

Israel-Palestine: Netanyahu Government Knew Kidnapped Teens were Dead as it Whipped Up Racist Frenzy

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

“Cursed be he who says, ‘Avenge!’ “
—Chaim Bialik, from “On The Slaughter”

From the moment three Israeli teens were reported missing last month, Israeli Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) and the country’s military-intelligence apparatus suppressed the flow of information to the general public. Through a toxic blend of propaganda, subterfuge and incitement, they inflamed a precarious situation, manipulating Israelis into supporting their agenda until they made an utterly avoidable nightmare inevitable.

Israeli police, intelligence officials and Netanyahu knew within hours of the kidnapping and murder of the three teens that they had been killed. And they knew who the prime suspects were less than a day after the kidnapping was reported.

Rather than reveal these details to the public, Israel’s [Shin Bet](#) intelligence agency imposed a [gag order](#) on the national media, barring news outlets from reporting that the teens had almost certainly been killed, and forbidding them from revealing the identities of their suspected killers. The Shin Bet even lied to the parents of the kidnapped teens, deceiving them into believing their sons were alive.

Instead of mounting a limited action to capture the suspected perpetrators and retrieve the teens’ bodies, Netanyahu staged an aggressive international public relations campaign, demanding sympathy and outrage from world leaders, who were also given the impression that the missing teens were still alive.

Meanwhile, Israel’s armed forces rampaged throughout the occupied West Bank and bombarded the [Gaza Strip](#) in a campaign of collective punishment deceptively marketed to Israelis and the world as a rescue mission.

Critical details that were known all along by Netanyahu and the military-intelligence apparatus were relayed to the Israeli public only after the abduction of more than 560 Palestinians, including at least 200 still held without charges; after the raiding of Palestinian universities and ransacking of countless homes; after six Palestinian civilians were killed by Israeli forces; after American-trained [Palestinian Authority police](#) assisted Israeli soldiers attacking Palestinian youths in the center of [Ramallah](#); after the alleged [theft](#) by Israeli troops of \$3 million in US dollars; and after Israel’s international public relations

extravaganza had run its course.

The assault on the [West Bank](#) arrived on the heels of the collapse of the US-led framework negotiations, for which the US blamed Netanyahu, and immediately after [Hamas'](#) ratification of a unity deal with the [Fatah](#)-controlled Palestinian Authority. Netanyahu was still smarting from the US recognition of the [unity government](#) when news of the kidnapping reached him. Never one to miss an opportunity to undermine the Palestinians, he and his inner circle resolved to milk the kidnapping for maximum propaganda value.

Weeks after the incident, it is now clear that the Israeli government, intelligence services and army engaged in a cover-up to provide themselves with the political space they required for a military campaign that had little to do with rescuing any kidnapped teens.

The disinformation campaign they waged sent a heavily indoctrinated, comprehensively militarized population into a tribalistic frenzy, provoking a wave of high-level incitement, the shocking revenge killing of an innocent Palestinian teen and rioting across East Jerusalem.

Where the chaos will end and how far it will spread is unknown. But its origins are increasingly clear.

Gagging the media, lying to teens' parents


On 12 June, three Jewish Israeli youths, Naftali Frenkel, Gilad Shaar and Eyal Yifrach, went missing while hitchhiking from Kfar Etzion, an illegal settlement in the occupied West Bank. At 10:25pm, Shaar placed a panicked call to Israeli police.

During [the eerie call lasting two minutes and nine seconds](#), the supposed kidnappers can be heard ordering the youths to keep their heads down. Israel Radio plays in the background as Shaar repeatedly appeals for help. Then several gunshots can be heard followed by celebratory singing as the kidnappers remark, "We got three." The teens had been killed.

It took until the next morning for the police to connect the call to a missing persons report filed by the youths' parents. In a meeting with Shin Bet officials that day, the teens' parents listened to a recording of the phone call.

Bat Galim Shaar, the mother of Gilad Shaar, demanded investigators explain to her why gunshots can be heard in the background, and if this meant that her son was dead.

[According to Bat Galim Shaar](#), police claimed the bullets were "blanks." When the car used by the alleged kidnappers was discovered burned by a roadside, the Shin Bet [told her](#) no DNA was found. In fact, bullets and blood were present throughout the interior of the car. The Shin Bet had lied to the parents of the missing teens in order to stoke false hopes that their sons were alive.

