Photo by Or Many

The Israel Police ***Crisis Negotiation Unit***

It's midnight; Mira is just about to get into bed when the phone rings. When she answers, someone tells her a man has barricaded himself and his children in his apartment with a gas tank. Five minutes later Mira is in her car and on her way. • Friday night. Benny's beeper goes off during dinner. The message: a man caught stealing at work is threatening to kill himself with a pistol. Benny apologizes to his wife and children, and leaves his warm dinner for a cold sandwich, which he will eat in his car as he drives to the location of the unfolding incident. • David is vacationing in the north of Israel when he is informed that a young girl at a nearby town is threatening to commit suicide because of unrequited love. David switches from his bathing suit into work clothes and travels to the location of the incident.

Some 60 police officers, men and women, do this routine regularly. During holidays, nights, weekends and busy weekdays at the office, they rush to respond to people held up in their homes, making threats to murder or commit suicide. The officers leave everything and go wherever the beeper tells them – all on a voluntary basis. They are not looking for a fight and do not want to attack or make threats. Their goal: negotiate with the individual in question and bring the situation to a peaceful end.

Not Just Hostages

December 2013, the city of Ashkelon, 2:30 PM. A woman arrives at the local police station and says her brother-in-law has barricaded himself in her apartment, together with her four-year-old daughter. She says he will not let the daughter leave and she is afraid he will hurt her. Police officers arrive at the apartment and make contact with the suspect. When he refuses to open the door and the officers feel the girl's life is in danger, the negotiation unit is called to the scene.

Back in time, the year is 1974, the place, the northern Israeli town of Ma'alot. A terrorist cell is on a killing spree in and around the town. At night, they reach a high school in the nearby city of Safed. The terrorists had planned to set an ambush for the students in the morning, but they discover that there are already 102 students having a sleepover at the school. The students are taken hostage and the terrorists demand the release of 20 prisoners in exchange for the release of the students. Just a few hours later, the incident ends tragically with the deaths of 22 students and an IDF soldier, all killed during a rescue attempt. A commission is established to investigate the incident, and it recommends transferring the authority over public security to the Israel Police,

An Inside Look

By Roni Malul-Hecht

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Photo by Or Many

as well as the establishment of the YAMAM Counter-Terrorism Unit, a sapper unit and a crisis negotiation unit. Four years later the crisis negotiation unit is established. Its original purpose was to save hostages in terrorist situations, but, over the years, it became apparent that the unit was needed for other situations as well.

"While we prepare for the worst – terrorist hostage situations – because thankfully these are few and far between, we also deal with other situations," says B., commander of the unit. "We deal with missing persons, people threatening to commit suicide, interrogations at crime scenes, criminal profiling, kidnappings and people showing signs of distress on social media. These are all extremely important and these scenarios keep us better prepared for hostage situations."

Almost daily, the volunteer officers of the unit are called to speak to people holed up or threatening to kill themselves. "Our actions often prevent tragedies," says B. "The volunteer officers in the unit know how to speak to these people, and how to reach out to them. We listen to the person, build up his self-confidence, and eventually help him get out of the situation he is in."

The Key is Empathy

Back to Ashkelon. The negotiation team arrives and immediately begins collecting information on the suspect. The police officers speak with the young girl's mother. The suspect is apparently mentally unstable. They learn about his personality and attempt to collect as much information about him and his relationship with his niece as possible. They construct a profile of the suspect – what is his motivation, what will get his attention and what they should avoid mentioning.

The negotiation unit responds to over 250 incidents annually. The incidents are varied and stem from many different circumstances – a bank robbery in Be'er Sheba, a shooting in Eilat, a knife fight between brothers, a couple whose home was slated for demolition, a teenager whose heart was broken and is threatening to commit suicide, an IDF wounded veteran with nothing left to his name. They can be holed up in a room with a gas tank, a gun or knife, be standing on a bridge or crane, and be alone or with other people they are holding hostage.

"The goal is, first of all, to listen to them, and give them the feeling that they are not alone, and that we are here listening," says Liav, a training officer for the

unit. "Eventually they hear what we are saying. We express empathy and demonstrate that we respect their feelings – which are genuinely difficult. We recognize the difficulty they are going through and respect their pain. We all go through tough times and we've all fallen apart at some point in our lives."

Aside from these incidents, there are some 300 suicide threats identified over the internet each year. Individuals or NGOs report suicidal threats from the internet, and members of the unit race against the clock to locate the individual making the threats and speak to him and help him choose an alternative to suicide.

"On average, there is at least one incident a day in which the unit is called," says Liav. "And there are days with many more incidents. Just last week we had four incidents in one night. You can't push it off until the morning or put your phone on silent and go back to sleep. Every incident is real, and every situation is someone's life, in danger."

