

# Israel's Most Famous Hostage-Rescue Commando Faces His Toughest Test

<https://www.newsweek.com/israels-most-famous-hostage-rescue-commando-faces-his-toughest-test-1836656>

By [Tom O'Connor](#) AND [David Brennan](#)

Opening fire as they stormed the plane's emergency exits and charged up the aisle, Israel's elite Sayeret Matkal commandos killed two Palestinian hijackers and overpowered the others, saving all but one hostage in a 10-minute mission hailed in Israel as a triumph of ingenuity and bravery. In the vanguard on that spring day in 1972 was none other than current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose two brothers also served in Sayeret Matkal. But while his personal experience of hostage rescue makes him uniquely placed to take ultimate responsibility for deploying the force in one of the biggest crises in Israel's history, the challenge this legendary unit faces now is many times greater than in any of its previous daring operations if it is to try to extract 200 hostages who were abducted by Hamas fighters and bundled back to the Gaza Strip during an unprecedented assault this month.

"In terms of what this unit can do and can't do, this is a guy who would be completely familiar," says Doron Avital, a former Sayeret Matkal commander whose teachings remain influential in the current leadership.

"He was the prime minister for 15 years, it means he approved many of the operations of the unit, so he knows the game, no question," Avital tells *Newsweek*. "But here it's a big challenge," he adds. "This is a rescue

*operation on no magnitude that we ever met, in the context of those hostages being in Gaza, in the context of this hidden infrastructure underneath the streets of Gaza. This is a big challenge ... it's a rescue operation in the context of war."*



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu looks on during a press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (not pictured) after their meeting in Tel Aviv on October 17. The commando-turned-world leader who is Israel's longest-serving prime minister faces one of his greatest challenges yet as he navigates an unprecedented war with the Palestinian Hamas movement while attempting to gather intelligence on 200 hostages held in the Gaza Strip. MAYA ALLERUZZO/Pool/AFP/Getty Images

## A Legacy Written in Blood

Sayeret Matkal, whose official name translates to the *General Staff Reconnaissance Unit*, was established in 1957 as a special commando formation modeled after the British Special Air Service (SAS) with the ability to conduct operations behind enemy lines. While initially attached to the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) paratroopers, Sayeret Matkal eventually came under the direct command of Israel's intelligence services, making it unlike anything else in the Israeli military.

"The advantage that Sayeret Matkal has is the fact that it's so integrated into the intelligence infrastructure," Avital says. Second to the commander of the unit itself, the intelligence officer is the most important component of the team, with many going on to later serve as heads of intelligence, as Avital points out. As for its functions, Sayeret Matkal carries out several different kinds of operations, such as combat and assassinations, earning it notoriety among Israel's enemies abroad. But what it's perhaps become best known for are audacious hostage-rescue raids such as the 1972 "**Operation Isotope**" in which a **22-year-old Netanyahu** took part long before a political career that would make him Israel's longest-serving premier.

Four members of the Palestinian Black September group posing as civilian couples hijacked Sabena Flight 571 and redirected it to Tel Aviv, where they demanded the release of 600 Palestinian prisoners. If their demands were not met, they threatened to detonate explosive charges planted on the plane that carried about 100 people. Alerted by a secret signal sent by the aircraft's pilot, a British World War II veteran, Sayeret Matkal—

including Netanyahu **under the command of fellow future Prime Minister Ehud Barak**—jumped into action, quietly disabling the plane's landing gear, then posing as a maintenance crew before storming the aircraft.

In the ensuing chaos, both male hijackers were killed and the two female hijackers captured. Three passengers were wounded and one of them later died. Netanyahu himself was injured in the hand when one of his fellow operators accidentally discharged his pistol while using it to hit one of the hijackers.

Sayeret Matkal won renown for an even more brazen raid four years later: one which was to bring Netanyahu his greatest loss even though he himself did not take part. In 1976, Israeli commandos responded to another seized aircraft, this time thousands of miles away in the hostile Ugandan capital of Entebbe, where members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—External Operations (PFLP-EO) and Germany-based Revolutionary Cells held more than 100 hostages from Air France Flight 139, demanding \$5 million and the release of 53 Palestinian and pro-Palestinian prisoners.