 Image: Israeli soldiers secure the area around a burnt car near the West Bank city of Hebron on 13 June after three Israeli teens went missing the day before. ([Mamoun Wazwaz](#) / [APA images](#))

"When [the Shin Bet] told me finally at 6:00am Friday that the army was on the job, I felt better — as if we were in good hands," Bat Galim Shaar told Israel's Channel 10. "I was naïve, I told everyone Gilad would be home before Shabbat."

Having deceived the victims' parents, Israel's military-intelligence apparatus moved to conceal the truth from the general public, imposing a gag order that barred the country's media from reporting on the sound of gunshots in the recorded call to police.

According to the text of the gag order, [which was first published in English at Mondoweiss](#), the military had forbidden Israeli reporters from publicizing "All the details of the investigation" and "All details that might identify the suspect."

Not only did all involved in the investigation — Netanyahu, the Shin Bet, the military — know right away that the three missing teens were almost certainly dead, they had identified the two men they believed were responsible for the crime little more than a day after it occurred.

To legitimize the military's wider goals, they withheld this information as well.

Hiding the suspects

On 17 June, Arabic-language news site [Rai Al Youm reported](#) that Israeli police and Shin Bet agents had raided the homes of Marwan Qawasmeh and Amer Abu Eische, the main suspects, near the southern West Bank city of [Hebron](#). As a Palestinian news outlet based in London, *Rai Al Youm* was not subject to the Israeli military's gag order and was therefore free to publish the names of the two accused kidnappers.

Citing a report in the Israeli online news outlet Walla! which was either scrubbed due to the gag order or otherwise rendered inaccessible, *Rai Al Youm* summarized an account by the father of Abu Eische as follows:

"On Saturday at dawn [two days after the alleged kidnapping was reported], special forces of the Israeli army stormed into the house and interrogated sons of the family trying to find any information that could lead them to his whereabouts but they were unsuccessful."

Abu Eische's father added that the Shin Bet had also arrested his son's wife to interrogate her about his whereabouts. An uncle of Qawasmeh remarked that four of his nephew's brothers and his wife were arrested the day after the alleged kidnapping and interrogated.

Rai Al Youm added:

"several of the military correspondents in the Hebrew media have reported last Friday on a statement attributed to a Palestinian security official in which he said that the PA [Palestinian Authority] is tracking two Hamas personnel who disappeared last Thursday [the day of the kidnapping] and that the security forces of the PA have given the information they have to Israel. And now it's clear that this story was true and that Israel is looking for them and has charged them with being behind the kidnapping."

Allison Deger, a correspondent for *Mondoweiss*, [visited the Qawasmeh home and confirmed](#) that the army and Shin Bet brought several male members of the families in for interrogation on 14 June.

 Image: The damaged family home of Amer Abu Eische, one of two Palestinians identified by Israel

as suspects in the killing of three Israeli teenagers, after it was destroyed by the Israeli army in the West Bank city of Hebron, 1 July. ([Oren Ziv / ActiveStills](#))

In a normal high-profile criminal investigation, the names of fugitive suspects are widely publicized. Investigators prominently display posters of the wanted criminals in public spaces while police officials stage press conferences appealing for help from the public. In this case, however, Israel's intelligence services chose to keep their suspects' identities a closely-held secret for two weeks.

While Netanyahu and his top deputies blamed the entire membership of Hamas for the kidnapping, the Shin Bet gag order suppressed all information relating to the identities of the suspects until 26 June. As far as the Israeli public knew, the kidnappers could have been anywhere in the West Bank, in any schoolhouse or coffee house or hen house where anyone remotely affiliated with Hamas congregated.

Having manipulated an exceptionally suggestible population through the careful management of information, the military had all the political latitude it needed to rampage through cities far from the scene of the crime.

During a raid of [Birzeit University](#) near Ramallah, [Israeli troops seized hundreds of Hamas flags, carting them away in trucks](#) as though they had obtained valuable evidence. [When the army bombarded the Gaza Strip](#), the only justification it needed was that the besieged coastal territory was governed by Hamas.

A poll released on 2 July revealed that [76 percent of Jewish Israelis approved](#) of the army's actions and expressed overwhelming support for the Shin Bet.

In the near term, the gag order had produced its intended result.

