

# Israelis Kidnapped in the West Bank: Implications

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

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## 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

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## If U.S. policy was to "wait and see" how the Hamas-approved Palestinian reconciliation process would unfold in practice, the test is now.

**O**n June 12, three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped in the West Bank while hitchhiking outside the Israeli settlement bloc of Gush Etzion. In addition to potentially undermining stability in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and southern Israel, the incident could severely complicate Palestinian political moves toward reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas.

## THE SECURITY CONTEXT

**A**ccording to Israeli security sources, West Bank terrorist groups had made forty-four kidnapping attempts on Israeli civilians and soldiers over the eighteen months preceding last week's incident, all of them thwarted. Israeli authorities have continuously warned the public not to accept rides from strangers, especially on West Bank highways, though the practice is quite common among the settler community.

Warning signs aside, the abduction of three people and the inability to locate them after several days indicates a high level of operational sophistication and planning by the perpetrators. It is unlikely that this was an isolated or spur-of-the-moment act, necessitating as it did a multiperson cell, transportation, evasion methods, and -- if the youths are still alive -- a secure holding location.

The Israeli response has been decisive, though at this point inconclusive. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have streamed elite combat infantry units into the southern West Bank, in particular Hebron and its surrounding villages, believed to be the most likely location of the missing civilians. IDF forces in the area have been reinforced by battalions from outside the West Bank, including a limited call-up of reserve units. Main access routes into Hebron have been monitored by "flying" inspection checkpoints, though a full-scale closure of the city has not been implemented. The Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) is known to be working around the clock gathering intelligence leads, and house-to-house searches as well as large-scale arrests of known terrorist operatives have been

undertaken across the West Bank. Senior Hamas leaders in particular have been targeted for arrest given the widespread belief among Israeli officials that the group is directly or indirectly responsible for the kidnapping.

Meanwhile, the border region surrounding Gaza has witnessed sporadic rocket fire targeting Israeli towns over the past several days. The IDF has elevated its force posture in southern Israel, including the additional deployment of Iron Dome antirocket systems. For its part, the Israeli Air Force has launched retaliatory strikes on Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad bases in Gaza.

## A DELICATE POLITICAL MOMENT

**T**he kidnapping comes at a sensitive moment in intra-Palestinian politics. Despite the inherent difficulties in the April 23 reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah (see [PolicyWatch 2258, "Palestinian Reconciliation: Devil in the Details?"](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/palestinian-reconciliation-devil-in-the-details) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/palestinian-reconciliation-devil-in-the-details>)), the two parties were in the process of implementing its terms. A new "national consensus" government was sworn in on June 3, and based on interviews over the past week in Ramallah with senior officials from both sides, their stated intention was to move forward on other outstanding issues: namely, resolving the salary crisis regarding Hamas public-sector employees in Gaza, opening the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt via the return of Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces, and holding presidential and legislative elections toward the end of the year.

Fatah and Hamas officials interviewed by the author were well aware of the high public support among Palestinians for reunification of the PA-governed West Bank and Hamas-ruled Gaza (see ["Palestinians Want Hamas In, but Want Peace Talks Too"](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/26068) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/26068>)). And given the deteriorating economic and social conditions in Gaza, many PA officials believed that Hamas felt more urgency than Fatah to strike the deal and keep its implementation on course. Indeed, the manner in which the reconciliation process has unfolded so far indicates that Fatah has been dictating terms to Hamas, not the other way around.

For instance, the recently established "unity" government does not include a single Hamas representative -- all of the key posts, including prime minister, interior minister, finance minister, and foreign minister, were retained by officials considered either close or pliant to PA president Mahmoud Abbas. In addition, public promises by Hamas leaders that all Gaza public-sector employees (approximately 70,000 affiliated with Fatah and 40,000 with Hamas) would be paid have not materialized. Only Fatah personnel have received salaries so far, and a recent week-long Hamas-initiated bank shutdown in Gaza did not succeed in forcing the PA's hand. The committee tasked with vetting the Hamas employees will reportedly not begin its work until after the next elections (i.e., in several months), and it too lacks Hamas representatives -- all of its members are PA technocrats from various ministries.

Tellingly, prior to his arrest by the IDF over the weekend, Sheikh Hassan Yousef, a prominent West Bank Hamas leader, did not refute these points, nor the claim that Hamas was in crisis (though he was at pains to emphasize that the entire region, including Israel, the PA, and Egypt, was also in crisis). In a conversation with the author, he freely admitted that the group's seven-year experiment in governing Gaza had eroded its support base there. "The sovereign loses," he observed. He added separately that Hamas had two goals in the reconciliation deal: (1) retaining its capabilities against Israel while participating in the political system (as he put it, "The Palestinian Authority has only the option of negotiations, while Hamas has many options...The current situation in Gaza could lead to an explosion, and Israel will be the target of this explosion...and the first target of Hamas"), and (2) pawning off Gaza on Abbas. "We say 'take,'" he stated figuratively, "Hamas is [now] responsible for nothing."