As Israel's political leadership entered into negotiations, Sayeret Matkal, **with Netanyahu's elder brother, Yonatan**, on board, made their way to East Africa by cargo plane and exited the aircraft with a black Mercedes-Benz and Land Rovers in the style of Ugandan President Idi Amin's presidential convoy. What the Israelis did not reportedly take into account, however, was the fact that Amin had recently purchased a new model of the luxury car in white. With the Ugandan guards on alert, a lengthy firefight erupted as Sayeret Matkal fought their way to the terminal where the hostages were being held, ultimately killing all the hijackers along with dozens of Ugandan soldiers.



When the smoke cleared, all but four hostages made it out alive. **The sole casualty on the Israeli side was Yonatan Netanyahu**, affectionately called "Yoni" by family and friends. What was officially known as "Operation Thunderbolt" would be renamed after the fallen soldier. Over the years, Netanyahu has told **how the loss of his brother affected him**. In a speech at Entebbe's airport on the 40th anniversary of the raid in 2016, Netanyahu proclaimed, "**When Yoni died, our world was destroyed.**"

Then-Lieutenant Benjamin Netanyahu, right, shakes hands with Israel's then-President Zalman Shazar during a ceremony honoring the soldiers from the elite Sayeret Matkal commando unit that freed the hostages in the Sabena Airlines hijacking, at the president's residence in Jerusalem on November 1, 1972. Half a century later, Netanyahu is serving as prime minister for the third time and weighing whether an even more complicated operation to rescue 200 held captive in the Gaza Strip is possible. Israeli Government Press Office/Getty Images

### History Does Not Repeat

Netanyahu has also said how the loss of his brother helped spur him into his political career, which has seen him serve three separate stints in office since 1996. The man who would succeed him following his first premiership was his Sayeret Matkal unit commander **Ehud Barak**, who led "Operation Isotope" and "Operation Spring of Youth," the 1973 slaying of high-ranking Palestine Liberation Organization officials in Lebanon in response to the Munich Olympics massacre against Israeli athletes a year earlier. Barak also helped plan "Operation Thunderbolt" and other covert actions.

Today, Barak warns against making comparisons between past glories and the unparalleled hostage crisis Israel faces today in the Gaza Strip. "*It never repeats itself,*" Barak tells *Newsweek*. "*We have to be aware that any kind of operation needs so much intelligence to be so accurate, such a tightly controlled situation, and there are so many lessons learned along the decades by the terror organizations, how to organize, how to spread them, even almost not knowing themselves where everyone is now.*"

The political rivalry between Barak, 81, and Netanyahu, 73, has often colored the two men's comments on one another. But in the context of Israel's current crisis, the former Israeli premier states that Netanyahu "*has a lot*

*of experience, he's a capable person,"* even if he has pursued policies that amount to "irresponsible behavior." Barak emphasizes that now is "not the time" to engage in political battles as the country deals with "probably the toughest blow Israel suffered since its establishment."

Hamas' stunning land, air and sea attack on October 7 took a nation that prides itself in state-of-the-art security and intelligence completely by surprise. More than 1,400 Israelis were killed in Operation "Al-Aqsa Flood," named after the revered site in the disputed holy city of Jerusalem that lies at the heart of the 75-year Israeli-Palestinian conflict and where violence had spiked in the months leading up to the latest fighting. While the majority of those killed in Israel were believed to be civilians, more than 300 soldiers have also been counted among the dead. That includes at least **nine members of Sayeret Matkal**, an unmatched toll for a small unit known for its capacity to bring its operators home alive.



A "Shabbat Dinner" table is prepared on October 20, 2023, at the Tel Aviv Museum Plaza, with 200 empty seats, representing the hostages and the people missing in the wake of the unprecedented Hamas assault. Though the majority of those held captive in the Gaza Strip are believed to be Israeli citizens, foreigners and dual passport-holders are also thought to be among the detainees. Leon Neal/Getty Images

### **Blind Spots**

Faced with this historic crisis, and with opinion polls showing his personal support slumping below 30 percent, Netanyahu has assembled a wartime Cabinet across political lines. The lineup includes five men with extensive military experience: opposition leader Benny

Gantz, fellow former IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, current Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer. Also in the inner decision-making circle is Netanyahu's military secretary, Major General Avi Gil.

*"This is the group within which they will take the decisions,"* says Yaakov Amidror, who served as Netanyahu's national security adviser from 2011 to 2013, suggesting that Netanyahu will seek wide agreement rather than trying to steamroll discussions. *"In the situation of today after the failure of the 7th of October, I think he will understand that the wider the support, the better."*

Should this group come to the decision that sending in Sayeret Matkal is the best bet for securing a positive outcome in the hostage crisis, however, Netanyahu, once on the front lines, will have to take a back seat. While Amidror tells *Newsweek* that Israel was "lucky that this prime minister, in this case, has some experience" in the field of hostage rescue, he explained that "the political level will be involved only in general terms. At the end, it's a mission for the military guys."

