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Bereavement in Uncertainty: The Health of Families of Deceased Hostages – Challenges, Needs, and Recommendations

Preliminary Note: This report contains descriptions that may be difficult and emotionally triggering for some readers. Discretion is advised before reading. Significant effort has been made to use sensitive and respectful terminology out of consideration for the families of the hostages and the deceased. However, in some cases, it was unavoidable to use difficult terms to accurately describe reality, and we apologize if the text causes distress to anyone.

A. Background

The brutal terrorist attack carried out by Hamas on October 7 resulted in mass killings alongside the abduction of 251 people to Gaza. Amid the chaos of that day and the days that followed, families—who later became the families of hostages—were exposed to the scope and brutality of the violence while desperately searching for information about their loved ones, some of whom were classified as missing for weeks and even months. As part of the search process, some families were required to provide DNA samples, conduct frantic searches in hospitals, personally gather intelligence, and watch harrowing videos—all while enduring absolute uncertainty, extreme tension, and constant anxiety. Upon receiving the official status of 'hostage,' families embarked on a relentless public struggle for the return of their loved ones alive, enduring a reality of waiting, ambiguity, and unrelenting emotional turmoil—oscillating between hope for their return and a deep, tormenting fear that they might never see them again. Over time, some families received the devastating notification that their loved ones were declared deceased based on intelligence information, without forensic identification.

Following October 7, there were 255 hostages held in Gaza, including 251 from the October 7 attack and four from prior incidents. Of them, 77 are classified as deceased, including those who were abducted post-mortem that day. Among the deceased, 41 have been brought back for burial in Israel. Thirty-one hostages were abducted alive and murdered in captivity, of whom 25 have been returned for burial. As of February 16, 2025, 36 deceased hostages remain in captivity.

Faced with the ambiguity surrounding a hostage's condition (What is their state? Where are they? Are they alive or dead?), receiving notification of death seemingly provides unbearable clarity while offering some solace that they are no longer suffering or being tortured in captivity. However, since some families struggle to fully accept the official notification in the absence of tangible proof—such as a grave or the repatriation of remains—they are left with agonizing doubt

and guilt. Doubt over whether their loved one is truly deceased and guilt over mourning them or acknowledging them as deceased (whether by the state, the public, or even within their own family), fearing that doing so might be a grave injustice if their loved one is still alive.

For these families, this unique status intertwines two conflicting realities, creating an unbearable psychological burden. On one hand, **ambiguous loss** (Boss, 2010, 2017), characterized by prolonged uncertainty even after receiving the notification of death—regarding the remains and whereabouts of the deceased, which prevents closure. On the other hand, **traumatic grief/bereavement** (Rubin & Malkinson, 2020), stemming from the violent and unfathomable loss of a loved one who was, until recently, presumed alive. This combination disrupts the mourning process (**disordered/disrupted bereavement**), as elaborated later, leading to **delayed grief** that remains **frozen** until there is definitive closure on the fate of their loved ones. This reality puts families at an increased risk of long-term health issues and psychological distress, while also complicating the recovery and bereavement process, extending it far beyond the conventional timeframes recognized in literature and therapeutic practice.

Even language struggles to adequately describe this condition. Some family members strongly oppose and are deeply hurt by the use of terms such as "bodies" or "corpses" when referring to their loved ones, whom they were never able to properly bid farewell to. Similarly, attaching the title "deceased" (ל"ז, ZL) can feel inappropriate and distressing in cases where uncertainty still lingers.

Therefore, this document, written at the request of families of deceased hostages, aims to explore the unique complexities faced by this group, outlining the emotional, social, and systemic challenges they endure, as well as the need for tailored responses to this extraordinary and distressing reality. As professionals in health and rehabilitation and as volunteers in the health team of the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, we will focus on health-related aspects. This reality demands a multidisciplinary approach that takes into account medical, social, legal, humanitarian, ethical, and economic considerations.

Attached to this report is an appendix detailing the legal and humanitarian aspects of the continued captivity of deceased hostages, including the violation of families' rights to certainty regarding their loved ones' fate and the ability to ensure them a dignified burial, should they no longer be alive. The appendix also reviews the persistent psychological distress caused by the lack of information, as well as the severe violations of international humanitarian law and international criminal law (**Appendix A**).

