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Israeli Police Lied to Me Over Umm al-Hiran Deaths

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Speaking to me for my report last month on the killing by police of Yacoub Abu al-Qiyan during the demolition of his home in Umm al-Hiran, in the Negev, police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld made three allegations against Abu al-Qiyan that he said proved he was a terrorist. All of them have now been shown to be entirely unfounded.

A fourth claim, made against Ayman Odeh, head of the Joint List and the most senior politician among Israel's 1.7 million Palestinian citizens, has also proved to be untrue.

The Israeli police appear to have been caught out as serial liars. Rosenfeld himself may have not known that he was peddling lies. He may have been simply reading from a script. But others surely knew. Not only did they wilfully mislead journalists, but they dangerously incited against Israel's large Palestinian minority.

(This would be far from the first time. Only recently, the police, as well as prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, accused Palestinian citizens of waging an "arson intifada" against Israel in November, when hundreds of fires broke out due to exceptional weather conditions. All of the dozens of Palestinians arrested over the fires were subsequently released, but no apology or retraction has been issued.)

First, Rosenfeld told me Abu al-Qiyan had carried out a deliberate "car-ramming terror attack" on police, which killed one officer. But a police aerial video of the incident shows that police opened fire on the car while Abu al-Qiyan was driving slowly and cautiously to leave his home before the demolition crew began work.

Further, leaks of an autopsy report show that Abu al-Qiyan was shot twice, in the torso and the knee, strongly suggesting that he lost control of the car as he tried to navigate carefully down a steep dirt track. If anyone is responsible for the death of the police officer, Erez Levy, it is his colleagues who opened fire without provocation.

Of equal concern should be the fact that Abu al-Qiyan was left for up to half an hour to bleed to death, while police denied an ambulance access to his village.

Second, Rosenfeld told me that Abu al-Qiyan's terrorist intent was discernible because, even though the incident occurred before dawn, he had turned off his headlights to avoid detection. But a new video shows his car lights were on, just as one would have expected.

Third, Rosenfeld told me police had definitive proof that Abu al-Qiyan was a supporter of ISIS, and that the evidence would soon be divulged. But two weeks later Israel's domestic

intelligence service, the Shin Bet, have provided no evidence of such a link. All his family deny that he supported ISIS, or even that he held strong political views.

And fourth, Rosenfeld denied Knesset member Ayman Odeh's claim that police fired a potentially lethal sponge-tipped bullet at his head. Rosenfeld said instead that the Knesset member's injuries had been caused by stones thrown by the inhabitants of Umm al-Hiran opposing the dozen or so demolitions police were carrying out. Another police spokesperson told the Israeli Maariv newspaper that the police did not even have sponge-tipped bullets in their armoury.

There were multiple problems with that account. Witnesses say there was no stone-throwing at the time Odeh was injured. And the Knesset member is photographed (above) holding the bullet in Umm al-Hiran, after he was shot. There is also a picture (below) of a huge bruise across his back, where he was shot a second time. It is hard to imagine how that injury was caused apart from by an impact with some form of rubber bullet.

And, whatever the police claim, there are well-documented instances of Israeli police using sponge-tipped bullets before, especially in East Jerusalem, but also in the Negev. The shocking thing in this case is that they used these bullets against a Palestinian Knesset member.

Interestingly, when challenged by another journalist, Mairav Zonszein, Rosenfeld denied that he had said Odeh was hit by stones, only that: "During the incident stones were thrown." Well, my notes from our conversation show him clearly stating that Odeh's head injury was caused by a stone.

It is past time for the police and the government ministers who for two weeks have incited against Abu al-Qiyan, against the inhabitants of Umm al-Hiran and more generally against Israel's Palestinian citizens to issue an apology for their serial lies and distortions.

It is also essential that the government set up an independent, judicial-led inquiry to assess what really happened in Umm al-Hiran on the morning of January 18.

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