

Palestinian kills four Israeli soldiers in Jerusalem truck attack

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A Palestinian Arab killed four Israeli soldiers and injured another 15 on Sunday. He was shot to death after he rammed a truck at high speed into a group of soldiers alighting from a tour bus near the Old City in East Jerusalem.

The driver of the truck was identified as Fadi Ahmad Al-Qanbar, 28, of the Palestinian neighborhood of Jabel Mukaber in East Jerusalem, near the scene of the killings. The four soldiers killed, three women and a man, were identified as 2nd lieutenant Yael Yekutiel, 20, and cadets Shira Hajaj, 22, Shira Tzur, 20, and Erez Orbach, 20.

Both Israeli government officials and the US State Department immediately denounced the attack as linked to ISIS, comparing it to the truck attack on a Christmas market in Berlin last month. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told reporters, “We know that there is a sequence of terror attacks. There definitely could be a connection between them, from France to Berlin and now Jerusalem.” Previously, however, Israeli police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told CNN “there are no potential active ISIS cells here in Israel.”

There is no indication, as of yet, that al-Qanbar was affiliated with any organization, terrorist or otherwise, and no group claimed responsibility for the attack. Neighbors and friends described al-Qanbar as a family man of traditional Muslim views, married and with four children.

There were conflicting reports about whether he had served time in an Israeli prison, something that is very common among young Palestinian men in the occupied territories. A relative told Israel Radio, “We were surprised; he was not a member of Hamas or a former prisoner. He never harmed anyone or caused problems.” But several Palestinian media outlets

reported he had once been in prison.

The attack came after more than a year of mounting tension in the Israeli-occupied territories of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, triggered by the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements and the unending repression of the Palestinian population, nearly 50 years after the seizure of the territories during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

Since September 2015, Israeli soldiers and settlers have killed more than 230 Palestinians, while Palestinian attackers, mainly armed with kitchen knives or driving vehicles, have killed 40 Israelis. The four killed Sunday was largest number of Israelis killed in any incident in the occupied territories over the past 16 months.

Video footage of the incident showed a scene of savage violence. The driver plowed into the crowd of soldiers as they were collecting their baggage from the tour bus. He then reversed the vehicle and backed over the prone bodies, trapping at least 10 soldiers underneath, who had to be rescued with a crane. Soldiers, tour guides and armed bystanders riddled the cab of the truck with bullets.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the Jabel Mukaber neighborhood sealed off, while his Security Cabinet decided to destroy the family home in which al-Qanbar lived and bar release of his body to relatives. His sister said police had arrested his parents, wife and two brothers.

Responses to the attack showed the deepening political fault-lines within Israeli society. One of the tour guides claimed that the soldiers had hesitated to open fire at the truck, even after it had first smashed into their ranks, because of the conviction of Sgt. Elor Azaria last week for executing a captured and severely wounded Palestinian attacker in Hebron in March 2016.

The Azaria case has become a rallying cry for Israeli ultra-right parties and fascistic settlers, and Netanyahu telephoned the soldier's parents after the guilty verdict to give his condolences.

Several of the soldiers responded angrily to the tour guide's claims. One young female soldier posted a denunciation on social media, identifying herself as a cadet of the Ezra Brigade on the Nahshon track, whose "friends were wounded and some of them were even killed."

She urged readers to "stop distributing opinions that are based on baseless lies," adding, "There is no connection to Elor Azaria. No connection. None of you should dare compare a semitrailer traveling 100 km/h to a terrorist who is lying down, incapacitated."



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