

As an American, I Am Ashamed

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

The Washington Institute's executive director decries the manner in which Americans and other hostages held in Gaza are being used as nameless bargaining chips.

The following remarks were prepared for delivery at a “Bring Them Home Now!” rally for hostages in Gaza, held weekly in front of the national headquarters of the American Red Cross in Washington.

We meet today in the middle of the festival of Passover to repeat words uttered by Moses three thousand years ago. These words are the most basic demand of humanity, universal words that translate into every language and transcend every faith. They are simple words, words that need no negotiation, no mediation, no bargaining over meaning or price or context. The words, in English, are “Let my people go.”

Two months ago, I walked the paths of Kibbutz Kfar Aza, guided by a young father—a man whose sister is among the hostages—who was himself locked in a safe room with his wife and two young children for 21 hours, as terrorists methodically killed, maimed, and kidnapped house to house. The brutality, the horror, was everywhere. In one two-room home, there were two hundred bullet marks on the walls of a tiny bedroom, nothing but a blood-soaked bed on the floor, where a young couple was slaughtered—200 hundred bullets when two would suffice. Or there was the refrigerator where terrorists left grenades in plastic bags so that first responders would get blown up by booby traps long after they had killed their prey. Or the house under which a well-trained, well-prepared terrorist hid for days, emerging long after October 7 in an attempt to gun down everyone in sight. One can never leave this place the same person as when you arrived.

Friends, I am ashamed—ashamed of how we have allowed the story of the hostages to get lost in the noise of the war that followed their capture; ashamed of how we have permitted their release to be a bargaining chip in some larger political negotiation; ashamed of how we have failed to give them the respect and dignity and our wholehearted

demand for Red Cross access and care and medicine that is our normal, usual demand for hostages.

I stand here to repeat the demand for unconditional release of every hostage—every woman and man, young and old, of every nationality. I am especially ashamed of the indifference we—the collective “American” we—have shown toward the American hostages, at least five of whom are believed to be still alive. Dozens of Americans were killed on October 7; dozens were injured; nine were taken hostage. Some were released. At least five are believed to be still alive.

Let’s remember: these Americans are not just “wrongfully detained.” These Americans were in their beds, or at a concert venue of a friendly country. They were attacked. They were kidnapped. They were dragged across international borders, from Israel to Gaza. They have been kept for more than 200 days in the most inhumane conditions—with no international inspections, no medicine, and uncertain food.

If they were taken by Boko Haram, everyone would know their name. If they were taken by the Taliban, everyone would tie a yellow ribbon around a tree for them. If they were taken by ISIS, kids would learn about them in school. But because they are a piece of a larger Gaza puzzle—caught up in a war, in a humanitarian crisis, in a presidential election—they are too often forgotten, or when they are remembered, they have an asterisk next to their names because they are mostly hyphenated Americans, as though they deserve less of our hearts and souls than other fellow citizens.

That is wrong. Protecting these Americans—saving them, rescuing them—should, in my view, be the President’s top priority, more important than any other political, strategic or humanitarian item on the President’s agenda in this conflict. These are Americans, after all—and protecting them is a president’s job one. Who are they? They are:

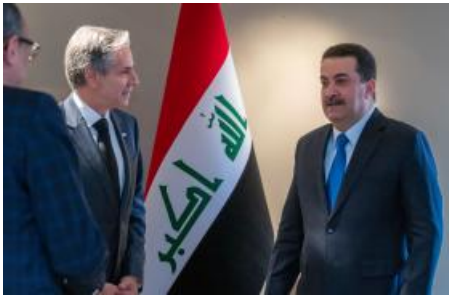
- Omer Neutra
- Idan Alexander
- Sagi Dekel Chen
- Hersh Goldberg Polin
- and Keith Segal

It is repugnant to see their freedom as just one item on the bargaining table with Hamas, as though they were chattel. These are Americans—and they deserve to be backed by the full faith and credit of the United States.

Of course, we stand here today to demand the unconditional release of all hostages, hostages of all nationalities, hostages of all faiths and none. They are not “unfortunate victims of war.” They are not “collateral damage.” They were purposefully taken as a tool of war. And victory over barbarism begins with their freedom. So, let us say together those four words Moses demanded of Pharaoh three thousand years ago: “Let my people go!”

Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in U.S. Middle East Policy at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the Times of Israel website](https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/as-an-american-i-am-ashamed/) (<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/as-an-american-i-am-ashamed/>). ❖

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