb attacks to involvement in militant organizations.

They include Iyad Abu Shakhdam, 49, locked up for nearly 21 years over his involvement in Hamas attacks in crowded civilian areas that killed dozens of Israelis. That included a 2004 suicide bus bombing in Beersheba that killed 16 people.

"From Oct. 7, 2023, to today we don't know anything about what is happening outside the prison," Shakhdam said.

Another is Jamal al-Tawil, a prominent Hamas politician, whose last reported arrest was in 2021 over alleged efforts to entrench Hamas' leadership in the West Bank. He was transferred to administrative detention, a renewable six-month period in which suspects are held without charge or trial.

War could resume in March without a deal

The war — the deadliest and most destructive fighting ever between Israel and Hamas — could resume in early March if no agreement is reached.

Israel says it is committed to destroying Hamas, which [reasserted its rule over Gaza](#) within hours of the ceasefire. Hamas says it won't release remaining hostages without an end to the war and a full Israeli withdrawal.

In the Oct. 7 attack, about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed. More than 47,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's retaliatory war, over half women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many were militants.

The Israeli military says it killed more than 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence. It blames civilian deaths on Hamas for operating in residential neighborhoods.



Palestinians purchase goods at a makeshift market set up amid widespread destruction caused by the Israeli military's ground and air offensive in Gaza City's Jabalia refugee camp, Friday, Feb. 7.



Pedestrians walk along a road lined with few stands selling goods, amid widespread destruction caused by the Israeli military's ground and air offensive in Gaza City's Jabalia refugee camp, Friday.

Goldenberg reported from Tel Aviv, Israel. Associated Press writer Isabel Debre in Ramallah, West Bank, contributed to this report.

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