

Israel closes probe into fatal shooting of Palestinian assailant

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Footage captured by bystanders appeared to show Israeli police officers continuing to shoot a Palestinian man from point-blank range while he was lying on the ground [File: Ahmad Gharabli/AFP]

Tel Aviv, December 9 (RHC)-- Israel has closed an investigation into two police officers who shot dead a Palestinian assailant as he lay on the ground, accepting the claim that they had acted in self-defense. Israel's Justice Ministry said on Thursday it had reached the decision to close the case after questioning the two officers.

“It was an incident that took place over mere seconds, in circumstances in which there was a real and concrete threat to the lives of the fighters and the civilians in the area,” it said in a statement. “It was found to be legally justified to use a weapon.”

The Palestinian, identified as 25-year-old Mohammad Salima, had allegedly stabbed an ultra-Orthodox Jewish man on December 4 outside Jerusalem’s Old City. He then reportedly attempted to stab the police officers before being shot.

Footage shot by bystanders appeared to show Israeli police officers continuing to shoot Salima from point-blank range while he was lying on the ground and not appearing to pose a threat.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the killing, saying: “This is a continuation of the Israeli escalation against the Palestinian people” and calling the shooting “a war crime.” And the United Nation’s Human Rights Office (OHCHR) said it was “shocked by the apparent extrajudicial execution.”

The killing has drawn comparisons to a widely publicised 2016 incident in which an Israeli soldier, Elor Azaria, was caught on camera shooting a wounded Palestinian attacker who was lying on the ground, prompting calls for an investigation.

Azaria served two-thirds of a 14-month sentence after being convicted of reckless manslaughter, in a case that sharply divided Israelis. The military pushed for his prosecution, saying he violated its code of ethics, while many Israelis, particularly on the nationalist right, defended his actions.

Public Defense Minister Omer Bar-Lev, who oversees the police, said the officers who killed Salima had “a second or two” after the first shot to determine whether the attacker was “going to set off an explosive belt.”

Opposition groups and human rights groups have called the incident a “summary execution.” Legislator Ofer Cassif of the Joint List, a predominantly Palestinian party in the Israeli Knesset, wrote on Twitter that that “executing a man who no longer constitutes a threat is a horrible crime. This is the reality created by the occupation.”

Israeli human rights group, B’Tselem, said in a tweet: “Contrary to the sanitized terminology Israeli authorities and media use, the assailant wasn’t “neutralized.” He was summarily executed.”

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