Further complicating the political atmosphere is the nearly two-month hunger strike by eighty-five Palestinian administrative detainees being held in Israeli prisons. The issue is a highly evocative one among the Palestinian public -- during a recent visit to Ramallah, the author noted that most street corners were adorned with black flags of

silhouetted prisoners, hands raised aloft, unshackled. Demonstrations on behalf of the prisoners have been held in central Ramallah over the past several weeks, as well as solidarity strikes by West Bank business owners and symbolic protests outside the prime minister's office. Given that the Palestinian media regularly refer to IDF arrests of Palestinian suspects as "kidnappings," the popular sentiment militating for the kidnapping of Israeli citizens as bargaining chips was considerable. Indeed, shortly after Thursday's abduction, the official Fatah Facebook page and a prominent PA daily ran cartoons supporting the act.

## WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

**W**hether the three Israeli teenagers are still alive, how the hunt for those responsible is concluded, and the actual identity of the perpetrators will all dictate how events unfold going forward. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and various IDF officers have already stated that Hamas is likely responsible, though it remains unclear whether the operation was sanctioned by the group's political and military leadership or carried out by a Hebron-area cell working on its own judgment. Thus far, no Palestinian group has claimed official responsibility, and no demands have been issued. Hamas leaders have remained silent apart from general statements supporting the act and urging West Bank Palestinians to confront Israeli forces.

For his part, President Abbas condemned the kidnapping only after several days' delay. At the same time, he condemned IDF actions in the West Bank, hinting at the political tightrope he apparently feels the need to walk: on the one hand, maintaining security cooperation with Israel and good relations with the international community, while on the other avoiding the appearance of undermining the Palestinian prisoner cause. Further pressure was heaped on him by Prime Minister Netanyahu, who recently stated that the "Hamas-Fatah unity pact" has led to an increase in terrorism from the West Bank.

## POTENTIAL FOR FURTHER ESCALATION

**I**f the kidnapping is not brought to a peaceful end -- and if it is shown to be a Hamas operation, sanctioned or not -- then Israel and the international community will pressure Abbas to launch a wide crackdown on Hamas in the West Bank. Such developments could damage the Palestinian reconciliation process, putting into question Abbas's entire political strategy since the breakdown in negotiations with Israel. The next milestone of the reconciliation agreement calls for the seating of the Palestinian Legislative Council, a move now in doubt given that most West Bank Hamas legislators, including parliamentary speaker Aziz Duwaik, have been arrested. Moreover, in the event of a military flare-up in Gaza (whether due to potential Israeli retaliation or other factors), it is highly unlikely that PA security forces could be deployed there as planned or that Egypt would agree to open the Rafah crossing, to say nothing of Abbas's rumored upcoming visit to the territory.

In Israel, the kidnapping has consumed the public's attention, with numerous prayer vigils held and nonstop media coverage urging the "return of our boys." Accordingly, the Netanyahu government will feel pressure to continue responding forcefully, not only with military raids, economic sanctions, and other legal measures in the West Bank, but perhaps with airstrikes targeting the likely "address" of the operation in Gaza. The Israeli cabinet is already reportedly mulling these and other steps against Hamas, including the group's political wing. This in turn would probably trigger increased rocket attacks against population centers in southern Israel.

In political and diplomatic terms, proving Hamas culpability for the kidnapping would reinforce the Israeli government's stance that the new Palestinian government is inimical to peace, making portions of the international community more receptive to that view. Public sentiment in Israel is also shifting against the idea of releasing Palestinian terrorists as part of a prisoner exchange similar to the 2011 Gilad Shalit deal. The Knesset is set to pass a bill making presidential pardons impossible in certain egregious cases of terrorism and murder, a move meant to dissuade future kidnapping attempts.

In light of these factors, the potential for military escalation is real and carries the added risk of further deterioration in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Escalation could also scuttle prospects for the questionable Palestinian reconciliation process; in fact, given the timing of the kidnapping, that may well have been one of the operation's objectives (in addition to gaining the release of Palestinian prisoners as part of a hostage negotiation). Spoilers and rejectionists, it seems, may have more than the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in their sights.

Finally, the kidnapping only underscores the current quandary of U.S. policy. In his remarks condemning the crime, Secretary of State John Kerry reaffirmed the U.S. view that Hamas is a terrorist organization, but he has said nothing further on the technocratic reconciliation government that exists because of Hamas approval. That ambiguity will be difficult to maintain should the group emerge as culpable for this event, or even if Hamas seeks to blame it on renegade members outside its effective control. If U.S. policy was to "wait and see" how the technocratic government performs in practice, the test is now.

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

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