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Some experts say the kidnapping points to a rift in the ruling Hamas party.

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RAMALLAH, West Bank -- Making the initial move in a delicate and dangerous dance, Palestinian extremists holding an Israeli soldier in the Gaza Strip issued their first demands since his abduction Sunday in a cross-border raid.

In exchange for information on 19-year-old Gilad Shalit's condition, the militants are demanding the release of all female Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, along with all Palestinian detainees under 18 -- a total of about 408 individuals.

Shalit was believed wounded in the attack, but his condition is not thought to be serious.

Analysts predicted the captured soldier would swiftly become a bargaining chip. Two other Israelis were killed in the cross-border raid.

But even among ordinary Palestinians, for whom the prisoners' issue is paramount, there is an uneasy sense that the gunmen holding Shalit are playing with fire this time because Israeli-Palestinian relations have been deteriorating for weeks.

Palestinian Hana Hirzala, 40, a school principal near the West Bank city of Jenin, said the abduction, while almost predictable in the context of rising violence, is an "obstacle" to peace that only puts Palestinians "on the road to something worse."

"People under occupation, facing economic and political siege," might be expected to lash out, she said, "but this will make things more complicated."

Hamas' military wing claimed joint responsibility for Sunday's raid, along with the Popular Resistance Committees and a largely unknown group called the Army of Islam.

Meeting in emergency session, Israel's political-security cabinet instructed the army to begin preparing for a "harsh military response" to secure Shalit's release.

An Israeli naval destroyer along with a large force of infantry backed by dozens of tanks continued to ring the Gaza Strip on Monday.

Israeli intelligence sources said the focus is on preventing the gunmen from smuggling Shalit out of the Gaza Strip, possibly to Lebanon or Syria, where his fate could become even more uncertain.

One party or two?

The Sunday raid also points to an apparent rift inside Hamas between radicals who refuse to recognize Israel in any manner and more pragmatic members.

A senior Israeli military intelligence officer, who was not named by the Israeli daily Haaretz, told the parliament's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee: "At the moment there are differences between Hamas' military wing and Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh [of Hamas] over how to confront the Shalit matter."

Palestinian analyst Hisham Ahmed, an expert on Hamas and political science professor at Birzeit University near Ramallah, concurred.

He said "a more radical splinter group" within Hamas or the other factions appears to be punishing Haniyeh for negotiating a potential national-unity political program with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Ghazi Hamad, a spokesman for the Hamas-led government in Gaza, denied reports of a split inside Hamas, calling them a "big lie," according to the Associated Press.

But he said the government had no prior knowledge of Sunday's raid, and struggled to explain how that could happen in the absence of a rift.

Abbas' Fatah faction supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hamas' charter calls for Israel's destruction.

"Haniyeh is trying hard to arrive at a halfway house," between the Hamas and Fatah positions "and certain elements within the factions did not like that," Ahmed said.

Against the backdrop of intense international diplomatic efforts to free the soldier, including intervention by French and Egyptian officials, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has held off on green-lighting a major military incursion.

At least publicly, Israeli officials maintain they will not bargain for the release of Palestinian prisoners.