That mission is made all the more complicated by an absence of intelligence. The 141-square-mile Gaza Strip is home to 2.2 million people now under bombardment by a historic Israeli assault in which local authorities count casualties surpassing 4,000. It had already proven to be one of the IDF's greatest intelligence challenges since Israeli troops withdrew from the Mediterranean territory in 2005. Amidror says that ground operations commanders "are supposed to do the best with the knowledge that they have about the situation on the ground." In this instance, he notes, "they **don't know where the hostages are**, and they are not taking it into account in their plans."

Michael Milshtein, former head of the IDF Military Intelligence's Department of Palestinian Affairs, tells *Newsweek* that neither Israeli forces nor their Hamas adversaries have "ever faced such an event." *"I do assess that, regarding Hamas, all the hostages or most of the hostages are in the tunnels,"* Milshtein says. *"Hamas has a very sophisticated, complicated system of internal tunnels inside Gaza, and actually the tunnels are where most of Hamas members and mainly the leaders are right now."* As to those being held by other Palestinian factions such as Islamic Jihad or even civilians, *"I really don't know,"* Milshtein says.

The unrivaled scope of the challenge facing Israel now begets a dark reality in which even seasoned Israeli officials understand that casualties among those detained in the Gaza Strip are almost inevitable. As to what



constitutes success, Milshtein calls it "an impossible question," one further obscured by statements by Hamas' military wing, the Al-Qassam Brigades, that **22 hostages have already died due to Israeli airstrikes.**

Israel has faced a hostage crisis in Gaza before. Then-IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit was abducted by Palestinian fighters in a cross-border raid in 2006. There was no rescue. He was freed after over five years in captivity in Gaza in exchange for the release of more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners. **Avital**, the former Sayeret Matkal commander, recalls how no attempt to extract Shalit was made because "we had no clue" regarding the details of his detainment at the hands of Hamas and other factions, who "were so tight in terms of information, communication, as they are in this operation."

"*The geometry of the problem is very complicated,*" Avital says. "*The best minds, the best intelligence officers, the best talent is now invested in it, but it's a tough problem.*"

Avital also spoke of past setbacks that test the legacy of the unit's record in rescue efforts. Specifically, he referenced the 1974 incursion from Lebanon into Israel by three partisans of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who shot their way into an Israeli elementary school, taking 115 people hostage, the vast majority being children. They demanded the release of 23 Palestinian and pro-Palestinian prisoners. When the commandos stormed the school, some 25 hostages, again mostly children, were killed.

"*Some were rescued, but it was a massacre,*" Avital says. "*This is a failure.*" More recently, he points to a botched 2018 operation within Gaza itself, where Sayeret Matkal commandos posing as Palestinians were discovered by Hamas operatives, resulting in a firefight that killed one Israeli operative and several Palestinian gunmen and forced the unit to retreat under IDF helicopter fire. The incident sparked two separate internal investigations. Gauging how Sayeret Matkal could emerge from the current situation claiming victory, he says that "***if you get the majority of the hostages out,***" then "***this is a success.***"



A smoke plume erupts during an Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern part of the Gaza Strip on October 19, 2023. In the immediate aftermath of Hamas' deadliest-ever attack on

Israel, the IDF launched a historic campaign of strikes against the Gaza Strip, where Hamas' military wing, the Al-Qassam Brigades, has claimed that at least 22 hostages have been killed as a result of Israeli airstrikes. SAID KHATIB/AFP/Getty Images

## **A New Kind of Crisis**

Avital also has his place in Sayeret Matkal's mythos of bold success against seemingly insurmountable odds. In 1994, he oversaw the dramatic kidnapping of Lebanese Amal Movement official Mustafa Dirani from his home, deep in Lebanese territory, in response to the abduction of an Israeli pilot years earlier. Avital recounts how the operation, in which helicopters swept by night into the Bekaa Valley, managed to evade the watchful eyes of both the powerful Lebanese Hezbollah and the Syrian military and avoid any major confrontations save for a gunfight with Dirani's relatives in which one Israeli commando was slightly wounded. He recalls how, throughout such operations under his command, he was in "intimate contact" with the prime minister, then Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated a year later by an ultranationalist Israeli opposed to the leader's peace accords with Palestinians. Today, Netanyahu would also play a central role in coordinating any action in Gaza, because, as Avital says, "*this kind of operation can create such havoc if they fail, create such consequences that go far beyond the military and go into the political arena.*"

