



Abduction and murder of Israeli teenagers

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The abduction and murder of three Israeli teenagers in an Israeli-controlled area of the West Bank has led to a dramatic increase in tension in the region. Israel claims that Hamas was responsible for the killings, and Israeli forces have entered Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank to arrest 330 suspects. Hamas, which recently ended its political exile by agreeing to support the new Palestinian technocratic government, has not accepted responsibility. Prior to the discovery of the bodies on 30 June, the Palestinian Authority had agreed to cooperate with the Israeli search effort, but the PA has also criticised the perceived excesses of the Israeli operation, whilst many ordinary Palestinians have protested against the Israeli incursions. Some protests have turned violent, and five Palestinians have been killed in clashes with Israeli forces; another Palestinian boy has been killed in a suspected “revenge” attack by Israeli extremists.

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1 Introduction

The abduction and murder of three Israeli teenagers in an Israeli-controlled area of the West Bank has led to a dramatic increase in tension in the region. Israel claims that Hamas was responsible for the killings, and Israeli forces have entered Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank to arrest 330 suspects. Hamas, which recently ended its political exile by agreeing to support the new Palestinian technocratic government, has not accepted responsibility. Prior to the discovery of the bodies on 30 June, the Palestinian Authority had agreed to cooperate with the Israeli search effort, but the PA has also criticised the perceived excesses of the Israeli operation, whilst many ordinary Palestinians have protested against the Israeli incursions. Some protests have turned violent, and five Palestinians have been killed in clashes with Israeli forces; another Palestinian boy has been killed in a suspected “revenge” attack by Israeli extremists.

2 Kidnapping incident

On the evening of 12 June, three Israeli teenagers disappeared from a spot near the West Bank city of Hebron. Eyal Yifrah (19 years old), Gil-Ad Sha’ar (16) and Naftali Frenkel (16) had been hitch-hiking. Their bodies were found on 30 June, in a shallow grave nearby.¹

3 Suggestion of Hamas involvement

Following the boys’ initial disappearance John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, said:

We are still seeking details on the parties responsible for this despicable terrorist act, although many indications point to Hamas’s involvement. As we gather this information, we reiterate our position that Hamas is a terrorist organisation known for its attacks on innocent civilians and which has used kidnapping in the past.”²

Hamas has not accepted responsibility for the incident.³ However, its first statement on the subject referred to “the success of the kidnapping” and stated that “the movement pays tribute to the heroes who are behind the kidnapping.”⁴

The Prime Minister of Israel, Binyamin Netanyahu, has explicitly blamed Hamas. Speaking before the discovery of the bodies, he said:

Those who perpetrated the abduction of our youths were members of Hamas, the same Hamas that Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority] made a unity government with. This has severe repercussions.⁵

Subsequently, following the discovery of the bodies, Netanyahu said:

Hamas is responsible, and Hamas will pay.⁶

Netanyahu did not, however, provide any evidence to support his claim that Hamas was responsible.

¹ "Israel finds bodies of three missing teenagers in West Bank", *Reuters*, 30 June 2014.

² "U.S. Condemns Kidnapping of Three Israeli Teenagers", *U.S. Department of State*, 15 June 2014.

³ "Hamas denies blame for teens' murders, Gaza braces for Israeli strike", *Haaretz*, 1 July 2014.

⁴ "Hamas kidnapping: Islamist group to blame for youths' 'kidnapping', Benjamin Netanyahu says", *The Telegraph*, 15 June 2014.

⁵ "Kidnapping of teens - Statement by PM Netanyahu", *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 14 June 2014.

⁶ "Bodies of kidnapped teenagers found in West Bank", *Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 30 June 2014.

