

Assessing the Potential for an Israel-Hamas Showdown

by [Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](/experts/neri-zilber)

Jul 1, 2014

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Neri Zilber \(/experts/neri-zilber\)](/experts/neri-zilber)

Neri Zilber, a journalist and analyst on Middle East politics and culture, is an adjunct fellow of The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The discovery of murdered kidnap victims in the West Bank and increased rocket fire from Gaza have brought Hamas and Israel to the brink of a new round of hostilities.

The fate of the three Israeli teenagers kidnapped on June 12 in the West Bank was clarified yesterday when Israeli forces found their bodies in a shallow grave in a dry riverbed just north of Hebron. The massive rescue mission and manhunt had evolved into a wider crackdown on Hamas personnel and infrastructure in the West Bank, including the deployment of three additional Israel Defense Force brigades (for a total of nine in the West Bank), special forces, aerial assets, and police search-and-rescue units. Since the kidnapping, over 450 Palestinians have been arrested, the vast majority suspected Hamas members, and Israeli forces have raided and searched an estimated 1,400 locations across the West Bank. Operation Brother's Keeper has, to this point, been the largest Israeli military operation in the West Bank in nearly ten years, since the second intifada. The hunt for the two primary suspects -- known Hamas operatives from Hebron -- is still ongoing.

The fact that the Israeli youths were not found alive is, tragically, not a surprise: strong intelligence had been swirling in Israeli security and media circles that the kidnapping had quickly gone bad; the hope was that despite the evidence, at least some of the victims would be found alive. As such, the Israeli government and the IDF have had over two weeks to prepare a response for today. According to various security sources in Israel, the IDF has been moving ground forces to southern Israel, in and around Gaza, as well as naval forces off the coast of the Palestinian territory. Moreover, additional Iron Dome antirocket systems have already been deployed to the area.

The government has already responded, striking thirty-four targets in Gaza last night (mostly in one compound), but the contours of the more forceful response expected by the Israeli public remain unclear. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu stated emphatically that "Hamas is responsible, and Hamas will pay," yet the security cabinet meeting held last night was inconclusive. Press reports indicate that right-wing ministers are demanding expansive measures, not only militarily against Hamas in Gaza but also in the West Bank, including settlement construction;

other ministers, and potentially even the IDF brass, have reportedly been counseling moderation, for fear that any escalation in Gaza would lead to a wholesale war.

The security cabinet is set to reconvene later today to finalize its decisions. Netanyahu is likely to chart a middle course, with limited strikes on Gaza, continued action against Hamas personnel and financial assets in the West Bank, and renewed calls for the dissolution of the recent Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement.

If the Israeli government opts for the more hawkish approach, however, it would likely have a strong mandate from the public. Israelis have shown overwhelming solidarity over the past few weeks as the lives of their kidnapped countrymen hung in the balance, with the faces of the three teenagers adorning billboards and the front pages of newspapers. An estimated 80,000 Israelis took part in a large prayer rally held on June 29 in Tel Aviv's central Rabin Square.

Adding to the heightened tensions, Israeli towns near the Gaza border have witnessed an increase in rocket attacks over the past several days and in particular over the past forty-eight hours, including one direct hit on a factory in Sderot. According to Israeli press reports, the barrage included direct action by Hamas rocket crews -- reportedly the first such action since Israel's November 2012 Operation Pillar of Defense.

Another operation as expansive as Pillar of Defense -- an eight-day campaign that involved substantial Israeli air, naval, and standoff fire, while Hamas launched 1,400 rockets, including on Tel Aviv and the outskirts of Jerusalem -- is a possibility, though neither side likely wants an escalation of this magnitude. Yet as one senior IDF officer told the author last week, "The last time three Israelis were kidnapped [in 2006, by Hezbollah on the Israel-Lebanon border] it led to a month-long war."

For the Palestinian Authority and, in particular, President Mahmoud Abbas, the crisis could not have come at a worse political moment. The "national consensus" government formed with Hamas support was just sworn in on June 2, and the Israeli crackdown in the West Bank has led to an increase in tensions and a reported six Palestinian fatalities, with some public anger even directed at the PA. To make matters worse, this past weekend marked the beginning of Ramadan -- the month-long holiday is customarily used for family gatherings and trips, but Israeli authorities have stiffened entry permits into Israel and some travel restrictions within the West Bank in the wake of the crisis. Abbas's strong and courageous public remarks condemning the kidnapping will likely not be enough to forestall more forceful Israeli military action. The best he can hope for is to insulate the West Bank from the wider conflagration via the deployment of PA police, riot control, and intelligence assets.

Politically, Abbas has stated that the Hamas-Fatah national consensus government would accept the principle of nonviolence, so the kidnapping can be viewed as a severe violation of the reconciliation agreement's terms and should again be stated as such by Palestinian officials. Indeed, given speculation that the kidnapping may not have been sanctioned by all or part of the Hamas leadership, this would be an opportunity for Hamas leaders themselves, whether in Gaza or abroad, to stop playing coy and publicly state that while the perpetrators may have been Hamas operatives, the act was not sanctioned from above. The likelihood of this happening is of course slim, since armed resistance is still the group's official policy. But it might be the only thing that saves Hamas from harsher Israeli reprisals -- and the only step that can save the reconciliation agreement the group so badly needs.

For the international community, this latest tragedy highlights the need to reemphasize the Quartet conditions for Hamas involvement in any political process, particularly the condition about renouncing violence. If nothing else, the kidnapping and murder of three teenagers indicates that Hamas is still committed to terror, no matter its political pretensions or exigencies.

Neri Zilber, a visiting scholar at The Washington Institute, is a journalist and researcher on Middle East politics and culture. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/Arab-Israeli-Relations\)](/policy-analysis/Arab-Israeli-Relations)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/Peace-Process\)](/policy-analysis/Peace-Process)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/Terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/Terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/Israel\)](/policy-analysis/Israel)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/Palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/Palestinians)