Rogue element

Though Qawasmeh and Abu Eise were widely identified as veteran members of Hamas' military wing, they comprised a rogue element that likely acted without the knowledge and against the wishes of Hamas leadership.

[According to Israeli journalist Shlomi Eldar](#), members of the Qawasmeh clan of Hebron have earned a reputation for attacking Israeli civilian targets during ceasefires between Hamas and Israel.

While an extended family of over 10,000 can hardly be blamed for the actions of some of its members, it is notable that attacks carried out by fighters from the family were privately criticized by top Hamas leaders, as Eldar explains. Hamas leadership regarded the operations as self-destructive acts of freebooting and often paid for them in the form of Israeli assassinations. In each case, the violence shattered ceasefires and inspired renewed bouts of bloodshed.

"The same is true now," Eldar writes. "Marwan Qawasmeh and Amer Abu Eise have taken Hamas to a place where its leadership never intended to go."

Hamas leadership has yet to take responsibility for the kidnapping and likely had no

knowledge of its planning. As *Haaretz* military correspondent [Amos Harel notes](#), “So far, there is no evidence that Hamas’ leadership either in Gaza or abroad was involved in the kidnapping.” Harel adds that the fallout of the kidnapping “effectively froze the Fatah-Hamas reconciliation.”

Why would Hamas leadership have authorized an operation that so clearly threatened to unravel the movement’s political achievements, wrecking the vaunted unity deal and leaving Abbas without rival in the West Bank?

The Israeli government’s propaganda blitz drowned out sobering questions like these. In turn, the gag order obstructed the flow of information that would have complicated the propaganda.

Determined to reframe the international media’s narrative around Israel’s plight at the hands of Palestinian terrorism, Netanyahu went on the offensive.

#BringBackOurBoys


On 17 June, the same day [the Israeli army forcibly confiscated CCTV cameras in Beitunia](#) that captured footage of its soldiers killing two unarmed Palestinian boys during a Nakba Day protest, Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations [Ron Prosor appeared behind a lectern at the UN Mission](#) in New York City.

“It has been five days since our boys went missing,” Prosor thundered, “and I ask the international community, where are you? Where are you?!”

Referring to the Fatah-Hamas unity government, Prosor added: “All those in the international community who rushed to bless this marriage should look into the eyes of the heartbroken parents and have the courage to take responsibility by condemning the kidnapping. The international community bought in to a bad deal and Israel is paying for it.”

Beside Prosor stood a large placard displaying the smiling faces of the three missing teens beneath a hashtag reading #BringBackOurBoys. Israel’s propaganda blitz was approaching its apex.

For days, leaders of Israel’s trained online propaganda brigades — from the [Israeli army spokesperson’s unit](#), to the [Jewish Agency](#), to the Prime Minister’s Office — [flooded social media with the #BringBackOurBoys hashtag](#). Mimicking Michelle Obama’s promotion of the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag that aimed to raise awareness of the kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls by Islamist militants, [the Israeli prime minister’s frowning wife, Sara, posted a portrait of herself](#) on Facebook holding a card that read, #BringBackOurBoys.

 Image: Right-wing protesters shout anti-Palestinian slogans during a rally outside the Israeli prime minister’s residence in Jerusalem, 5 July. Demonstrators hold up posters depicting the three murdered Israeli teens which read “United to bring them home.” ([Faiz Abu Rmeleh](#) / [ActiveStills](#))

The social media campaign reverberated throughout Jewish communities across the US, as [synagogues around the country displayed yellow ribbons](#) in a carefully coordinated show of solidarity with the missing teens. In New York City, [local politicians appeared at pro-Israel rallies](#), while American diplomats from US Ambassador to the UN [Samantha Power](#) to

Ambassador [Susan Rice](#) competed with one another [to deliver the most emotional tribute to the kidnapped teens](#).

Rachel Frenkel, the mother of the kidnapped Naftali Frenkel, was [junketed](#) by the Israeli government to the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva, Switzerland to plead for international help in rescuing her son.

The entire propaganda campaign was set into high gear despite Netanyahu and his inner circle's knowledge that the teens were almost certainly dead. And it was enabled by the Shin Bet's gag order, which even foreign correspondents like *The New York Times* Jerusalem bureau chief [Jodi Rudoren](#) honored. The Israeli government refused to allow the facts from interfering with what seemed like a political opportunity.