B. Methodology

The present report is primarily based on systematic data collection conducted through a research framework involving semi-structured in-depth interviews, carried out between December 2024

and January 2025. As part of the study, and following informed consent, 17 family members of deceased hostages with varying degrees of kinship were interviewed. The interviews were conducted by Dr. Einat Yehene, a specialist rehabilitation psychologist, senior supervisor, and head of the rehabilitation division in the health team of the Hostages and Missing Families Forum. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Tel Aviv-Yaffo Academic College and by the Research Committee of the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.

C. Typology of Families of Deceased Hostages

The group of families of deceased hostages can be categorized into three main subgroups:

1. Families who received the notification of their loved one's death or murder in captivity on the day of their return to Israel.
2. Families who received the notification of their loved one's death or murder in captivity, with their return to Israel occurring only after a period of time following the notification.
3. Families who received the notification of their loved one's death or murder in captivity, but their loved ones are still held hostage in Gaza and have yet to be returned to Israel.

In terms of coping, including psychological and emotional aspects, the groups share both common and distinct characteristics, with Group 3 representing the extreme end of the lack-of-closure experience. The shared characteristics stem primarily from traumatic bereavement. The unique characteristics arise from the disrupted mourning process, caused by the severe deviation from a normative mourning process, alongside the continued existence or absence of ambiguous loss.

This section will first outline the characteristics of traumatic bereavement experienced by families of deceased hostages at this time. It will then present the unique features of each group, stemming from the specific disruptions in the mourning process.

D. Characteristics of Traumatic Bereavement

From the interviews with families of deceased hostages, numerous risk factors emerged (detailed below), which are recognized in the literature as elements that inherently complicate the grieving process—many of which have not yet begun for some families (complicated grief/complex bereavement disorder - Boelen & Smid, 2017). Moreover, the multiplicity of risk factors, combined with the unique circumstances at this time, suggests that the mourning process is expected to extend far beyond the conventional timeframe documented in the literature.

1. **Death in traumatic, violent, and sudden circumstances (sudden and violent loss):** Whether they were murdered on October 7 or during captivity after enduring prolonged suffering, the violent nature of their deaths leaves families with traumatic grief, accompanied by significant

post-traumatic symptoms (nightmares, intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal), in addition to the grief itself (Hasson-Ohayon & Horesh, 2024), which are known to complicate both loss processing and grief responses.

2. **Lack of a farewell opportunity:** The circumstances of their death did not allow families to say goodbye or be present in their loved one's final moments. This absence of farewell represents a situation known as unfinished business in bereavement, which is associated with intense emotions such as guilt for not being able to save them and regret, both of which are known to exacerbate the grieving process.
3. **Missing pieces in the "death story" (death story):** Due to the nature of these events, families lack information about what their loved ones endured in their final moments and how exactly they were killed. As long as the full information is unavailable, families struggle to construct a coherent narrative and process the loss (Rubin & Malkinson, 2020). Even if a deceased hostage has been buried, the grief remains unresolved. Any new information that emerges later, even a year after the event, can reopen the wound and cause renewed distress.
4. **Circumstances of the hostage's death:** The different causes of death—whether due to IDF military operations, execution by captors, lack of medical treatment, or the extreme captivity conditions—intensify the tragedy and evoke emotions such as regret, humiliation, and a sense of abandonment, which further complicate the grief process.
5. **Dissemination of information and videos by Hamas:** In many cases, false reports about hostages' deaths were spread, only to later be disproven, and vice versa. Additionally, families were exposed to numerous distressing videos, from which they inferred that their loved one's life was at risk—even in the absence of an official confirmation. These exposures, along with disinformation and psychological terror, severely disrupted the transition into accepting the reality of death.
6. **Disruptions in receiving the notification of death:** In some cases, notification was given in gradual stages based on levels of concern, with families sometimes being instructed not to share the information. In other cases, concerns were later disproven and then reaffirmed repeatedly. Interviewees described how this eroded their trust in the notification process and those delivering the news. Some were given death probabilities in percentage terms, rather than definitive statements, which added to their distress. Others learned of the death through Telegram or media outlets before receiving the official notification. Disrupted notifications are known to exacerbate psychological distress in the grieving process.
7. **Absence of a structured notification protocol:** While the military has an established protocol for notifying families of fallen soldiers, there is no standardized protocol for notifying the families of deceased hostages. Questions remain unresolved, such as: Who delivers the news? Are municipal representatives involved? Are military officers present? What procedures

follow the notification? Additionally, there is ongoing debate over which hostages are classified as fallen IDF soldiers and under what framework their cases are handled.