Around the Clock

Ashkelon; 4 PM. Members of the unit have gotten the suspect to talk. At first, like all of them, he did not want to cooperate. But slowly, little by little, a conversation has developed. At first he refused to verify the girl's safety, but the members of the unit have convinced him to prove that she is okay. Based on the conversation with the suspect, the members of the unit are convinced the girl is not in serious danger at the moment.

The unit is made up of 10 full-time police officers, and each one, from the secretary to the commander, is trained in negotiating. "It doesn't matter who answers the phone when a call comes in, he'll know what to do," explains Liav. So how do just 10 people deal with hundreds of incidents? About 60 police officers and civilians volunteer their time and good will, and serve in the unit in addition to their day jobs. The volunteers come from all walks of life and professional backgrounds. The only things in common are their ability to speak, empathize and be sensitive.

'Every incident is real and every situation is someone's life, in danger.' (Photo: Or Many)

"Our volunteers are located throughout the country," says Liav. "At any given moment, anywhere in the country, we have someone available." Despite the need for volunteers, getting accepted into the unit is no simple task. B., the commander of the unit, says they cannot compromise. "We don't have a lot of people, but the ones we do accept are the best. We make no compromises and have no room for mistakes. It's a very sensitive role, and we need the best people for the job."

Not Something that can be Taught

One of the volunteers, 52-year-old Sergeant Major Betzalel Mizrahi, has been serving as a police officer for 26 years. He currently serves in Tel Aviv in an organized crime unit. "Three years ago I decided to become a volunteer in the crisis negotiation unit," he relates. "I wanted to do more, to help."

As a full-time police officer, how did you have time?

"There isn't much, but for something as important as this, I find the time. I don't go to every call, but I go to as many as I can. It's really satisfying."

But isn't being a regular police officer enough? Don't you see enough difficulties and tragedies?

"I deal with a lot of bad things, but that's exactly why I decided to help people who are truly in distress, who have lost all hope. They are usually not bad people."

But often they threaten to hurt other people?

"You have a person who is in distress, who feels the whole world is closing in on him and he has no one to turn to. He feels stuck, and the only solution he can think of is suicide. He's lost."

It sounds like you are speaking about a specific person.

"Yes. We had an incident with an IDF wounded veteran that I can't shake from my memory. As a result of an injury and trauma he experienced in the Lebanon War, a trustee was appointed to take care of his finances. The trustee exploited him until he was almost penniless. A person like that has no one to rely on. He barricaded himself in his home with his mother, and had a knife and pistol. He's not a bad person; he wasn't a criminal or murderer. He was just lost. His act was a call for help."

So what did you do?

"We spoke with him and we tried reaching out to him, to convince him that not everything was lost and that he still had a reason to live. He eventually changed his mind, and I even helped him get in touch with officials at the Ministry of Defense."

How do you know the right thing to say?

"From years of experience. Not just as a negotiator but as a police officer. It's not something you can be taught; I believe you either have it or you don't. Like a salesman – you'll have trouble trying to sell even the best product if you don't know the right way to approach someone, to pique their interest or present it to them the right way."

Is it difficult for you?

"To tell you the truth – yes. You keep this stuff with you when you go home. You are dealing with people in severe distress. I show up at rundown homes, everything is rotten and grimy, the things in the refrigerator are covered in mold. It's upsetting."

A Lesson for Life

Ashkelon; 5:30 PM. Three hours have passed and the negotiation team is worried they will not reach a solution. The suspect seems confused and does not appear to be thinking straight. The negotiation team is beginning to worry about the girl trapped in the house and they have lost sight of her. They inform the commander, who gives a sign to the YAMAM Counter-Terrorism forces positioned on the roof.

"A police officer who enters the negotiation unit and undergoes the training can negotiate with anyone," says B. "I've learned new techniques for speaking with my teenage daughter. We have a relationship that wouldn't exist had I not learned how to listen, how to ask a question in a way that won't be perceived by her as an accusation. I'll no longer ask her, 'Why didn't you do your homework;' now I ask her 'How much homework do you still have to do?' And you wouldn't believe the difference it makes. These may sound like simplistic techniques, but they can make a world of difference. And it doesn't stop at home," explains B. "It helps me when I'm looking to buy an apartment and when I'm at work. I and all the other members of the unit know how to communicate a message so that it will not only be received in the best possible way, but will also lead the listener to ask the questions we want him to ask."

Chief Inspector Moran Tadgi, aged 31, describes the same ability. She is an officer in the southern city of Dimona, and has been volunteering in the unit for two years. "Why break in when they can just open the door for you?" she asks. "If there is a criminal situation or someone is acting wildly and poses a threat, of course we have the authority and the ability to use force. But before we do, we can try speaking to the individual and attempt to understand what the problem is. If you look the person in the eye and take an interest in him, it will calm him down. Isn't that a better way? Why deploy a tactical unit when you can extract someone quietly? Negotiations can solve many difficult scenarios. Truthfully, in the past I might have been quick to break in and call for backup; but today, through speech and the tools I learned in the unit, I can often end situations peacefully."

