

Shooting in Hebron: Parsing an incident and its aftermath



Israeli soldiers carry the dead body of one of two Palestinians, whom the Israeli military said were shot dead by Israeli troops after they attacked an Israeli soldier, in Tal Rumaïda in the West Bank city of Hebron March 24, 2016. Reuters/Mussa Qawasma

For a number of days now, Israel has been abuzz over an incident in Hebron in which an IDF soldier shot a Palestinian in the head. Some facts concerning this incident are undisputed: The Palestinian was an attacker, who stabbed other soldiers before he was shot and killed. The Palestinian was lying on the ground, wounded (if not [already dead](#)) when he was shot in the head. The soldier was not under threat.

The story became a firestorm because of one reason: it was filmed by a volunteer of the NGO BTselem. The IDF was embarrassed and [arrested](#) the soldier for investigation. The political and military leaderships of Israel were quick to condemn the shooting – but soon a backlash from other leaders and from the public arrived. Two thirds of the Jewish public believe that no matter what the investigation reveals, the soldier should not be prosecuted. Many Israelis also don't understand why killing a terrorist is something that should be condemned.

As usual, the debate fast became a shouting match. It fast became a blend of many things, some of which are irrelevant, some not much more than political propaganda. Here is an attempt to put it in some order.

The incident

That is the key – and the problem for us is that the door is still locked. We have footage, we have leaks from the investigation, but we do not yet have the full picture and an answer to the crucial question: why did the

soldier decide to kill a man that posed no threat to him or his friends?

The possibilities are as follows:

1. He perceived him to be a threat even though he was not a threat.

In such case, there are two possibilities:

A. He was wrong to make this judgment and hence is guilty of unprofessional behavior that does not befit a soldier (but certainly not murder).

B. It was reasonable under the tense circumstances to make such a judgment, and hence the soldier is guilty of nothing. In tense situations such as this one, mistakes are to be expected.

2. He decided to kill him even though he knew there was no threat.

In such case, there are two possibilities:

A. He thought that an attacker should be killed, IDF instructions notwithstanding, and should be prosecuted for disobedience and possibly murder.

B. He did not understand the IDF instructions and did not realize that shooting a person who poses no threat is forbidden. If that is the case, it is a failure of the IDF.

The Response

Many Israelis were unhappy with the rapid response of the political echelon to the incident. They felt that the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister, by condemning the shooting in strong terms, were essentially throwing a soldier under the bus to appease international public opinion. Here, again, we have to parse the main claims that were made against them:

1. They should have waited for the investigation to be completed before issuing a condemnation.

2. By condemning the soldier early, the leaders made it much more difficult for the soldier to be treated fairly and investigated impartially.

3. Israel should not publically condemn its own soldiers, even when they make a mistake.

The first claim makes some sense. But the PM and Defense Minister would counter argue that in today's world of fast communication and aggressive media, waiting with the condemnation would have greatly damaged Israel's image. No media outlet is going to wait with its report until the investigation is over, and hence it was essential for the leaders to issue a strong response immediately.

The second claim also makes sense. It is important that the investigators and (if it comes to that) justices try to isolate themselves from all the political brouhaha surrounding the case.

The third claim merits a discussion. If a soldier makes a mistake on a battlefield, he should still feel guarded by the IDF and the state. If a soldier decides to act criminally, disobeying orders and damaging Israel – both morally and in the court of public opinion – no such shield should be extended to him.

The Attacker

The mother of the soldier cried that her son is presented as a criminal while the Palestinian attacker is painted as a saint.

The attacker was not a saint. The debate is not about him – whether he deserved to die or not. Had he died during the attack, there would be no issue. The debate is about us – whether we kill attackers who are no longer a threat.

The Politicians

Politicians do what their job requires, and they do what the public wants them to do. The PM and Defense Minister condemned the shooting. The public seems to feel that their condemnation was somewhat premature. Their colleague and rival – the Education Minister – took advantage of this sentiment, and put himself at the head of the camp that demands to back the soldiers and patience with the verdict.

Is the Prime Minister justified in being upset with Minister Bennett's political ploy? Of course he is.

Is it legitimate for Bennett to capitalize on this incident and make it a political tool? That's the nature of politics the way it is played in Israel.

The Public

Four worrying signs concerning the (Jewish) Israeli public:

1. The public seems to be too ready to cast aside established moral and legal rules following the recent Palestinian attacks. There is nothing surprising about this – when people feel threatened they have less patience for sensibilities such as the requirement not to shoot an attacker when he is already subdued.
2. The public seems to have lost patience with the inability of the government to put an end to Palestinian attacks and is looking for quick fixes for a situation that has no quick fixes.
3. The public seems to confuse its love for IDF soldiers with the need to maintain law, order and morality in Israel. Soldiers are not above the law. The IDF is not above criticism.
4. The public seems unable to have an unbiased, apolitical, detached, discussion. Loving the IDF is not right-wing. Expecting morality is not left-wing. Fighting terrorism is not right-wing. Opposing murder is not left-wing.