8. **Ongoing exposure to daily triggers:** New updates about living hostages, or notifications of death for others, constantly reignite the grief and prevent emotional closure. Even images of released hostages can trigger deep psychological pain for families who longed for that moment but never got it.
9. **Multiple losses (multiple losses):** Many families face compounded losses, including the loss of their home or community due to displacement from October 7, forced evacuations from their residences, loss of livelihood, and additional personal or communal bereavements, all of which contribute to grief overload (Stroebe & Schut, 2016).
10. **Sense of abandonment and moral injury:** Many interviewees reported a profound sense of abandonment and loss of trust in response to the absence and failure of military and state institutions on Oct. 7, the lack of a hostage release deal, and the moral decisions of policymakers shaping national priorities. This sense of abandonment is intensified when surviving hostages remain in captivity, and families feel the state has failed in securing their return alive.
11. **Difficulty in constructing meaning (meaning-making):** The lack of a state commission of inquiry into the failures of October 7 reinforces families' distress, as they struggle to understand what happened and derive meaning from their loss (Neimeyer et al., 2010).
12. **Lack of social and state recognition for the "deceased-hostage" status (disenfranchised grief - Doka, 2002):** Some families feel deeply hurt by dehumanizing language (e.g., referring to their loved ones as "bodies" rather than as individuals). They struggle against a hierarchy between living hostages and deceased hostages in public discourse.
13. **Media and public intrusion in grief:** Families described difficulties in balancing personal mourning with the public struggle, as grief is an intimate and private process.
14. **Declining media attention:** Families reported a significant drop in media coverage once their loved one was reclassified from hostage to deceased, reinforcing the perception of hierarchical visibility between the two statuses.
15. **Continued emotional entanglement with the hostage community:** Every new status update on hostages affects the families of deceased hostages, eliciting feelings of longing, grief, envy, or shared mourning.

E. Disruptions in the Normative Mourning Process

Figure 1 illustrates the normative mourning process (A), characteristic of Jewish tradition, structured in a sequence of stages that help the bereaved individual process the loss. In contrast, other processes (B, C, D) depict typical disruptions in this sequence, as observed among the families of deceased hostages. These disruptions are known to create a complex and prolonged grief response, particularly in cases where there is no burial or closure.

