

Why Is Israel Attacking Gaza? Shouldn't More Journalists Press Israeli Officials About their Claims?

By [Peter Hart](#)

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Why is this war happening?

The conventional answer tells us that the June abduction and murders of three Israeli teenagers is the answer. This crime was carried out by Hamas, Israeli officials claim, and it led to a brutal crackdown on Hamas officials in the West Bank. Hundreds were detained, and several Palestinians died in clashes with Israeli security forces. Rocket fire from Gaza then intensified, forcing the Israelis to launch the current military assault.

But did Hamas actually kill Naftali Fraenkel, Eyal Yifrach and Gilad Shaar? And if there's no evidence that they did, shouldn't more journalists be pressing Israeli officials about their claims?

There seems to be agreement on the timeline. As the Washington Post([7/22/14](#)) put it:

Israel accused Hamas of orchestrating the killing. Israeli troops cracked down hard on the militant group in the West Bank; Hamas responded by escalating rocket fire from Gaza into Israel.

Time magazine's [Joe Klein](#) ([7/24/14](#)) wrote that Hamas "was in an existential jam this spring," and their best option was simple: "Provoke Israel." He writes:

The initial provocation, the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers, was indefensible, as was a retaliatory murder of a Palestinian teen. In a moment of moral clarity, Hamas lauded its kidnappers, while a furious Netanyahu called the retaliation "reprehensible."

It is true that Hamas lauded the kidnappings, most likely as one way to strike a prisoner swap with Israel. The group did not claim responsibility for that action, though—which is precisely what one would have expected them to do.

So what is the evidence—other than Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#)'s word—that Hamas carried out these murders? A CNN report ([6/15/14](#)) noted:

A Hamas spokesman in Gaza told CNN that Netanyahu's comments attributing blame were "stupid and baseless."

"The arrest campaign made by the Israeli occupation in the West Bank is

targeted to break the backbone of Hamas and bring it down, but the Israelis will not succeed in achieving their goal,” Sami Abu Zuhri said.



Fox News’ Howard Kurtz said Hamas killed the Israeli youth—then said his point was that Hamas praised their killing. Both claims were dubious. (cc photo: David Shankbone)

Fox News host [Howard Kurtz](#) (7/27/14) was, like Klein, sure about what happened: “There is no question that Hamas started the latest round of Mideast violence, first with the killing of three Israeli teenagers, and then by firing rockets indiscriminately at the Jewish state.” When it was noted on Twitter that there was still no evidence that Hamas was responsible (Mediaite, [7/27/14](#)), Kurtz tweeted: “My point on the three slain Israeli teenagers is that Hamas praised killings as a heroic act.” Which is, of course, not the same point at all.

(The Al-Jazeera interview in which Hamas chief Khaled Mashaal heralded the abduction of the teenagers as “a heroic act”—in the Times of Israel’s paraphrase, [6/24/14](#)—took place on June 23, a week before the discovery of the youth’s bodies, so it’s also inaccurate to say that Hamas praised the “killings.”)

Controversy over who carried out the murders kicked into high gear recently when two reporters tweeted that Israeli police spokesperson Micky Rosenfeld had admitted that they could not pin the crimes on Hamas. First from BBC reporter Jon Donnison:

Israeli police Mickey Rosenfeld tells me men who killed 3 Israeli teens def lone cell, Hamas affiliated but not operating under leadership 1/2

— Jon Donnison (@JonDonnison) [July 25, 2014](#)

And then BuzzFeed’s Sheera Frankel:

After Israel’s top leadership exhaustively blamed Hamas for kidnap of 3 teens, they’ve now admitted killers were acting as “lone cell.”

— Sheera Frenkel (@sheeraf) [July 25, 2014](#)

Those posts garnered some attention—most specifically via a New York Magazine post ([7/25/14](#)) that was originally headlined, “It Turns Out Hamas Didn’t Kidnap and Kill the Three Israeli Teens After All.” Then came some pushback in the form of a Daily Beast report ([7/27/14](#)) by [Eli Lake](#), who got a denial from the Israeli source:

Rosenfeld said that he had told Donnison what the Israeli government had been saying all along. “The kidnapping and murder of the teens was carried out by Hamas terrorists from the Hebron area,” he told the Daily Beast. “The security organizations are continuing to search for the murderers.”

Donnison on Saturday said he [stood by his earlier tweets](#).

Lake’s piece does not substantiate the Israeli claims that Hamas bears responsibility. “Hamas is responsible, and Hamas will pay,” Netanyahu famously declared after the victims’

bodies were found (Washington Post, [6/30/14](#)). While the controversy over Rosenfeld's statement and subsequent walkback is interesting, it does not change the fact that linking the crime to Hamas has always been a stretch (FAIR Blog, [7/2/14](#)), since the suspects were not considered to be part of any formal Hamas cells.

As Shlomi Eldar (Al-Monitor, [6/29/14](#)) wrote, the suspects belong to a clan that "has a well-earned reputation as troublemakers. Not only does it tend to ignore the movement's leaders. It even [acts counter](#) to the policies being advocated by the movement."

Journalism about the current violence is bound to focus on the [death and destruction](#) in Gaza. But there remains ample space to ask whether the war was launched to punish Hamas for something it had nothing to do with.

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