Summary:

- Exactly 50 years ago, on the night of July 4, 1976, a special forces unit of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) carried out “Operation Entebbe.”
- During the operation, Israeli elite soldiers freed 102 of the 106 hostages who had been on board a hijacked Air France plane at Entebbe Airport in Uganda.
- Four hostages were killed; one of them was murdered in a hospital in Kampala on the orders of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin.
- The hostages who were rescued were the 12 members of the flight crew and 90 passengers, 84 of whom were Israelis.
- All seven terrorists involved in the operation, as well as numerous Ugandan soldiers, were killed during the rescue operation.
- On the Israeli side, the only casualty was the commander of the elite unit, Jonathan Netanyahu, the brother of current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.
- To mark the 50th anniversary of “Operation Entebbe,” the Israeli National Archives has released documents that had previously been kept under lock and key. The following article is based on these documents.

By Reto E. Wild

Entebbe, the former capital of Uganda, holds special significance for many Israelis: On June 27, 1976, four terrorists hijacked an Air France plane. The aircraft was en route from Tel Aviv to Paris and was diverted.

“Zero Hour Approaches”: 50 years ago, Israel carried out the rescue operation in Entebbe

At first, things didn’t look good for the passengers. On Thursday, July 1, 1976, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was meeting with a small group of advisors when the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), Motta Gur, delivered some bad news: “There’s no denying it: the IDF isn’t really suited for operations in Entebbe.” “The Times of Israel” recently reported on this historic moment.

Four days earlier, the Israeli government had learned that an Air France plane en route from Tel Aviv to Paris had been hijacked after its stopover in Athens and ultimately flown to Entebbe Airport in Uganda. There were more than 240 passengers on board, over 80 of whom were Israelis. The crisis had kept the government on edge ever since; this was already the sixth meeting that day.

Fifty years later, a collection of documents from the Israeli National Archives—now made public—provides insight into the minutes of the many government meetings held during that fateful week-long crisis. Also included are diplomatic dispatches, photos, and handwritten notes covering everything—from Israel’s attempts to influence Ugandan dictator Idi Amin to an issue that has been particularly relevant to Israel since the massacre of October 7, 2023: attempts by relatives of the hostages to persuade the government to strike a deal with the kidnappers in order to save the lives of their family members.

During the week-long crisis, Prime Minister Rabin and his inner circle changed their tactics, as reported by *The Times of Israel*. At first, they hoped for international assistance. When that failed to materialize, they reluctantly decided to negotiate with the terrorist kidnappers, while at the same time trying to appease Amin and prevent leaks to the press. It was not until days later that a risky, secret military operation was launched.

Prime Minister Rabin received the news that a flight from Tel Aviv to Paris had been hijacked after a stopover in Athens in the middle of his weekly Sunday cabinet meeting on June 27. “It has been hijacked and is apparently heading toward Benghazi,” Rabin said of the plane. Even as the meeting was still in progress, Rabin passed a handwritten note to his chief of staff, Eli Mizrahi, making it clear that the plane was an Air France flight and that the French government was therefore responsible. “I intend to hold the French government responsible for the fate of the Israelis flying on an Air France plane,” he wrote.

Days later, the statement made by then-Defense Minister Shimon Peres during a cabinet meeting on July 3, 1976, sounded almost menacing: “I am not proposing

this lightly,” he said, as the government decided to send commandos to Uganda. “This is an operation the IDF has never experienced before. This is the first operation in Israel’s history outside the Middle East.”

Only Israelis and Jews were held hostage

A key reason for choosing the military option was the fact that, at that point, only 84 Israeli and six other Jewish hostages remained in the terrorists’ custody. The non-Jewish passengers had been released by the hostage-takers earlier. The Israeli government therefore concluded that no other country would step in to rescue these hostages.

The terrorists—including members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and two Germans from the group Revolutionary Cells—demanded the release of “freedom fighters” being held by Israel and several other countries, and set a deadline of July 1. That, too, sounds like something that would happen after October 7, 2023.

Meanwhile, Israeli officials were considering who might serve as a mediator: Pope Paul VI, Henry Kissinger? And through the former Israeli military attaché in Kampala, Baruch Bar-Lev, they informally contacted the one man they believed could intervene directly with the terrorists: Idi Amin.

Uganda’s dictatorial president was no longer a friend of Israel: in 1972, he had severed ties with Jerusalem and had been championing the Palestinian cause ever since. Yet Baruch Bar-Lev continued to maintain good relations with Amin. For this reason, the Israeli government tasked him with contacting Amin—but only as a private citizen, so that it would not appear as though Israel, as a state, was negotiating directly.

“How are you, my friend?” Amin said to Bar-Lev, according to a Hebrew transcript of the June 30, 1976, phone call—the first of five calls between the two men during the crisis. Bar-Lev soon began to flatter the dictator’s ego: “You have a tremendous opportunity to go down in history as a great peacemaker,” he said. “If you free the people.”

Amin was receptive, but responded with a warning: The deadline—zero hour—was approaching, and the hostages were in danger. “They emphasize that if the Israeli government does not respond to their demands, they will blow up the French plane

and all the hostages tomorrow at noon,” Amin said of the hijackers.

Negotiate or take military action?

In the days following the kidnapping, the Israeli government repeatedly emphasized that negotiations with terrorists were contrary to Israel’s policy. A telegram from the Foreign Ministry dated June 29 confirmed: Israel would not capitulate to blackmail. At the same time, Prime Minister Rabin received a letter from the hostages’ families. They referred to an earlier exchange of bodies for terrorists (1975) and demanded: “It is better to negotiate for the living—human lives are more important than principles.”

The next day, Transportation Minister Gad Yaakobi and Rabin met with the families. Rabin asked the media to refrain from reporting on the families’ contacts with France, but expressed understanding for the pressure they were under. On June 30, Rabin said, “Even not making a decision is a decision.” A military operation still seemed unrealistic at the time. Defense Minister Peres warned of the long-term consequences of giving in. Rabin, however, spoke out in favor of negotiations and echoed the families’ argument: “I am not prepared to explain why we exchange terrorists for the dead, but not for the living.”

Ultimately, the talks broke down on July 2 because the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) saw no logic in Israel’s offer. At the same time, the non-Israelis who had been released in the meantime provided important information. Chief of Staff Gur proposed a surprise operation. Rabin initially approved the preparations only as a “second option” alongside the negotiations.

On July 3, the cabinet approved the military operation despite the risks. Peres: “I hope to see the hand of God in this.” Shortly after 3:00 p.m., Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft and two Boeing 707s took off from the Sinai Peninsula bound for Uganda. The four transport aircraft carried about 100 elite IDF soldiers and equipment to Uganda. On the night of July 4, 1976, Israeli commandos stormed the airport terminal and freed the hostages. However, three hostages and the commander and operation leader, Lieutenant Colonel Jonatan Netanyahu, were killed in the crossfire—as were all seven terrorists and dozens of Ugandan soldiers. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin later emphasized: “The entire operation was based on the element of surprise—no other country was involved.”

In Israel, as well as in the U.S. and Europe, the rescue of the 102 surviving hostages

was met with great relief. This was coupled with admiration for the successful commando operation carried out by the Israeli elite unit. Following the victorious Six-Day War of 1967, it once again demonstrated the military and intelligence strength of the young Jewish state and showed that it was prepared to do whatever it took to protect and rescue its citizens. Forty-seven years later, following the massacre carried out by the terrorist organization Hamas on October 7, 2023, in Israel, it proved this once again.