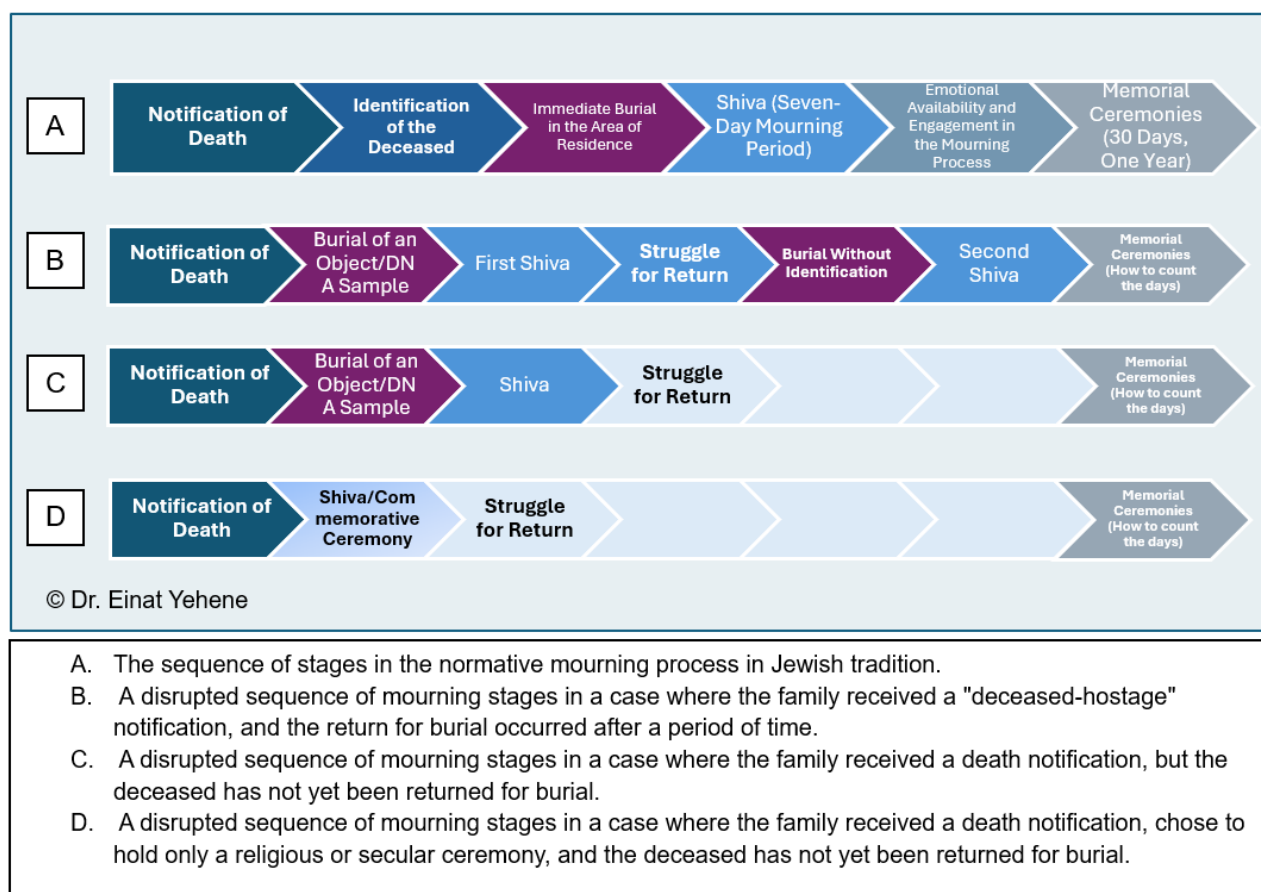


Figure 1: The Normative Mourning Process (A) and Disrupted Mourning Processes Among Families of Deceased Hostages (B, C, D).

Below are the **unique characteristics** of each of the three groups:

Group 1 – Families of deceased hostages who received the notification and were able to bury their loved ones immediately

- A sudden and unexpected transition from ambiguous loss to notification of death, following a prolonged struggle to return the hostage alive.

- No opportunity to identify the deceased before burial.
- The very question of whether to be exposed to information or evidence is itself an unusual and burdensome dilemma.
- Lack of availability for mourning due to the ongoing traumatic event and the need to support the collective struggle to bring the hostages home.
- The accumulation of multiple losses and an overwhelming grief burden make it difficult to fully engage in mourning.
- Mismatched societal and institutional expectations for "healing/recovery" and returning to normalcy, as if "the circle has been closed," without an understanding of the complexity of loss processing.

Group 2 – Families of deceased hostages who received the notification, but burial occurred only after some time

- **The death determination:** Many interviewees felt that the information on which the death determination was based was not sufficiently evidence-based, relying on non-concrete or contradictory information. This often led to doubts about the credibility of the information and difficulty in fully accepting the death. Mistakes made during the burial process further contributed to doubts, both at the time of notification and afterward.
- **A period of mourning ("Shiva") without burial,** characterized by a general preoccupation with the circumstances of the death declaration rather than the farewell itself.
- **Continued tense anticipation for an update on the deceased's whereabouts** even after the "Shiva" period had ended, in the absence of a burial.
- **The burial itself solidified the reality of death** and allowed for "closure."
- **Confusion surrounding "Shiva"** and dual farewell ceremonies.
- **Uncertainty regarding the memorial date**—should it be counted from the death notification? The return of the body? The date of death? This confusion is further exacerbated by intelligence reports that do not always provide certainty regarding the exact date and circumstances of death.
- **Lack of availability for mourning and postponement of grief processing** due to the ongoing trauma and the need to support the collective struggle for the hostages' return.
- **The accumulation of multiple losses** and an overwhelming grief burden make it difficult to fully engage in mourning.

- **Mismatched societal and institutional expectations** for "healing/recovery" and returning to normalcy, as if "the circle has been closed."

