

<https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-war-sexual-violence-zaka-ca7905bf9520b1e646f86d72cdf03244#>



How 2 debunked accounts of sexual violence on Oct. 7 fueled a global dispute over Israel-Hamas war



Volunteers from the ZAKA rescue service remove blood stains from a public bomb shelter on a road near the Israeli-Gaza border in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, Nov. 20, 2023. Some allege the accounts of sexual assault were purposely concocted. Zaka officials and others dispute that. Regardless, AP's examination of Zaka's handling of the now debunked stories shows how information can be clouded and distorted in the chaos of the conflict. (AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg, File)

By [TIA GOLDENBERG](#) and [JULIA FRANKEL](#)

Updated 1:20 AM MDT, May 22, 2024

JERUSALEM (AP) — Chaim Otmazgin had tended to dozens of shot, burned or mutilated bodies before he reached the home that would put him at the center of a global clash.

Working in a kibbutz that was ravaged by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, Otmazgin — a volunteer commander with ZAKA, an Israeli search and rescue organization — saw the body of a teenager, shot dead and separated from her family in a different room. Her pants had been pulled down below her waist. He thought that was evidence of sexual violence.



Volunteers from the ZAKA rescue service remove blood stains from a public bomb shelter on a road near the Israeli-Gaza border in the aftermath of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, Nov. 20, 2023. (AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg, File)

He alerted journalists to what he'd seen. He tearfully recounted the details in a nationally televised appearance in the Israeli Parliament. In the frantic hours, days and weeks that followed the Hamas attack, his testimony ricocheted across the world.

But it turns out that what Otmazgin thought had occurred in the home at the kibbutz hadn't happened.

Beyond the [numerous and well-documented atrocities](#) committed by Hamas militants on Oct. 7, some accounts from that day, like Otmazgin's, proved untrue.

“It’s not that I invented a story,” Otmazgin told The Associated Press in an interview, detailing the origins of his initial explosive claim — one of two by ZAKA volunteers about sexual violence that turned out to be unfounded.

“I couldn’t think of any other option” other than the teen having been sexually assaulted, he said. “At the end, it turned out to be different, so I corrected myself.”

But it was too late.

[The United Nations](#) and other organizations have presented credible evidence that Hamas militants committed sexual assault during their rampage. The prosecutor for the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan, said Monday he had reason to believe that three key Hamas leaders bore responsibility for “rape and other acts of sexual violence as crimes against humanity.”

Though the number of assaults is unclear, photo and video from the attack’s aftermath have shown bodies with legs splayed, clothes torn and blood near their genitals.

However, debunked accounts like Otmazgin’s have encouraged skepticism and fueled a highly charged debate about the scope of what occurred on Oct. 7 — one that is still playing out on social media and in college campus protests.

Some allege the accounts of sexual assault were purposely concocted. ZAKA officials and others dispute that. Regardless, AP’s examination of ZAKA’s handling of the now debunked stories shows how information can be clouded and distorted in the chaos of the conflict.



Israeli soldiers inspect the site of the Nova music festival where at least 260 Israeli festival-goers were killed during the attack by Hamas militants on Oct 7, near the border with the Gaza Strip in southern Israel. Oct. 13, 2023.(AP Photo/Ariel Schalit, File)

As some of the first people on the scene, ZAKA volunteers offered testimony of what they saw that day. Those words have helped journalists, Israeli lawmakers and U.N. investigators paint a picture of what occurred during Hamas' attack. (ZAKA, a volunteer-based group, does not do forensic work. The organization has been a fixture at Israeli disaster sites and scenes of attacks since it was founded in 1995. Its specific job is to collect bodies in keeping with Jewish law.)

Still, it took ZAKA months to acknowledge the accounts were wrong, allowing them to proliferate. And the fallout from the debunked accounts shows how the topic of sexual violence has been used to further political agendas.

Israel points to [sexual violence on Oct. 7](#) to highlight what it says is Hamas' savagery and to justify its wartime goal of neutralizing any repeated threat coming from Gaza. It has accused the international community of ignoring or playing down evidence of sexual violence claims, alleging anti-Israel bias. It says any untrue stories were an anomaly in the face of the many documented atrocities.

In turn, some of Israel's critics have seized on the ZAKA accounts, along with others shown to be untrue, to allege that the Israeli government has distorted the facts to prosecute a war — one [in which more than 35,000 Palestinians have been killed](#), many of them women and children, according to Gaza health officials.

