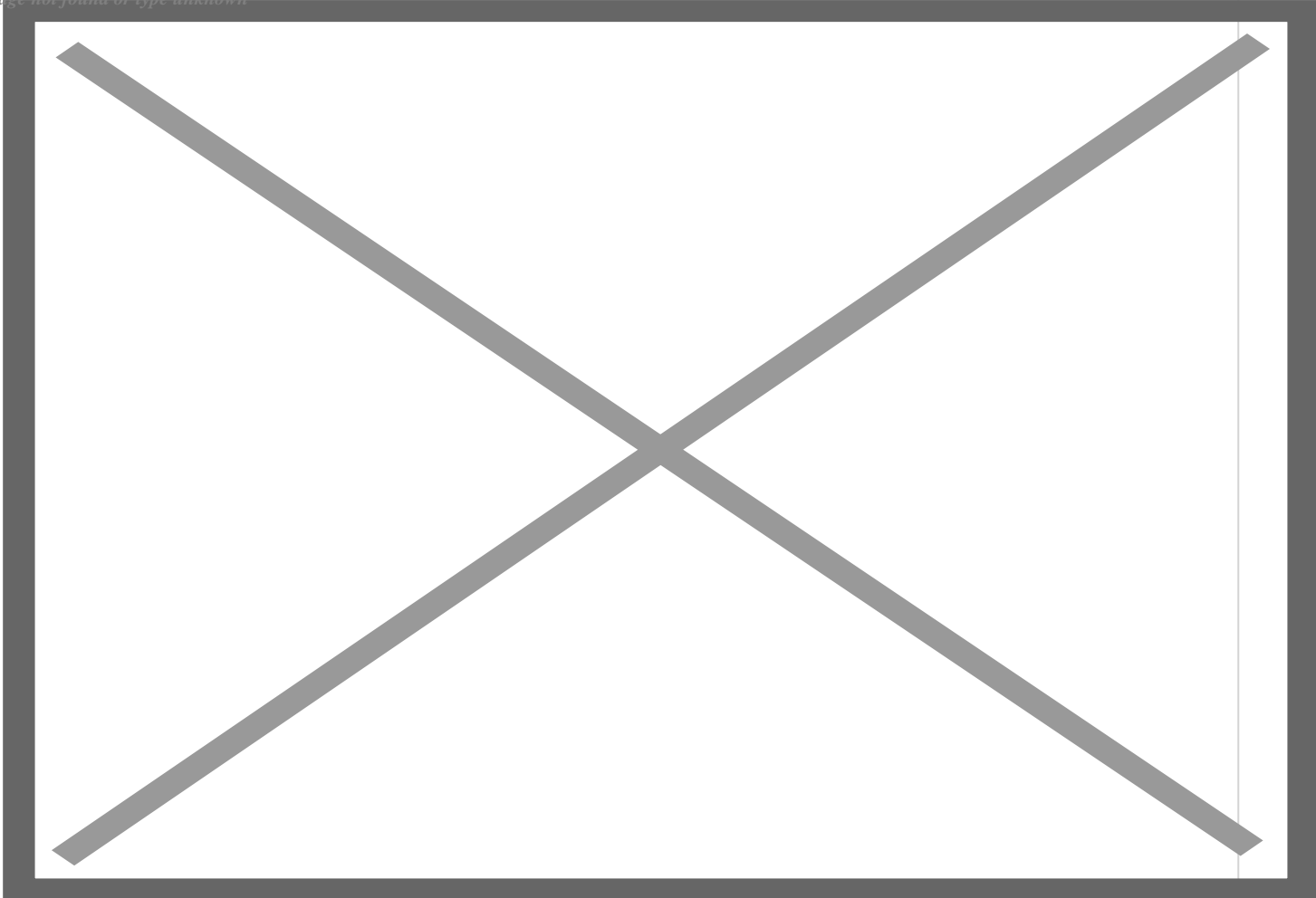


Hamas says it has enough Israeli captives to free all Palestinian prisoners

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Palestinians ride on an Israeli military vehicle seized by Palestinian gunmen who infiltrated areas of southern Israel, in the southern Gaza Strip, October 7, 2023 [Bassam Masoud/Reuters

Gaza City, October 8 (RHC)-- A senior Hamas leader has said that the group had captured enough Israeli soldiers during an unprecedented attack against Israel to make Israeli authorities free all Palestinian prisoners in its jails. "We managed to kill and capture many Israeli soldiers. The fighting is still on," Saleh al-Arouri, deputy chief of Hamas's political bureau, told Al Jazeera on Saturday.

"Our detainees in [Israeli] prisons, their freedom is looming large. What we have in our hands will release all our prisoners. The longer fighting continues, the higher the number of prisoners will become," added al-Arouri, who said senior officers were among those captured, but did not provide any figures.

According to the latest figures by Addameer, a prisoners' rights NGO, nearly 5,200 Palestinians are in Israeli jails, including 33 women, 170 minors and more than 1,200 placed under administrative detention.

The Israeli army has acknowledged soldiers and commanders have been killed and prisoners of war have been taken. It has not given any figures.

Hamas, the group running the besieged Gaza Strip, launched the biggest operation on Israel in years on Saturday, killing dozens of people and wounding hundreds after fighters crossed into Israel under the cover of a barrage of rockets fired from Gaza. Meanwhile, Hamas social media accounts posted footage of what were said to be Israeli captives moved alive into the Gaza Strip.

The surprise operation from Gaza came on the heels of the killing of four Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, widespread Israeli settler attacks, especially in Huwara, near Nablus and increased tensions at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, al-Arouri said the group is engaged in a battle for freedom. "This is not a [hit-and-run] operation; we started an all-out battle. We expect fighting to continue and the fighting front to expand. We have one prime target: our freedom and the freedom of our holy sites," he told Al Jazeera.

Al-Arouri said Palestinians have a right to freedom, to fight the Israeli occupation and to safeguard their holy sites. "We will continue to fight until we are rewarded with victory, freedom and independence," he said. As observers noted that a land invasion by Israel could be imminent, Hamas said it is ready for "the worst-case scenario". "All scenarios are now possible and we are ready for an [Israeli] land invasion," he added.

Al-Arouri also said that Israel had been planning to launch an attack on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Earlier, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his country is "at war", while Palestinian officials say ending the Israeli occupation of their territory is the only guarantee for "security, stability and peace" in the region.

The United States, meanwhile, said it will work to ensure Israel "has what it needs to defend itself" and the UK, EU and Ukraine have condemned Hamas's operation in Israel.

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