

Israel Apologizes and Sends Condolences for the Death of an Autistic Palestinian

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The story is from [Reuters](#):

More than a week after Israeli police shot dead an unarmed and autistic Palestinian in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday called the killing a tragedy and offered his condolences to the family.

Iyad al-Halaq, 32, was killed during a police chase in Jerusalem's Old City on May 30. A police spokesman said at the time officers suspected he was carrying a weapon.

The police internal affairs division is investigating the shooting.

“What happened to Iyad al-Halaq is a tragedy. This was a man with disabilities, autism, who was suspected – and we (now)

know wrongly – of being a terrorist in a very sensitive venue,” Netanyahu said in comments that fell short of an apology. “I know that (police) are conducting examinations. We all share in the grief of the family,” Netanyahu said in public remarks to his cabinet.

Addressing Internal Security Minister Amir Ohana, who is responsible for police, at the cabinet meeting, Netanyahu said: “I expect your full investigation into this matter.”

But before Netanyahu, Israeli officials had already apologized. Defense Minister Benny Gantz had expressed condolences to the family of Iyad Halaq, and apologized on behalf of the government and people of Israel, the very day after Halaq was killed. “We are really sorry about the incident in which Iyad Halaq was shot to death and we share in the family’s grief,” Gantz said. “I am sure this subject will be investigated swiftly and conclusions will be reached.”

Furthermore, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel Israel Stern, two days after Gantz’s statement, paid a condolence call on the family, to express his sorrow over the tragedy.

Why, some may wonder, didn’t Israeli officials go in person to the family to offer their condolences? It turns out that they wanted to do so, but it was the family that insisted they didn’t want any Israeli officials to visit them. One can hardly fault them for not visiting; they were only respecting the wishes of Halaq’s family.

The tragedy unfolded this way:

Iyad Halaq was at the entry to the Old City known as the Lion’s Gate, on his way to classes for special needs students. His family said they told him always to hold his cell phone in his hand, and it was that cell phone that looked like a weapon to the Israeli police, who reported that they had spotted a suspect “with a suspicious object that looked like a pistol.”

The police confronted him. He panicked, and ran off. When he failed to obey orders to stop, the police – there appear to have been two officers – opened fire. Did they hit him while he was running? It's still unclear. He then ran into a garbage room where he hid. The police followed after, and no doubt fearing for their own lives, either shot at him, or at anything he might have been hiding behind.

Had Iyad Halaq not been holding the cellphone, mistaken for a pistol, he would not have been asked to halt. Had he not been autistic, he likely would not have taken off when the police asked him to halt (so they could check what he was carrying). There is no reason to think the police were shooting to kill him as he ran, but things changed when he suddenly went into that garbage room to hide. The police, at that point, feeling themselves endangered by someone they thought carried a pistol and was now hiding behind some trash cans and likely to shoot at them, may then have used deadly force. A profound tragedy of errors, for which all Israelis are sorrowful.

When Prime Minister Netanyahu referred to “a very sensitive venue,” he meant the Old City, a place where lone-wolf Palestinian terrorists have struck many times in the past. And he likely also had in mind the last time a Palestinian terrorist attacked right at the Lion's Gate, where the police first encountered, and tried to halt, Iyad Halaq.

Here is the description of one of those attacks at the Lion's Gate:

On 3 October 2015, a Palestinian resident of al-Bireh attacked the Benita family near the Lions' Gate in Jerusalem, as they were on their way to the Western Wall to pray. The attacker murdered Aaron Benita, the father of the family, and injured the mother Adele and their 2-year-old son Matan. Nehemia Lavi, a resident who heard screams and came to help was also murdered and his gun taken by the assailant. The attacker, 19 year old Muhanad Shafeq Halabi was shot and

killed by police as he was firing on pedestrians.

Adele Benita described the horror of being stabbed, trying to help her husband, and screaming for help while, "There were lots of Arabs around looking ... laughing and smiling..." Benita told the New York Times that she, "Screamed, I begged for aid," but, "They stood chatting and laughing – they spat at me." As she ran past them to find help, Arab onlookers "spat at me and slapped me in the face. While the knife was still stuck in me they slapped me and laughed at me."

You can find details of many similar attacks simply by doing an Internet search for "terrorist attacks" and "Israel." It makes for horrifying reading. This is the reality that keeps police in or near the Old City and its many entrances ("gates") on high alert.

Palestinians have drawn comparisons between the Palestinian man's fatal encounter with police and the death in the United States of African-American George Floyd after a police officer in Minneapolis pressed a knee into his neck while detaining him.

It's perfectly predictable that such a malevolent comparison would be made by Israel's enemies. In the same vein, they are absurdly claiming that the Minneapolis police must surely have been taught to use chokeholds by Israeli police. But it won't wash. George Floyd did not carry any weapons, and the police who held him, and then held him down, knew it, whereas the Israeli police believed that Iyad Halaq was carrying a pistol. There was no eight-minute chokehold placed on a helpless man insisting throughout that he could not breathe. As far as the Israeli police were concerned – and it was not an irrational conclusion, judging by what he appeared to hold in his hand, and from his suspect behavior in fleeing and then in hiding – Iyad Halaq was armed and dangerous, and had to be stopped. A terrible mistake, sorrowfully acknowledged by the Prime

Minister, apologized for by the Defense Minister, and with condolences offered in person to Iyad Halaq's family by the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi. But Iyad Halaq's death was the result of a grievous set of errors, and to liken it to the murder of George Floyd is unconscionable.

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