Group 3 – Families of deceased hostages who received the notification, but their loved ones have not yet been returned for burial

- **The death determination:** The death determination process was sometimes based on insufficiently substantiated evidence, relying on non-concrete or contradictory information, making it difficult for families to trust the authority making the determination. This often led to difficulty in fully accepting the death.
- **The presence of profound doubt and hope:** Because the death determination was based on a photo, video, or other indirect information, rather than tangible evidence such as forensic identification or a pathological examination, families experience a deep sense of doubt regarding the certainty of death. The absence of physical evidence or medical data reinforces even the slightest hope that their loved one might still be alive.
- **Refusal/non-refusal to hold a burial or sit Shiva:** Some interviewees held Shiva and symbolically buried an object or a DNA fragment from their loved one. Others firmly refused to hold a Shiva or conduct a burial for an object or symbolic grave, as it felt emotionally disconnected. Some feared that such a move would reduce efforts to return their loved one's remains for proper burial.
- **Knowledge without closure:** Families describe how the absence of a grave to visit or the fact that their loved ones remain in Gaza continues to torment them.
- **Ongoing painful anticipation:** Families remain in an agonizing wait for an update on the deceased's whereabouts and their return for burial.
- **A persistent, urgent struggle** to bring their loved ones home for burial, which demands emotional and physical resources, leaving little energy for personal grief processing. Families are preoccupied with maintaining public awareness and advocating for recognition of the importance of bringing their loved ones home.
- **Societal and institutional expectations for "returning to normalcy"**—as if they were only bereaved families and not also hostage families.
- **Profound fear that as time passes, it will become increasingly difficult to locate and return the deceased**, and they may be classified as missing persons whose fate remains unknown. This would leave families in a perpetual state of emotional limbo.

F. Effects on Mental and Physical Health and General Functioning

The prolonged stress resulting from the exhausting struggle to bring back the hostages, receiving the death notification, and the lack of closure due to the deceased not being returned for burial, significantly impacts family members' functioning and takes a serious toll on both their physical and mental health. The uncertainty not only causes severe mental distress but also directly harms the health of the families and may shorten their lives. The return of the fallen is not only a matter of final respect but also a necessary step to save lives.

1. **General Functioning:** Most interviewees described experiencing a lack of motivation and energy to get out of bed in the morning, with some stating that they were unable to leave their beds for days or even weeks. Many reported difficulty engaging in routine daily activities they had previously performed, such as doing laundry, cooking, or exercising. In many cases, families continue to rely on friends and relatives for daily support.
2. **Mental Health Effects:** The constant fear that their loved one may never be found and returned exacerbates anxiety. Some interviewees reported experiencing panic attacks, particularly at night, when daily distractions subside and deep thoughts take over. The majority of interviewees reported post-traumatic symptoms, especially nightmares and intrusive memories, often related to the kidnapping or the murder of their loved one in captivity.
3. **Emotional Instability:** The ongoing crisis results in significant emotional instability, with most families describing serious difficulties in emotional regulation. Irritability, anger, emotional withdrawal, and social isolation—at higher levels than before—affect their relationships within the family and with friends, as well as their overall daily functioning.
4. **Accelerated Physical and Emotional Burnout:** The dual burden of both leading efforts to bring back their loved one and caring for the household and remaining family members creates a substantial mental and physical toll. In addition to the unrelenting grief over their loved one's fate, many interviewees described how juggling daily responsibilities alongside the ongoing, urgent struggle to recover the bodies for burial depletes their personal resources, leading to exhaustion and burnout.
5. **Effects on Physical Health:** Many interviewees reported eating disorders and weight fluctuations. Some described experiencing weight loss in the initial months following the kidnapping, due to loss of appetite and lack of time to eat while dedicating all their efforts to the struggle to bring back their loved ones, which continues to this day. Others reported emotional eating as a reaction to the constant stress and uncertainty, which persists as long as there is no closure.

Most interviewees, including those whose loved ones have not yet been returned for burial, reported severe, persistent sleep disturbances since October 7, due to acute stress and hyperarousal, which make falling asleep extremely difficult. In many cases, sleep was

described as shallow and fragmented, lasting only a few hours per night (3-4 hours). Some rely on medications and psychiatric treatment to obtain even minimal rest.