A U.N. fact-finding team found “reasonable grounds” to believe that some of those who stormed southern Israel on Oct. 7 had committed sexual violence, including rape and gang rape. But the U.N. investigators also said that in the absence of forensic evidence and survivor testimony, it would be impossible to determine the scope of such violence. Hamas has denied its forces committed sexual violence.

BODY BAGS AND ROCKET FIRE

Israel was [caught off guard](#) by [the ferocity of the Oct. 7 assault](#), the deadliest in the nation's history. About 1,200 people were killed and 250 taken hostage. It took days for the military to clear the area of militants.

There were hundreds of bodies scattered across southern Israel, bearing various signs of abuse: burns, bullet holes, signs of mutilation, marks indicating bodies were bound. ZAKA volunteers weren't used to dealing with so many bodies.

“You get dizzy at some point,” said Moti Bukjin, ZAKA's spokesperson. “Some of the bodies are burned. Some are mutilated. Some of the bodies are decapitated. Every house has a story.”

Standard protocols for dealing with attacks, which Israel encountered frequently on a far smaller scale in the early 2000s, collapsed. There was confusion over who was dead and who was taken captive, especially in the hard-hit [communal farming villages](#) and in the aftermath of [the outdoor Nova music festival](#).



The site of the Nova music festival where at least 260 Israeli festival-goers were killed during the attack by Hamas militants on Oct 7, near the border with the Gaza Strip in southern Israel, Oct. 12, 2023. (AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg, File)

Authorities were concerned that remaining militants might snatch more bodies. ZAKA says it was instructed to gather the dead as swiftly as possible and send them for [identification and quick burial, according to Jewish custom](#). ZAKA said it sent some 800 volunteers to southern Israel, arriving at the music festival late on Oct. 7 and entering the kibbutzim two days later, according to Otmazgin.

For the first three days, many hardly slept at all. Accompanied by military escorts, volunteers went house to house, wrapping the bodies in white plastic bags on which they wrote the person's gender, the house number where they were found and any other identifying details. Then they'd say the Jewish mourning prayer and load them into a truck, according to Tomer Peretz, who volunteered for the first time with ZAKA in the days following the attack.

As first responders worked, rocket fire from Gaza boomed overhead. Volunteers paused and crouched when air raid sirens blared. They used anything they could find to move bodies — even shopping carts. “We worked a minute and a half per body, from the moment we touch it to the moment it is on the truck,” said Otmazgin, commander of special units with ZAKA.

Peretz, a U.S.-based artist, said the volunteers weren't there to do forensic work; he thought the soldiers who cleared the houses of explosives beforehand were handling that process. But the Israeli military told the AP that the army did not do any forensic work in the wake of Oct. 7.

Bukjin said police forensics teams were mostly focused on the southern cities of Sderot and Ofakim. Otmazgin said forensics workers were present in the kibbutzim but spread thin and could not follow standard — and painstaking — protocols because of the scale of the attack. He said forensics teams in the area mostly instructed ZAKA on how to help identify the bodies.

That means that bodies which might have shown signs of sexual assault could have eluded examination. Instead, they were loaded into body bags, sent to a facility to be identified and dispatched for quick burial.

“People seem to have expected that the aftermath of the attack would be like a movie, that immediately the police would come, that everything would be very sterile and very clean. People who don't live in a war zone do not understand the horrific chaos that took place that day,” said Orit Sulitzeanu, the executive director of The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel.

The group has spent months [gathering evidence](#) of sexual violence that occurred that day, sifting through many accounts emerging from the chaotic early days just after the attack. “Some of those stories that turned out not to be true were not lies,” she said. They were, she said, “mistakes.”

FIRST ACCOUNT: PANTS PULLED DOWN

Otmazgin said he was the origin of one of two debunked stories by ZAKA volunteers about sexual assault.

He said he entered a home in [Kibbutz Be'eri](#), one of the hardest-hit communities, where nearly a tenth of the population of roughly 1,000 was killed, and found the body of a teenage girl separated from two of her relatives. Her pants, he said, were pulled down. He assumed that meant she had been sexually assaulted.

“They slaughtered her. They shot her in the head and her pants are pulled down to here. I put that out there. Have someone give me a different interpretation,” he said then, showing an AP reporter a photo he took of the scene, which he had altered by pulling up the teenager's pants.