As Amidror outlined, however, it would be up to the military planners themselves to draw up the details. Avital explains that "on a humorous note," *it's necessary that "the commander of the unit has to be very good in marketing it to the prime minister and to the defense minister so that it's approved, because this unit can work for a year on an operation and, in the last minutes, it's not approved, and it's devastating to the soldiers and the officers.*" Even the Bekaa raid, he noted, was delayed by a day due to a last-minute call by the prime minister.

For Americans, such high-stakes raids evoke images of presidents sat alongside key Cabinet members crammed into a war room, closely monitoring the situation and anxiously awaiting the outcome. Avital

references the famed 2011 raid by the **U.S. Navy's SEAL Team Six** in which Al-Qaeda leader **Osama bin Laden** was killed in a compound in Pakistan, saying this portrayal of the national leader's role is not too far off in Israel—at least in normal circumstances. *"In the regular context, it's so intimate on the level of the prime minister, the head of the army, right now, the war Cabinet,"* Avital says. *"But in the context of something wider, a ground incursion, so many decisions would be delegated downward, and there would be no way to monitor them on this level."*

### **Everything Is on the Table**

What's almost universally agreed among those with close ties to Israel's highest decision-making echelons is that **a major ground incursion into the Gaza Strip is inevitable**. Since exiting Gaza 18 years ago, the IDF has fought within the Palestinian territory on at least three occasions, in the midst of previous wars fought in 2008, 2012 and 2014. But as the Israeli leadership declares its official goal of eliminating Hamas as a functioning military entity altogether, a ground war could be expected to go far beyond previous conflicts.



An Israeli tank moves in an undisclosed location along the border with the Gaza Strip on October 18, 2023. As the deadliest episode of Israeli-Palestinian conflict in decades unfolds, the IDF is poised to conduct its most intensive incursion into the Hamas-held territory. GIL COHEN MAGEN/AFP/Getty Images

IDF spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hecht tells *Newsweek* that *"our intelligence corps and all our special ops are involved in this. The whole country is mobilized in this operation. It's not only regular infantry."* Hecht declined to comment about the potential involvement of the Sayeret Matkal, adding that the hostage rescue effort is *"being handled in the most*

*sensitive, closed circles within our intelligence community and our political echelon, and that's all I can say about it."* Israel, Hecht says, is **"gathering a lot of information"** from Palestinian militants captured during Al-Aqsa Flood and its aftermath.

On the other side of the once-thought-impregnable security fence lie Palestinian fighters who are **also prepared in the full knowledge of what their operation was likely to bring**. Unlike more moderate Palestinian factions, **Hamas seeks the destruction of Israel** and its replacement with an Islamic Palestinian nation rather than statehood on land seized by Israel in its 1967 war with a coalition of Arab countries. **For Hamas, all of Israel is occupied land.**

*"The resistance is preparing with all it has to defend our people,"* Hamas spokesperson Bassam Naeem tells *Newsweek*. *"Certainly, the enemy's entrance into the Gaza Strip will not be a cakewalk. Likewise, all possibilities on the part of the resistance are open."*

Even in the heat of war, however, Barak, the former Israeli premier, defense chief and Sayeret Matkal leader, believes active efforts are being made on the part of foreign governments, including Egypt, Germany, Qatar, Switzerland and even the U.S., to **actively seek secret communications with Hamas' political leadership in hopes of resolving the multinational hostage crisis**. Citing what it said were humanitarian grounds, Hamas released two American hostages, 17-year-old Natali Raanan and her mother, Judith, on October 20, a deal made possible **through Qatari mediation**. Barak expresses doubt that any deal would bring home all of the hostages. *"I think the decision-makers of Hamas on this issue are not the political leadership, they are the military leadership, and they are probably not even in the northern part of the Gaza Strip, but they fled with the others to the south in order not to be hit, and only the fighting force they probably left in the northern part,"* he says.

Comparing the situation to Sayeret Matkal's past operations, Barak says **it was much more complicated and that ultimately decisions could only be made by those with the facts and data at hand**. *"That's why we have to trust them,"* he says. *"And my instinct tells me that any deeper diving in discussing it is irresponsible,"* he adds. *"We shouldn't discuss it."*