These prolonged challenges also contribute to a weakened immune system. Many interviewees reported feelings of extreme fatigue, body pain, and recurring illnesses such as colds and infections. Additionally, some reported developing stress-related illnesses, including cardiac conditions and the onset or worsening of autoimmune diseases and other preexisting health conditions. Reports also indicate an increase in dependency on tobacco and other substances, posing a significant long-term health risk. There is a real concern regarding reduced life expectancy as a result of these conditions.

6. **Cognitive Difficulties:** In addition to the physical and emotional effects, many interviewees reported experiencing cognitive difficulties, primarily problems with concentration and memory. Some described persistent confusion, attributed to the overwhelming mental and emotional strain.
7. **Occupational Functioning:** The majority of interviewees have not returned to work since the kidnapping, finding employment unrealistic under conditions of extreme uncertainty and ongoing distress. For those whose loved ones have not been returned for burial, a "tunnel vision" effect—in which all energy is focused solely on the effort to bring them home—prevents them from maintaining a work routine. Others struggle to function due to deteriorating mental and physical health, which makes it difficult to sustain employment. Among those whose loved ones have been returned and buried, those who resumed working reported reduced working hours and lower productivity, due to the emotional burden and overwhelming sense of emptiness.
8. **Effects on Children and Parenting Challenges:** Interviewees described significant difficulties explaining the traumatic events to their children. Some children were directly exposed to life-threatening danger alongside their parents or witnessed the kidnapping of a parent or family member. The emotional distress of children manifests in heightened need for parental presence, refusal to attend school, and severe emotional outbursts. Additional challenges emerged in explaining the status of their loved ones as "hostage," "deceased," or "deceased-hostage," particularly given developmental differences in children's cognitive understanding. Some interviewees also expressed frustration with the education system, stating that it failed to provide adequate guidance in addressing the situation or long-term emotional support for children from hostage families.
9. **Difficulties in Family Dynamics:** Most families struggle with significant changes in family dynamics and relationships. While some reported that the trauma of the kidnapping fostered a sense of closeness and unity, others described how it sparked conflicts among family members regarding how to proceed with the struggle—even after receiving the death notification. Differences in how individuals process grief further intensify familial tensions.

10. **Self-Neglect:** In this reality, the personal health and well-being of family members of deceased hostages—whether they have been returned for burial or not—are often pushed aside, as the struggle to bring their loved ones home remains the central focus of their lives. The neglect of their own health and avoidance of self-care is not only due to a lack of time or resources but also stems from psychological and emotional mechanisms that prevent them from prioritizing their own well-being.

The lack of motivation and difficulty initiating routine activities means that many avoid scheduling medical appointments or seeking therapy. For many, the sense of urgency in the struggle to bring back their loved ones consumes their time and energy, leaving no room for personal care. In addition, self-devaluation makes matters worse, as some feel that taking care of personal needs is an unjustified "luxury" that contradicts the urgency of their fight. Some interviewees noted improvements in access to services through various institutions (National Insurance, HMOs, and the Hostages Administration), while others continue to struggle with long waiting times and difficulty obtaining the assistance they need. This situation requires a systemic response to ensure tailored support, enabling families to cope with the physical, emotional, and bureaucratic challenges they face.

F. Summary

This report examines the emotional, health, and functional implications for families of hostages who were declared deceased following the terrorist attack carried out by Hamas on October 7. The mourning process of these families is characterized by unique aspects, including disrupted traumatic bereavement, ongoing ambiguous loss, and lack of closure—as long as the deceased are not returned for burial—which further intensify the challenges of daily emotional and functional coping. It is important to note that even in cases where the deceased has been buried, the multiple risk factors outlined above contribute to disruptions in the grieving process, leading to complexities that may persist beyond the expected mourning period. Furthermore, as long as the struggle to return all hostages continues, the recovery and mourning processes remain suspended even for families who have received their loved ones for burial but continue to fight as part of the psychological family of hostage families, representing for them the ongoing trauma and unresolved loss.

Additionally, the lack of sufficient recognition of these families' unique status—by the authorities, the media, and society—further exacerbates their distress. The gaps in emotional and functional support, the sense of abandonment by the state, and the lack of tailored support frameworks for accompanying the families of deceased hostages create a deep sense of isolation in grief and increase the risk of developing significant psychological and physical disorders. These factors negatively impact the continuity of grief processing, hinder the ability to process loss, and delay the closure needed for emotional healing and adaptation to a new reality.