Behind the pitiable image it affected before the world, Israeli society seethed with bloodlust. A spontaneously-created [Facebook page](#) calling for the execution of one Palestinian prisoner for each hour the teens remained missing, while another called "The People of Israel Demand Revenge" garnered more than 35,000 "likes" from mostly young Israelis in just a few days.

Manipulated by a high-level campaign of deception and disinformation into believing that "their boys" were still alive, the Israeli public was about to receive shocking news.

A shallow grave

At 6am on 30 June, the bodies of Frenkel, Shaar and Yifrach were found in Halhoul at the northern entrance to Hebron in the occupied West Bank. They lay in a shallow grave on property [owned](#) by Marwan Qawasmeh, one of the two men suspected in their kidnapping and killing.

The bodies were discovered not by the Shin Bet, but by a team of volunteers from the Kfar Etzion Field School who led soldiers to the location. For its part, the army had been too busy invading Palestinian homes in areas as far away as Nablus to effectively comb the property of a suspect less than 10 kilometers from the site of the kidnapping.

Hours after the discovery, Israeli forces detonated explosive charges inside the Qawasmeh and Abu Eische family homes. The destruction followed an announcement that the army was re-instituting its policy of punitive home demolitions against the families of Palestinians accused of terrorism.

That afternoon, Netanyahu set the tone for the national response, publishing remarks on his personal Twitter account that he had just delivered in a cabinet meeting:

PM at the Cabinet meeting: With heavy grief we found 3 bodies. All signs indicate they are of our abducted youths Eyal, Gilad and Naftali.

— Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu) [June 30, 2014](#)

They were abducted & murdered in cold blood by human animals. On behalf of the entire Jewish People, I would like to tell the dear families-

— Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu) [June 30, 2014](#)

the mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, and brothers and sisters
- we are deeply saddened, the entire nation weeps with you.

— Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu) [June 30, 2014](#)

Vengeance for the blood of a small child, Satan has not yet created. Neither
has vengeance for the blood of 3 pure youths who were on their>

— Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu) [June 30, 2014](#)

way home to their parents who will not see them anymore. Hamas is
responsible and Hamas will pay. May the memories of the 3 boys be blessed.

— Benjamin Netanyahu (@netanyahu) [June 30, 2014](#)

Netanyahu's comments perplexed outsiders, but for those embedded inside the tight confines of Jewish Israeli life, they carried a familiar resonance. From Kishinev to Jerusalem Netanyahu's statement alludes to the final stanza of a poem by the Hebrew writer Chaim Bialik titled "On The Slaughter":

Cursed be he who says: "Avenge!"

Vengeance such as this, vengeance for the blood of a small boy,

Satan himself has not devised-

Let that blood pierce the abyss!

Let that blood pierce the depths of darkness,

Let it eat away the darkness and there undermine

All the rotted foundations of the earth.

In Bialik's verse, a searing lament anchored in Biblical language, the poet dramatized a brutal 1903 pogrom incited by the Russian Tsar that left scores of Jews dead in the town of Kishinev.

Bialik followed his first account of Kishinev with "The City of Slaughter," an incendiary work admonishing the victims of the pogrom for their supposed passivity in the face of armed marauders. (Reports of ferocious resistance by the locals was conveniently overlooked.) The poem helped radicalize thousands of young Jews across Eastern Europe, inspiring the

formation of self-defense committees and winning waves of adherents to the militant philosophy of Zionism. Among those most influenced by Bialik was Vladimir Jabotinsky, the right-wing Zionist activist who would later become a political benefactor to Netanyahu's father, Benzion.

In his crude appropriation of Bialik's verse, Benjamin Netanyahu recast the Russian pogromist as a Palestinian militant, drawing a seamless line between the Jewish nightmare of pre-war Europe and the present-day Israeli experience. In Netanyahu's view, the "human animals" of Palestine had inherited the genocidal spirit of the Tsar's mobs and would repeat their crimes unless Jews were prepared to fight.

Of course, Israeli Jews are the exact opposite of turn-of-the-century *shtetl* dwellers girding themselves against pogroms and ethnic cleansing. Unlike the persecuted outclass of Eastern Europe, Israeli Jews comprise a nuclearized, high-powered military that lord over an outcasted, largely defenseless Palestinian population with full support from the world's lone superpower.

