

Terrorists deny bodies final rest BY STEVEN B. NASATIR

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Today I am moved to weep in sorrow, and to scream in outrage.

This is a long story with a sad ending and a hard message for us Americans as our forces engage in a war against terrorism.

Almost one year ago to the day, three Israeli families--two Jewish and one Muslim--stood before a packed audience at the UIC Pavilion and made a simple, heart-wrenching plea in words any civilized human being could understand.

"We want as parents to know if our sons are alive, who took them, and when they will be released," said my friend, Chaim Avraham, fighting back tears, on behalf of the group.

Chaim's son Binyamin, Adi Avitan and Omar Sawaid were young soldiers patrolling Israel's side of the United Nations-certified border when they were kidnapped by Hezbollah, the Lebanese-based Islamist terror organization, which gets money and marching orders from Damascus and Tehran.

The parents--with Mayor Daley, Gov. Ryan, Sen. Dick Durbin, Israel's then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak, myself and others at their side--addressed thousands here to attend a national Jewish community gathering about the terrible plight of their children. They sought to enlist the help and support of anyone and everyone who would hear their story.

We now have, I'm sad to report, the probable answer to Chaim's most crucial question: whether or not the young men are alive. According to new Israeli intelligence, the young men are "almost certainly" dead. The Israeli army's chief rabbi, after consulting that country's top Jewish and Islamic religious authorities, has just ruled to that effect. (While the Avitan and Avraham families accepted the ruling, the Sawaid family did not, saying that under Muslim law, a person cannot be pronounced dead without a body or with the statements of two witnesses who have seen the body.)

Difficult as it is for the parents to accept, the truth is that their children, like all too many Israelis before them, at best will be coming home in coffins. That is, if their killers grant even that most elementary human dignity. Hezbollah and other such terror groups maintain virtual silence about the state of their captives. Even when the awful truth comes out, they always demand a high price to return the bodies of those they abducted and killed.

Words escape me when I try to grasp the merciless nature of the terrorists who abducted these young men, apparently killed them, withheld any information about their condition, cruelly continued to speak to intermediaries as though they were alive (the latest intelligence is that the men died during or shortly after their capture), and even now deprive their parents and loved ones of definitive closure.

For more than a year, the thoughts and prayers of Chicago's Jewish community have been with the kidnapped young men. We initiated an international campaign to wear blue ribbons to remind ourselves and others of their plight. We advocated on their behalf to our elected representatives, who also took up their cause, with Mark Kirk and Jan Schakowsky taking the lead in the House and Peter Fitzgerald in the Senate. With the help of American Red Cross officials we urged the United Nations and U.S. and foreign diplomats to investigate their fate. Now that the worst case seems to be true, can we find meaning in Avi's, Binyamin's and Omar's

likely deaths? I'm afraid we can, given the events of Sept. 11 and their aftermath.

Now America is fighting an enemy cut of the same cloth as Hezbollah, a terrorist enemy who in the name of religion kills and maims with impunity, targeting so-called infidels while also indiscriminately killing their own co-religionists; an enemy who cynically violates the norms of civilized behavior and the tenets of Islam while appealing for others' sympathy, an enemy who is ready to choose his own death while aiming to destroy us.

As Americans, we must come to grips with the true nature of an enemy who won't tell you for over a year whether the loved one he has murdered is alive or dead.

All who stand for human decency and dignity, like those sad, brave parents, must cry out in moral outrage and must strengthen our resolve, knowing the only viable option is victory.

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