It should be emphasized that this new and unique status emerged after October 7 and is not fully recognized in Israel, especially not at this scale, combination of factors, or with such severe

disruptions. Viewing the situation of kidnapping victims through conventional categories such as "*victims of hostile acts*" or "*bereaved families*" fails to capture the reality they face. These existing classifications do not encompass the trauma of abduction, the period of captivity, the murder, the profound feelings of abandonment, betrayal, and helplessness, the disrupted mourning process, and the lack of burial among hostage families, each of which carries unique psychological complexities at this stage.

G. Recommendations

Based on the above, we call for **the development of appropriate solutions for the families of deceased hostages** and propose the following recommendations:

1. **Immediate return of all deceased hostages for burial:** The state must continue to work towards the immediate return of all deceased hostages held in Gaza, out of moral, national, and personal responsibility to bring them to a dignified burial in Israel. For the families, this is about gaining certainty and allowing their loved ones—and themselves—eternal rest. Without the return of all deceased hostages, the recovery process is hindered not only for the families but also for the entire bereaved community and Israeli society as a whole. This commitment must be publicly expressed, while upholding the families' right to closure and their ability to grieve.
2. **Raising public and media awareness:** It is essential to ensure that the crisis of deceased hostages remains an integral part of public discourse and the overall struggle to return all hostages. Public engagement with the issue must continue even after the death notification and not fade from national consciousness. This can be achieved through ongoing media coverage, the promotion of relevant government policies, and a national dialogue that underscores the continuous responsibility of the state and society towards the families.
3. **Sensitivity in public and media discourse:** It is recommended that families be consulted on how they wish their loved one to be referred to (e.g., some families may prefer the term "*deceased-hostage*", while others may wish to maintain only "*hostage*", or decide whether to use "*of blessed memory*" (ל"ר)). Sensitivity in language choices can help prevent additional emotional distress for the families.
4. **Full institutional recognition of the families' status and needs:** A formal and unique status must be established for families of deceased hostages, reflecting official and societal recognition of their distinct situation. The response must be trauma-informed and sensitive, including the resolution of bureaucratic issues (e.g., keeping the hostage's name listed as alive on their parents' ID card until they are returned to Israel). Such recognition should lead to necessary adjustments across various aspects of life, ensuring psychological, medical, social, occupational, and financial support.

Eligibility for support should extend beyond parents and spouses to include siblings, as they too have had their lives profoundly disrupted by the trauma of abduction and the struggle to

bring their loved ones home. The duration of available assistance must be extended, as the lack of time and emotional capacity to grieve and rebuild (especially when the deceased has not been returned) extends far beyond the conventional short-term allocations.

5. **Commemoration, recognition, and support groups:** Activities should be organized to maintain awareness of the hostages who have not yet been buried, and later ensure diverse forms of commemoration that honor the deceased and provide community support structures to help families cope with grief and loss together.
6. **Improving protocols for death notifications and information dissemination:** The current reality disrupts the standard procedures for delivering death notifications and creates unique challenges in determining death. There is an urgent need to adjust existing protocols with the necessary caution and sensitivity, ensuring dignity, privacy, and mental well-being for the families. Given the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the return of deceased hostages, a dedicated and specialized mechanism must be rapidly developed to allow families who wish to receive all relevant information to do so and to provide the option for a designated professional representative to be present in these processes, fostering trust and transparency.
7. **Comprehensive, long-term multidisciplinary support and rehabilitation:** A tailored rehabilitation and support framework must be established to provide multi-system assistance to the families, including:
 - **Access to long-term psychological care:** for families experiencing traumatic bereavement, which often extends far beyond the conventional one-year mourning period.
 - **Proactive access to healthcare services:** to enable family members to care for themselves and maintain their physical and mental well-being, including specialized interventions for sleep disorders, eating disturbances, and substance dependency.
 - **Vocational support and professional rehabilitation programs:** to facilitate a gradual return to the workforce, tailored to the personal needs of each family member.
 - **Family and community support structures:** including guidance on relationships, parenting, and coping strategies to rebuild family life.

The return of the deceased hostages is, first and foremost, a moral and ethical imperative—a profound obligation to the deceased, their families, and Israeli society as a whole. The public, bearing witness to this traumatic loss and sharing in the pain of the hostage families, feels a deep sense of collective responsibility toward the national memory. The way to address the disruption caused by loss is to correct it—through synchronized processes, in which the burial and farewell ceremonies of the deceased give meaning to the loss and contribute to national healing and recovery.