For his part, Netanyahu shares more in common with the Russian Tsar who incited against religious minorities to deflect from his political problems than he does with Bialik, the itinerant scribe who channeled the pain of his society's weakest members.

The exploitation of historical Jewish persecution has been a constant feature of Netanyahu's rhetoric, on bold display during a nationally televised speech last October when he baselessly [accused the Palestinian national movement of a direct role in the Holocaust](#).

This time, amidst a dangerously pressurized atmosphere, his demagoguery helped set in motion a wave of vigilante violence that threatened to engulf the whole of Israeli society. Then he shrank from public view, maintaining a conspicuous silence for several days while the extremist elements he emboldened took control of the streets.

"Murder, riots, incitement, vigilantism"

As [mobs of Jewish youths fanned out across central Jerusalem](#) to chant "Death to Arabs!" and search for Palestinians to assault, [active duty Israeli soldiers took to Facebook to demand revenge](#), posting photos of themselves with the weapons they were aching to use.

With [an Israeli public opinion poll taken after the Israeli teens' funeral](#) showing the far-right [Jewish Home](#) party gaining ground on the right-wing [Likud](#), Israeli political upstarts rushed to [issue calls for blood vengeance](#) and the "annihilation" of Hamas. [Ayelet Shaked](#), a rising star of the right-wing Jewish Home party, published a [call](#) for the genocide of Palestinians on Facebook that earned thousands of "likes" from Israelis.

Rabbi Noam Perel, the secretary general of Bnei Akiva, the world's largest religious Zionist youth movement, upped the ante on fanaticism when he called for turning the Israeli military into an army of avengers ["which will not stop at 300 Philistine foreskins."](#) Akiva's appeal alludes to the first book of Samuel, in which the biblical character [David](#) kills two hundred Philistines and brings back their foreskins as evidence that he had done so.

Against the backdrop of fever-pitched incitement, a small car entered the back streets of [Shuafat](#), a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem, on 2 July. Behind its darkened windows were angry young men hunting for Arab boys.

Following a botched kidnapping of a ten-year-old boy in the same neighborhood the day before, [a group of men grabbed a 16-year-old named Muhammad Abu Khudair](#), threw him in their car and sped away. Abu Khudair was found dead the next morning in the woods of Givat Shaul just west of Jerusalem with burns over 90 percent of his body.



Image: Protesters in the Palestinian city of Arara in the north of present-day Israel throw stones at Israeli police during a demonstration following the murder of Muhammad Abu Khudair, 5 July. ([Yotam Ronen / ActiveStills](#))

As they did after the kidnapping of the three Israeli teens, the Shin Bet imposed a gag order on the investigation, seemingly hoping to delay the news that Abu Khudair was the victim of Jewish extremism. And as before, the police flooded Israeli media with disinformation, this time [by insinuating the murdered teen had been killed by members of his own family for being gay](#).

[The Electronic Intifada has obtained CCTV footage](#) showing the faces of the alleged killers of Abu Khudair just as they abducted him. The video was concealed for several days from the Israeli public under a new Shin Bet gag order. When the police finally arrested the suspected killers of Abu Khudair, they curiously [staged](#) a simultaneous press conference about an unrelated killing a young Jewish woman, suggesting without any clear evidence that she had been the victim of a Palestinian terrorist.

On 4 July, an autopsy revealed that Abu Khudair's killers had burned him alive. Protest and rioting spread from Shuafat across East Jerusalem and into areas of northern Israel. Meanwhile, Jewish nationalists took to Facebook to organize more lynch mobs.

Netanyahu surfaced briefly the day before at an Independence Day ceremony at the US consulate in Jerusalem. With US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro seated by his side, the Prime Minister was forced to confront the binge of racism that he helped inspire.

[Speaking in English for the consumption of his American hosts](#), Netanyahu declared, "Murder, riots, incitement, vigilantism — they have no place in our democracy. And it is these democratic values that differentiate us from our neighbors and unite us with the United States."

Outside, the chaos showed no sign of ebbing.

Editor's note: This article has been corrected since original publication to clarify that two popular Facebook pages calling for revenge were created after the Israeli teens' disappearance; the article originally mentioned only one page.

Max Blumenthal is an award winning journalist and bestselling author. His latest book is Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel (2013, Nation Books).

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