Israeli soldiers inspect the site of the Nova music festival where at least 260 Israeli festival-goers were killed during the attack by Hamas militants on Oct 7, near the border with the Gaza Strip in southern Israel. Oct. 13, 2023. (AP Photo/Ariel Schalit, File)

Today, he maintains that he never said outright that the girl whose body he saw had been sexually assaulted. But his telling strongly suggested that was the case. Otmazgin says [he told journalists and lawmakers](#) details of what he'd seen and asked if they might have some other interpretation.

Nearly three months later, ZAKA found out his interpretation was wrong. After cross-checking with military contacts, ZAKA found that a group of soldiers had dragged the girl's body across the room to make sure it wasn't booby-trapped. During the procedure, her pants had come down.

Otmazgin said it took time to learn the truth because the soldiers who moved the body had been deployed to Gaza for weeks and were not reachable. He said he recognized that such accounts can cause damage, but he believes he rectified it by correcting his account months later.

A military spokesperson said he had no way of knowing what had happened to every body in the assault's immediate aftermath. He spoke on condition of anonymity in line with military regulations.

Another account with details similar to Otmazgin's but attributed to an anonymous combat medic has also come under scrutiny after emerging in international media, including in a story by the AP. But the medic did not disclose where he saw the scene.

The military would not make the medic available for further interviews, so it was not possible to reconcile the two accounts or verify the medic's.

SECOND ACCOUNT: EVERYTHING WAS CHARRED

Yossi Landau, a longtime ZAKA volunteer, was also working in Be'eri when he entered a home that would produce the second debunked story. Landau would recount to global media what he thought he saw: a pregnant woman lying on the floor, her fetus still attached to the umbilical cord wrenched from her body.

Otmazgin was overseeing the other ZAKA workers when he said Landau frantically called him and others into the home. But Otmazgin did not see what Landau described. Instead, he saw the body of a heavy-set woman and an unidentifiable hunk attached to an electric cable. Everything was charred.

Otmazgin said he told Landau that his interpretation was wrong — this wasn't a pregnant woman. Still, Landau believed his version, went on to tell the story to journalists and was cited in outlets around the world. Landau, along with other first responders, also told journalists he had seen beheaded children and babies. No convincing evidence had been publicized to back up that claim, and it was debunked by Haaretz and other major media outlets.

Bukjin said it took some time for ZAKA to understand that the story was not true, then asked Landau to stop telling it. Otmazgin also told Landau to stop telling the story, but that wasn't until about three months after the attack when ZAKA was wrapping up its work in the field. The United Nations said Landau's claim was unfounded.

Otmazgin said it has been difficult to rein Landau in, both because he vehemently believes in his version and because there is no way to stop journalists from engaging with him directly. Both Otmazgin and Bukjin attributed Landau's continued belief in the false account to him having been deeply traumatized by what he saw in the aftermath of Oct. 7.

AP journalists attempted to reach Landau multiple times. While he answered initial inquiries, he was ultimately unreachable.

'WE'RE NOT FORENSICS WORKERS'

Almost immediately after Oct. 7, Israel began [allowing groups of journalists to visit the ravaged kibbutzim](#). On the trips, journalists found ZAKA volunteers onsite to be some of the most accessible sources of information and some shared what they thought they saw, even though, as Bukjin notes, "we are not forensics workers."

"They pretend to know, sometimes very naively, what happened to the bodies they are dealing with," said Gideon Aran, a sociologist at Jerusalem's Hebrew University who wrote a recent book on the organization.

Bukjin said that the group’s usual media protocols faltered and that volunteers, who he said typically were vetted by him before being interviewed, were speaking to journalists directly. “The information is wild, is not controlled right,” said Peretz, the first-time volunteer. He said he took photos and video of what he saw even though he was told not to and was interviewed repeatedly about what he witnessed.

Other first responders also offered accounts — of babies beheaded, or hung from a clothesline, or killed together in a nursery, or placed in an oven – which were later debunked by Israeli reporters.

ZAKA is a private civilian body made up of 3,000 mostly Orthodox Jewish volunteer workers. Beyond its work in Israel, the group has also sent teams to international incidents, including the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan and the 2002 attacks in Mombasa, Kenya. As part of its role to ensure burial according to Jewish law, its volunteers scour crime scenes for remains in order to bury each body as completely as possible.

Aran, the sociologist, said Oct. 7 was unlike anything the organization had previously witnessed. ZAKA’s main experience with victim identification before Oct. 7 was limited to distinguishing militant attackers from their victims, not determining who was a victim of sexual assault, Aran said.



