**Israel Blames Hamas in Disappearance of Three Teens**

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Israel accused Hamas of abducting three Israeli teenagers missing in the West Bank since Thursday evening, after the military arrested dozens of Palestinians overnight and enforced a closure around the city of Hebron.

The disappearance of Gilad Shaar, Naftali Frenkel and Eyal Yifrach while hitchhiking on a highway in the West Bank has become a crisis for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and is straining ties with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas over the jointly backed government he formed with Hamas two weeks ago.

Mr. Netanyahu, who huddled with security chiefs over the weekend at military headquarters in Tel Aviv, said Saturday night that "there is no doubt" that the teenagers had been kidnapped by a terrorist group.

On Sunday, he told his cabinet that a wave of arrests of top Hamas members in the West Bank had confirmed that the Islamist militant group was responsible. "We know that for a fact,'' he said, but offered no evidence to back up the statement.

The prime minister said Saturday that the disappearance was a result of Mr. Abbas's reconciliation efforts with Hamas, and said the Palestinian president would be held responsible by Israel for the well-being of the teenagers.

Sami Abu Zuhri, spokesman for the Hamas leadership, in Gaza called Mr. Netanyahu's accusation "stupid."

The Palestinian Authority's Foreign Affairs Ministry condemned Israel's arrest of 80 Palestinians around the West Bank. The political friction from the incident risks harming ties between Israeli and Palestinian Authority security forces, which have cooperated in recent years to keep the West Bank relatively calm, Israeli security analysts said.

"Netanyahu's method of holding President Mahmoud Abbas responsible [for the missing settlers] is a clue to the inability and failure of Netanyahu," the ministry said, according to the official Palestinian news agency.

No one from the Palestinian Authority or Hamas has commented on the teenagers' whereabouts.

Secretary of State [John Kerry](http://topics.wsj.com/person/K/John-Kerry/7196) said there were indications pointing to Hamas involvement, but that the U.S. is still seeking details on who is responsible.

If Israeli assertions about Hamas involvement are confirmed, it is likely to inspire more opposition in Congress to continued U.S. aid to the Fatah-Hamas-backed unity government, said Nathan Thrall, a Middle East analyst with the International Crisis Group.

Mr. Thrall added that Mr. Kerry's statement didn't appear to signal any immediate change in administration policy to continue working with the new Palestinian cabinet, which is composed of technocrats who aren't activists in political parties. The U.S. has said it will monitor the Palestinian government to ensure there is no Hamas involvement.

Israeli security officials said that since the start of the year, there had been dozens of attempted kidnappings foiled by security services.

Israelis fear that the purpose of the attempt is to force the government into releasing some of the 5,000 security prisoners and detainees in Israeli jails. In recent weeks, dozens of Palestinians have been on a hunger strike to protest Israel's policy of holding hundreds without trial in administrative detention.

"The kidnapping confronts Israel with a complex security test. In the five years since returning to power, Netanyahu hasn't faced many challenges like this," wrote Amos Harel, the military commentator for the Haaretz newspaper. "In an area where Israel enjoyed de facto control, like the West Bank, Netanyahu will prefer a rescue operation to prolonged negotiations.''

Friends of Masters Yiftach and Frenkel, both 16, and Mr. Shaar, 19, said they were making their way home from religious seminaries in the West Bank on Thursday evening. An educator at the settlement high school where two of the youths are enrolled said students saw the three teens get in a car headed for Tel Aviv.

Large numbers of Israeli forces have been conducting a manhunt for the missing students, going house to house and shutting roads in and around Hebron, a Hamas stronghold in the West Bank. Israeli security forces have also erected checkpoints around the Gaza Strip and limited passage at a Gaza-Israel crossing point for fear the teens might be smuggled into the enclave controlled by Hamas.

The alleged abduction has stirred traumatic memories in Israel of the ordeal of Gilad Shalit, a 19-year-old soldier who was abducted from the Israeli border in 2006 and held in Gaza by Hamas for five years before being released in return for more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners.

The incident also recalled the abduction of Nachshon Wachsman, a soldier kidnapped in central Israel nearly 20 years ago and held in the West Bank by Hamas before being killed in a failed commando raid.

Israeli television showed footage of Israelis at the seminaries where the boys studied holding special prayer services for the boys' safety.

In a sign of potential pressure on the government, thousands of Israelis gathered for prayer at the Western Wall plaza in Jerusalem and hundreds in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square. Speaking to the crowd in Tel Aviv, Former chief Rabbi Yisrael Lau said, "Don't wait, God forbid, like with Gilad Shalit."