As a nation, we do not forget our fallen—we bring them home for burial, we say our goodbyes, we commemorate them, and in doing so, we forge the meaning and ethos necessary for continued existence and renewal.

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Appendix A: Legal and Humanitarian Aspects

The reality in which the families of deceased hostages must cope with traumatic loss is further complicated by the violation of their right to know the fate of their loved ones and ensure them a dignified burial. This is not only a moral issue but a serious breach of international law, which mandates the provision of information to families and the return of deceased hostages. **This document is based on the report *Hostage-Taking as Torture* (Hostage and Missing Families Forum & IJL, 2024), submitted to the United Nations by the Hostages and Missing Families Forum and the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists (IJL).** The report analyzes the legal implications of abduction, captivity, and the holding of both live and deceased hostages, as well as their impact. The use of deceased hostages as bargaining chips is not just a theoretical legal issue but also a source of ongoing psychological distress and a barrier to the families' mourning process [1].

This document focuses on the legal and humanitarian aspects of holding deceased hostages, emphasizing the families' right to know the fate of their loved ones and ensure them a dignified burial. The discussion addresses the consequences of withholding information and failing to return deceased hostages, based on international law. This analysis does not focus on the classification of the conflict as an international armed conflict (IAC) or a non-international armed conflict (NIAC) but rather on the legal and humanitarian implications for the families of deceased hostages.

The holding of hostages—whether alive or deceased—constitutes a grave violation of human rights and international humanitarian law. International law recognizes the right of families to know the fate of their loved ones and to ensure them a proper burial. Article 32 of the First Geneva Convention (1949) states that *"parties to a conflict must record and preserve information about casualties, wounded, prisoners, and missing persons, and transmit this information to their families as soon as possible"* [2]. Article 33 of the Third Geneva Convention requires that information on prisoners of war be provided, and its obstruction is considered a serious violation [3].

According to the report, the holding of deceased hostages by Hamas and other terrorist organizations in Gaza is not only a violation of international law but also causes severe psychological suffering to the families. The continuous denial of information creates extreme mental distress, anxiety, and depression, leading to dysfunction at personal, social, and economic levels [1]. The report emphasizes that this situation constitutes psychological torture under international law, as families of the deceased hostages remain without information about their loved ones, unable to properly mourn, and denied justice [1].

When Hamas holds deceased hostages and withholds information about their status, whereabouts, or even their deaths, this constitutes a blatant violation of the laws of war and inflicts severe psychological suffering on the families—a situation that violates Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) [4]. Additionally, the withholding of deceased hostages without providing information to their families constitutes enforced disappearance, as defined by the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), which in Article 17 prohibits the denial of information to the families of the missing [5].

Under the laws of armed conflict, the holding of deceased hostages is illegitimate and may constitute a war crime. Article 8(2)(b)(xxi) of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court states that "*outrages upon personal dignity, including mistreatment of the dead or denial of proper burial, may constitute a war crime*" [6]. Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions mandates humane treatment of all non-combatants, including prisoners and the wounded, and prohibits disrespect for or desecration of their bodies [7].

UN Security Council Resolution 2474 (2019) obligates parties to a conflict to take all possible measures to locate, identify, and return the deceased to their families. This resolution is grounded in international humanitarian law principles, which require parties to a conflict to respect the dignity of the deceased and provide their families with information about their fate [8].

In this context, enforced disappearance harms not only the hostages themselves but also their families, who are recognized as victims in their own right. International tribunals have acknowledged that withholding information about a person's fate inflicts significant suffering on their relatives, which amounts to torture under international law.

The denial of information and the failure to return deceased hostages is not only a grave violation of international law but also causes prolonged distress for their families. Depriving them of the right to know the truth about their loved ones and preventing the return of the deceased denies them the ability to engage in a proper mourning process, leaving them in a state of continuous uncertainty that deeply affects their mental and social well-being.

These consequences are not merely legal issues—they constitute a real and ongoing harm to the families of the deceased hostages. In this situation, it is not just a legal right to know the fate of their loved ones, but a fundamental human need to provide them with a dignified burial and put an end to their prolonged suffering.

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