4 Response by Israeli security forces

4.1 Arrests

Although the boys disappeared in an Israeli-controlled area of the West Bank, Israeli security forces subsequently entered Palestinian-controlled areas and conducted door-to-door searches in the hunt for suspects. (The West Bank has been divided into Israeli-controlled and Palestinian-controlled areas, plus some areas in which control is shared, since the signing of the Oslo Accords in the 1990s.) Much of the operation focused on the city of Hebron.⁷ Door-to-door searches were scaled back from 24 June,⁸ but further searches were launched following the discovery of the bodies on 30 June.⁹

As at 1 July, over 400 suspects had been arrested,¹⁰ of which at least 240 were Hamas members.¹¹ Those arrested included Aziz Dweik, the Hamas-affiliated Speaker of the Palestinian Parliament,¹² and (according to Palestinian officials) seven new Palestinian MPs.¹³ Some members of the Islamic Jihad militant group were also arrested.¹⁴ However, the prime suspects are Marwan Qawasmeh and Amer Abu Aishe, Hamas members from Hebron who remain at large. Their houses were blown up in so-called “punitive house demolitions” by Israeli forces in the early hours of 1 July.¹⁵

4.2 Other measures

Following the boys’ disappearance, Israeli authorities imposed a number of restrictions on residents of Hebron. Initially all entrances to, and exits from, the city were closed, though it was reported on X June that some had reopened. Hebron residents were also barred from crossing the Allenby Bridge, which connects the West Bank with Jordan.¹⁶

Israeli forces also raided the premises of a number of charitable organisations with suspected links to Hamas: examples include the Islamic Charitable Society in Hebron. Reports indicated that Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW) was banned from operating in the West Bank following allegations that it provided funding to Hamas¹⁷ - yet in its statement of 19 June, Islamic Relief categorically denied such links and stated that it had received no communication from the Israeli authorities on the matter.¹⁸

Following the discovery of the bodies, there were reports of divisions in the Israeli cabinet as to how to react. According to the Guardian:

The Israel media reported on Tuesday morning that Netanyahu had faced splits in his Cabinet in its deliberations over how hard to retaliate both for the murders and the increased in rocket fire.

⁷ "Israel steps up West Bank search for missing teens", *Reuters*, 21 June 2014

⁸ "Israel names two Hamas militants as key suspects in kidnappings", *Reuters*, 26 June 2014

⁹ "Suspected Israeli revenge killing of Palestinian triggers clashes", *Reuters*, 2 July 2014

¹⁰ "Israel vows to make Hamas pay for alleged murder of three teenagers", *The Guardian*, 1 July 2014.

¹¹ "Palestinian teenager killed in Israeli arrest raids in West Bank", *The Guardian*, 20 June 2014.

¹² "Israeli forces kill Palestinian during raids", *Aljazeera*, 16 June 2014.

¹³ "Israeli forces tighten grip on West Bank in search for three abducted teenagers", *The Guardian*, 15 June 2014.

¹⁴ "Protection of Civilians: Weekly Report 17 - 23 June 2014", *OCHA*, 23 June 2014.

¹⁵ "Israel names two Hamas militants as key suspects in kidnappings", *Reuters*, 26 June 2014; "Palestinians furious as Israel resumes punitive demolitions", *Reuters*, 1 July 2014.

¹⁶ "Israeli leader meets families of missing teenagers as search continues", *The Guardian*, 17 June 2014; "Gun battle in West Bank as Israeli search for missing teenagers continues", *The Guardian*, 19 June 2014.

¹⁷ "Israel kills Palestinian teen in escalating West Bank arrest raids", *Reuters*, 20 June 2014.

¹⁸ "Statement by Islamic Relief on operations in the Palestinian territories", *Islamic Relief*, 19 June 2014.

