‘Now You’re Dead’: Freed Hostage Recounts Captivity in Gaza

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/16/world/middleeast/keith-siegel-israel-hostage-hamas-gaza-interview.html>

Hamas gunmen picked the female hostage out from a cluster of captives in an apartment in Gaza. They threatened her with a pistol and led her away into a separate room. Then they commanded Keith Siegel to follow.

It had been about a month since Mr. Siegel, the woman and roughly 250 others were kidnapped on Oct. 7, 2023, during the Hamas-led attack that set off the war with Israel. The conditions of their captivity in Gaza were unbearable, Mr. Siegel said. Meals were intermittent. Water was scarce. And any failure to follow their captors’ instructions risked violent retribution.

As Mr. Siegel stepped into the room, panic washed over him: He found himself in the audience of a “medieval-style” trial by torture, he said.

The woman had been bound, and the guards were beating her with primitive tools. They demanded that she “tell the truth,” Mr. Siegel said. He was instructed to assist with getting a confession.

“I was told to go into the room and to tell the person that the torturing will continue until they admit what they were being accused of,” he said.

The episode was one of many that defined the horrific experience that Mr. Siegel, an Israeli American originally from North Carolina, and his fellow hostages endured in captivity. Mr. Siegel [was released on Feb. 1](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/01/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-keith-siegel-hostage-release.html), after 484 days as a hostage, as part of a short-lived cease-fire deal between Israel and Hamas. Another 59 hostages remain in Gaza, with around 35 presumed by the Israeli government to be dead.

Since Mr. Siegel’s release, Israel has resumed its military campaign in Gaza. More than 50,000 Palestinians have been killed in the enclave throughout the war, according to Gazan health authorities, who do not distinguish between civilians and combatants. About 1,200 people were killed in Israel during the 2023 attack that started the war, Israeli officials say.

In his encounter with the female hostage being tortured, Mr. Siegel felt powerless to assist. It seemed like nothing he said could dissuade their captors from continuing the abuse.

“I was feeling that I’m in a situation where I want to help this woman and to get her out of this horrible, horrendous situation that she’s in, that we’re in, and just felt helpless,” he said.

Now that he is free and working on his recovery, Mr. Siegel is determined to draw attention to the plight of those still captive in Gaza.

He and his wife, Aviva Siegel, who was also taken captive to Gaza but was released during a cease-fire in November 2023, have made frequent public appearances. On Israeli media and in an appearance on “60 Minutes,” Mr. Siegel has called for international help to secure the hostages’ release. Last week, he and Ms. Siegel appeared with President Trump at a National Republican Congressional Committee dinner to thank him for his role in the most recent round of hostage releases.

In an interview with The New York Times, Mr. Siegel, 65, described the physical and psychological distress he and his fellow hostages endured at the hands of their captors. He outlined a pattern of abuse similar to [what other released hostages have said about their time in captivity](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/25/world/middleeast/israeli-hostage-gaza-campaign.html).

Some months after witnessing the female hostage’s torture, Mr. Siegel’s captors forced him to deliver a video message. He desperately hoped to use the opportunity to project strength to his family, he said, but he broke down in tears during filming.

Mr. Siegel hoped that his captors would cut that scene. Instead, it featured prominently in the final video, which he saw by chance a few days later in an Al Jazeera broadcast on his captors’ TV. Mr. Siegel was heartbroken and severely distressed, he said. He could not improve his circumstances, but he had at least hoped to allay his family’s anxiety.

“That was very, very hard for me to think that my family would see that,” Mr. Siegel said.

Rights groups and international law experts say that such hostage videos are, by definition, [made under duress](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/10/gaza-hostage-videos-outrage-personal-dignity). On Wednesday, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, another group involved in the 2023 attack on Israel, released a video that appeared to show one of the remaining hostages in Gaza. In it, a man pleads for his release. He describes severe conditions and shows wounds on his body.

The Hostages and Missing Families Forum, a group that represents the relatives of many captives, identified the man as Rom Braslavski, 21. Mr. Braslavski [was working at the Tribe of Nova music festival](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/13/world/middleeast/israel-oct-7-nova-festival-memorial-day.html) in Israel, near its border with Gaza, on the day of the attack, the group said.

The video appears to match Mr. Siegel’s description of worsening conditions in captivity as the war progressed. After the collapse of the cease-fire in which Mr. Siegel’s wife was freed, the militants became increasingly agitated and violent toward him, he said.

Days and months passed. Over the course of his time in captivity, different guards cycled through, and Mr. Siegel was whisked between hiding locations over 30 times, he said. He was sometimes kept with fellow hostages, other times for months on his own.

During a stretch in a tunnel more than 100 feet below the streets of Gaza, Mr. Siegel found himself gasping for air, desperate to get out.

“I thought about death many times in that tunnel,” he said.

One day in late January, as Mr. Siegel was lying down in a small, dark and windowless locked room, one of his captors approached him, clutching a pistol and insisting that Mr. Siegel take it from him, Mr. Siegel said. When he declined to do so, his captor pointed the pistol at Mr. Siegel’s face and threatened to kill him.

“He pretended as if he was shooting me, and he said, ‘Now you’re dead,’” Mr. Siegel said.

The captor then turned the gun on himself. In that moment, Mr. Siegel worried how the other captors would respond if he pulled the trigger.

“If he kills himself, the other terrorists will be sure that I shot him, and then what’s going to happen to me?” Mr. Siegel said he had thought to himself.

The man laughed and left, locking the door behind him.

Throughout his time in Gaza, Mr. Siegel’s captors would spit on him and scream at him, he said. They would kick him as he lay on the floor and withhold food from him and other hostages, even as the captors ate.

To try to cope with the persistent stress, keep his mind sharp and pass the long stretches that he spent alone, Mr. Siegel made sure to keep track of the date and the number of days he had been in captivity, repeating it to himself several times throughout each day.

The hostages still in Gaza have been there 558 days. Mr. Siegel cannot rest, he said, until the count has ended and all the hostages have returned.

“This occupies me, my mind, every day from morning to night and throughout the night when I wake up many times,” he said.