Israelis killed by Hamas militants lie on the road near Sderot, Israel, Oct. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg, File)

DEBUNKED ACCOUNTS VS. THE EVIDENCE

After untrue accounts of sexual assault filtered into international media, the process of debunking them appeared, at times, to take center stage in the global dispute over the facts of Oct. 7. On social media, accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers question the very occurrence of sexual violence.

The loud debate belies a growing body of evidence supporting the claim that sexual assault took place that day, even as its scope remains difficult to ascertain.

The U.N. team investigating sexual violence said it saw “credible circumstantial information which may be indicative of some forms of sexual violence, including genital mutilation, sexualized torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.”

That included photos and videos showing a minimum of 20 corpses with clothes that had been torn, revealing private body parts, and 10 bodies with indications of bound wrists and or tied legs. No digital materials showed sexual violence in real time, the report said.

The investigators described the accounts that originated with Otmazgin and Landau to be “unfounded.” Regarding Otmazgin’s original account, they said the “crime scene had been altered by a bomb squad and the bodies moved, explaining the separation of the body of the girl from the rest of her family.”

Otmazgin said he publicly corrected himself after discovering what had transpired, including to the U.N. investigators he met. He showed the investigators — and later an AP reporter — photos and video, including one of a deceased woman who had a blood-speckled, flesh-colored bulb in her genital area, as well as several bodies of women with blood near their genitals and another who appeared to have small sharp objects protruding from her upper thigh and above her genitals.

More evidence is emerging as time goes by. A released hostage has described facing sexual violence in captivity in [an account to The New York Times](#), and a man at the music festival said he heard a woman screaming she was being raped.

On Monday, releasing arrest warrants for top Hamas and Israeli officials, ICC Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan said that “there are reasonable grounds to believe that hostages taken from Israel have been kept in inhumane conditions, and that some have been subject to sexual violence, including rape, while being held in captivity.”

The U.N. report shines a light on the issues that have contributed to the skepticism over sexual violence. It said there was “limited crime scene processing” and that some evidence of sexual assault may have been lost due to “the interventions of some inadequately trained volunteer first responders.” It also said global scrutiny of the accounts emerging from Oct. 7 may have deterred survivors from coming forward.

PULLING FOCUS FROM THE VICTIMS

In the fraught global discourse surrounding Oct. 7 and the war it sparked, sexual violence has been a particular point of tension.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as prominent figures such as former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and top technology executive Sheryl Sandberg, have called out what they saw as global indifference toward Israeli women who were sexually assaulted in the attack.

Some critics of Israel's war, meanwhile, have raised questions about the weight of the evidence, using debunked testimonies, including from ZAKA volunteers, to do so. The site oct7factcheck.com, which says its aim is to combat "atrocities propaganda" that could "justify military or political actions," has repeatedly challenged investigations in mainstream media about sexual violence.

The site, which is run by a loose coalition of tech industry employees supporting Palestinian rights, says it has not yet reached a conclusion on the occurrence of gender-based violence. It has alleged that ZAKA members are "behind many of the Oct. 7 fabrications." The site has also highlighted other debunked accounts, including about a baby found in an oven and a hostage giving birth in captivity.

Tariq Kenney-Shawa, a U.S. policy fellow at Al-Shabaka, a Palestinian think tank, said a long history of what he calls Israeli disinformation and propaganda has fueled global skepticism over the claims. The debunked ZAKA stories, he said, contributed to the sense that Israel exaggerated accounts of atrocities committed by Hamas to dehumanize Palestinians as its military continues its deadly offensive.

"Skepticism of all claims made by the Israeli military, a military that is being investigated for genocide at The Hague, are not only justified but should be encouraged," he said. "That's why Palestinians, and much of the international community, are asking for thorough scrutiny."

Dahlia Scheindlin, a commentator on Israeli affairs, said those downplaying the atrocities committed by Hamas have seized on the debunked ZAKA accounts as "ammunition" to show that Israel fabricates or that Oct. 7 wasn't so bad, rather than examining all the available evidence to build a more comprehensive picture of what happened.

At the same time, any false accounts, even if produced without malice, lead to further polarization and pulls the focus away from victims, she argues. "Every bit of misinformation, disinformation — good faith or bad faith, mistakes or lies — is extremely destructive."

[TIA GOLDENBERG](#)

Goldenberg is an Associated Press reporter and producer covering Israel and the Palestinian territories. She previously reported on East and West Africa from Nairobi.

[JULIA FRANKEL](#)

Frankel is an Associated Press reporter in Jerusalem.