Does the work in the unit contribute to your personal life?

"Without a doubt."

How so?

"It's made me remove some of the walls I've built around myself all these years."

What do you mean?

"When I am negotiating, I transform from an authoritative police officer, who knows the ins and outs of the law, into someone without a uniform and rank. I've also learned that life and death can be decided by the tongue. In every situation, whether at work or in life, the quickest way to solve a problem is through speech; through a conversation."

A Matter of Experience

Ashkelon, 5:45 PM. The YAMAM team needs more time to get ready. The negotiation team must keep the suspect talking. If the conversation ends, they know he might hurt the girl or himself. "The art of negotiation is to keep talking to the suspect, even when he doesn't want to," says B. "Speaking to someone can be like sand slipping through your fingers. Our goal is to keep the conversation going; the moment he stops talking to us, he may return to his original plans."

As a commander, have you been involved in negotiations yourself?

"Of course. A number of times I have spoken to suspects and opened up to them, told them about my problems, demonstrating that they aren't alone. I've said many times that I am scared or that I'm having a difficult time. These aren't things you would normally hear combat personnel say, but this is a job that requires a great amount of sensitivity, a love of mankind, and the ability not just to get the suspect to talk, but to tell him how you feel and what you're going through yourself."

That is why, according to B. and Liav, the unit seeks people who have gone through difficulties themselves, and have managed to overcome them; police officers who experienced tragedies and are not afraid to talk about it. "We encounter people at the brink, at their most difficult moment. So we need people in the unit who will truly understand them, who can bring their own pain to the scene," says Liav.

"A man wants to commit suicide because his wife took the kids from him. In order to begin to understand what he is going through, you have to understand what something like that would do to you, to lose your child. If you don't have children, how will you identify with him? You have to listen, to truly listen, with your ears and your heart. Our main tool is empathy – identifying with the person, understanding, and truthfulness. It takes life experience; it's not something you can just be taught."

So young people are not accepted into the unit?

"No. It's probably one of the only places where age is a clear advantage."

Because they haven't suffered enough?

"Because they haven't been through enough. Imagine if a young man has to speak to someone my age. With all due respect, what does he know about debt, mortgages, alimony? And what if he has to speak to someone even older than me? Or an Arab, where in his culture, respect and age are even more significant? You cannot negotiate with someone if you are 24 years old, it doesn't work. If someone is telling you about the difficulty in caring for a baby, you have to be able to understand what they're talking about. You need maturity and life experience."

Making a Difference

Ashkelon, 6 PM. The YAMAM team is ready for action, but in order for their mission to be a success, the suspect needs to stand by the balcony and look away from the point of entry. The negotiation team knows that success is largely dependent on their ability to hold the suspect's attention.

"Sometimes it's difficult," admits the unit's commander. "You see people in difficult situations. You live in your own little bubble, with your wife and kids, you have a paycheck; then suddenly you meet people who are in a much worse place. It's not easy, and it's difficult to leave it behind when you're done. However, the work we do in the unit provides you with tools for society, for your family, for everyday life; and you can really reach people. But most of all, the unit really gives you a sense of satisfaction. To get a 16 year old to take the

YAMAM Counter-Terrorism officers in a training exercise. (Courtesy, Israel Border Police)

noose off his neck and walk away is something you can't describe. You go home and you know that you directly saved a life today.

What exactly are you looking for in a volunteer?

"Police officers who have served for at least five years in the Israel Police. We give preference to those from a field background, especially intelligence, investigations and officers who operate confidential informants. We also like people who have experience in takeover missions. But we have all types of officers in our unit: horsemen, patrol officers, K-9 police; whoever is best for the job. We won't accept young officers and we always aim for diversity – married and single, secular and religious, different sexual preferences, Druze, Christians, Muslims – it's a definite advantage. Someone in distress responds better to someone who looks and sounds like him, someone who can really understand him."

According to Liav, no condition is absolute. "As long as the person can listen, show empathy and get you talking. What we are insistent about is that our people are not judgmental; that they are open to all types of lifestyles, no matter how different they may be from their own. And a big heart, that's something we won't compromise on."

Back to Ashkelon. The sign is given, and while the negotiation team draws the suspect's attention, five YAMAM officers repel down from the roof of the building. Two stop on top of the balcony, a third stops next to it. Before the suspect realizes what is happening, stun grenades are thrown in to the apartment. The suspect is surprised, and two officers easily overtake him. At the same time, two officers repel down the side of the building, break through the windows and reach the girl being held inside. The mission is a success.

Eli, deputy commander of the negotiation team at the scene, is satisfied, but not completely. "It's always better to end a situation through dialogue rather than force, even if the mission is successful and there are no casualties."