**TERRORIST OR JOURNALIST? WHO REALLY WAS THE SLAIN GAZAN YASER MURTAJA?**

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The general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists accused Israeli authorities of “fabricating lies to justify murder” in the case of a Palestinian journalist who was killed last Friday during protests in Gaza. Others have called into question Israel’s assertions on Wednesday that Yaser Murtaja was a Hamas member.

Murtaja, a 30-year-old photographer and cameraman, was killed near Khan Yunis during the second Friday of the Palestinian “Great March of Return” on the Gaza border. He was wearing a blue journalist-style flak jacket marked with the word “press.”

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman said that Murtaja was flying a drone near the border. However, Palestinians present claimed that journalists were targeted by IDF snipers during the clashes and that he did not use his drone that day. MKs MKs Ksenia Svetlova and Zouheir Bahloul called for an investigation and the IDF said it was looking into the incident.

Murtaja was well-known in Gaza and he was the co-founder of Ain Media. He had a drone and had posted video from it on March 30. In the past he worked with locals and international media, including Al Jazeera.

Norwegian Refugee Council secretary-general Jan Egeland told The Guardian that Murtaja was a “civilian and a journalist.” The Committee to Protect Journalists called on authorities to “hold to account anyone who shot journalists with live ammunition.”

On Tuesday, unnamed Israeli security officials told Walla that Murtaja was a Hamas activist and active in the Hamas “security apparatus’s work on a daily basis” to help the terrorist organization with intelligence gathering. Prime Minister’s Office spokesmen Ofir Gendelman and David Keyes both tweeted that Murtaja was not only on the Hamas payroll since 2011 but that he held the rank of captain and had a “prior association with the military wing [the Izzadin Kassam Brigades].”

The International Federation of Journalists disputes this and alleges that “Israeli soldiers murdered a journalist,” and the “defense minister is more interested in spouting propaganda and engaging in a cover-up than in carrying out a thorough and transparent investigation.”

A NEW TWIST emerged on Thursday when it was revealed that the US Agency for International Development provided a $11,700 grant to Ain Media in March. Reuters reported that the grant was for technical assistance and equipment, and State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert indicated Murtaja had been “vetted” under department guidelines. However, she didn’t provide the specifics of the case. An inquiry to USAID was not answered by press time.

This raises two distinct questions. If Murtaja was a Hamas officer and using equipment to gather intelligence against Israel, then that would indicate that major NGOs and the US had erred greatly in working with him. Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist, also worked with Murtaja and wrote about him on Instagram after his death.

Israel has sought in the past to spotlight NGOs accused of working with Hamas. A manager for World Vision was detained in 2016. Earlier this year Israel also indicted a member of a Turkish humanitarian aid group in Gaza, accusing him of financing Hamas’s military wing. However, public inquiries about Murtaja’s work had not been raised before his death.

The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center said that Murtaja’s “double role as a media man and Hamas operative is part of a well-known phenomenon.” It said that an examination of 17 people killed in the 2014 war in Gaza (Operation Protective Edge) who were said to be journalists revealed that eight of them “belonged to Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.”

However the International Federation of Journalists claims that in 2015, Murtaja was actually a victim of Hamas. According to an AFP report, while filming near the border he was detained by Hamas security members and beaten to the extent that he required hospitalization. The Israeli security sources speaking to Walla contend that 2015 was the same year Murtaja was prevented from bringing a drone into Gaza, allegedly in connection with his work for Hamas. Could it be that he was both a victim of a Hamas beating in 2015 and on its payroll as an officer?

On Thursday, Keyes told The Jerusalem Post that Murtaja was 100 percent an officer with Hamas. “I’ve seen the intelligence and there is not one scintilla of doubt about his being an officer in Hamas.”

Nevertheless, the story still raises question marks. While Israel has not revealed any proof to its claims, members of Murtaja’s extended family appear to have had associations with Hamas, as revealed by photos of them posted online. Others familiar with the situation in Gaza have pointed out that many people in Gaza are linked to Hamas in some way because Hamas governs the Strip and is active in many layers of society. One person who knew Murtaja dismissed claims he was a terrorist or in any way affiliated with Hamas’s military wing.

The question still remains what happened on April 6 when he was killed. Even if he was linked to Hamas, was he killed because of that, or mistakenly shot, or shot due to his proximity to the security fence. The initial claim that he was flying a drone has not been confirmed, leaving many questions about what led to Murtaja’s death and why allegations he was a Hamas member only emerged days later. So the question still remains - who was Yaser Murtaja?