Senior officials stated both publicly and privately on Monday night and Tuesday morning that Israel was not seeking an "escalation with Hamas", suggesting that despite the rhetoric and the airstrikes in Gaza, retaliation might be limited. Several analysts in the Israeli media, including Amos Harel in Haaretz, have suggested Netanyahu is not keen to get embroiled in a long conflict with Hamas.¹⁹

5 Response by Palestinian Authority

Following the boys' disappearance, the Palestinian Authority pledged to work together with the Israeli Government to locate them,²⁰ but it also criticised Israel following its incursions into Palestinian-controlled areas. In a statement on X June, President Abbas condemned "the series of events over the last week, beginning with the kidnapping of the three Israeli teens and ending with a series of Israeli violations."²¹

Despite its support for the recently-formed Palestinian Authority (PA) administration, Hamas did not support the idea of PA-Israeli cooperation, describing such a strategy as a "knife in the back."²² Following the discovery of the bodies, Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said: "If the occupiers carry out an escalation or a war, they will open the gates of hell on themselves."²³ One Palestinian official has suggested that – if Hamas is proved to have been responsible for the incident – the new PA administration might collapse.²⁴

6 Protests by Palestinians

The Israeli security operations provoked large-scale protests amongst Palestinians in the West Bank. One Palestinian was killed and another wounded during clashes in Ramallah on 15 June.²⁵ When Israeli forces entered the West Bank city of Jenin on 19 June, protestors opened fire and threw explosives, and Israeli forces returned fire. There Palestinians were injured; there were no Israeli casualties.²⁶ The following day, in the village of Dura near Hebron, protestors threw rocks and firebombs at Israeli forces; the military responded with live fire, killing a 15-year old Palestinian.²⁷ As at 1 July, a total of five Palestinian protestors had been killed in clashes with Israeli forces.²⁸

7 International reaction

Following the discovery of the bodies, UK Prime Minister David Cameron said:

¹⁹ "Israeli jets pound Gaza as Netanyahu blames Hamas for teenagers' deaths", *The Guardian*, 1 July 2014.

²⁰ "Israel ramps up pressure on Hamas in hunt for missing teens", *Reuters*, 1 July 2014.

²¹ "Israel rounds up Hamas members in search for missing teens", *Fox News*, 16 June 2014.

²² "Israel ramps up pressure on Hamas in hunt for missing teens", *Reuters*, 1 July 2014.

²³ "Israeli teenagers: Netanyahu warns Hamas will pay", *The Telegraph*, 30 June 2014.

²⁴ "Bodies of three missing Israeli teenagers found in West Bank", *The Guardian*, 30 June 2014.

²⁵ "Israeli forces tighten grip on West Bank in search for three abducted teenagers", *The Guardian*, 15 June 2014.

²⁶ "Missing Israeli teenagers: Jenin clashes follow arrests", *BBC News*, 19 June 2014.

²⁷ "Israel kills Palestinian teen in escalating West Bank arrest raids", *Reuters*, 20 June 2014.

²⁸ "Israel vows to make Hamas pay for alleged murder of three teenagers", *The Guardian*, 1 July 2014.

This was an appalling and inexcusable act of terror perpetrated against young teenagers. Britain will stand with Israel as it seeks to bring to justice those responsible.²⁹

US President Barack Obama said:

From the outset, I have offered our full support to Israel and the Palestinian Authority to find the perpetrators of this crime and bring them to justice, and I encourage Israel and the PA to continue working together in that effort. I also urge all parties to refrain from steps that could further destabilise the situation.³⁰

8 Suspected “revenge killing” of Palestinian boy

Mohammed Abu Khudair, a 16-year old Palestinian, was found dead in East Jerusalem on 2 July; it was widely suspected he had been the victim of a “revenge attack” by an extremist Israeli group. Further clashes occurred later that day between Israeli forces and rock-throwing Palestinian protestors.³¹

²⁹ ["PM statement following discovery of missing Israeli teenagers"](#), statement from Prime Minister's Office, 30 June 2014.

³⁰ ["Statement by the President on the Deaths of Naftali Fraenkel, Eyal Yifrach, and Gilad Shaar"](#), statement from the White House, 30 June 2014.

³¹ ["Suspected Israeli revenge killing of Palestinian triggers clashes"](#), *Reuters*, 2 July 2014