

THE WITNESS

«We Israelis are now more united than ever in defence of our nation»

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“It was shocking, I know people who were murdered by Hamas terrorists.” “Now all the shops and businesses in Tel Aviv are closed for safety, but Israelis are united like never before.” Zoltan Zholdi speaks with melancholy but determination about the situation in

Israel after the Hamas terrorist attack last October 7. He is a young entrepreneur from Tel Aviv who regularly travels between Israel and Italy for business. A week after the attack, he arrived in Milan, accompanied by his wife and one year old son. *The Daily Compass* spoke to him about the atmosphere and life in Israel after the surprise barbaric attack by Hamas near the Gaza border.

Two weeks have passed since Hamas attacked Israel, what is the situation on the ground in Tel Aviv where you live?

Life is very stressful. Missiles continue to rain down on Tel Aviv forcing us to live in lockdown. Everything is closed including schools, only the emergency services such as supermarkets and chemists are still open. The military has advised everyone to stay home. Those who can, are working from home. Those who can't, have no income. At home, everyone is watching the news for updates on the situation. Alarms go off at least once a day in Tel Aviv, but, near the border, it's non-stop. We live in a wartime situation and we don't know when it will end. It's difficult to describe the anxiety people feel at the moment. The military are still finding bodies after the attack which means families are discovering loved ones they hoped had survived, are in fact dead. Hamas has declared war on Israel.

What happens when a missile alarm sounds?

All modern apartments and housing in Israel have safe rooms which are strong enough to resist a missile attack. But, they are only relatively safe because they are easy to open from the outside, as we saw when Hamas entered the Kibbutz. The terrorists broke in, killed and tortured the people hiding in them. People who live in old buildings shelter in the stair cases. Once the alarm sounds, we have between 15 and 20 seconds to get into a safe room. We stay there for 10 minutes and then return to our usual routine. We are constantly on edge.

How have Israelis responded to the breach in security which caught Israel off guard when Hamas militants attacked?

In the first few days after the attacks, Israelis felt very insecure, but now we have different priorities. This isn't the moment to delve into what went wrong. That will come later. Now, we have to think about the future and putting all our effort and energy into defending ourselves and our nation. For example, thousands of reservists were called back to support the war effort. 100% of those called up responded positively but unexpectedly another 50% volunteered to join forces. Israelis are united like never before to face this war. When there is an emergency, everyone steps forward to protect our nation and looks for ways to make a contribution.

What forms does this solidarity take?

The gestures of solidarity are many. It varies from donations to getting food or medicines for those who find it difficult to go out or who can't work at the moment. The more courageous civilians who live close to the border take food, equipment and comfort to the soldiers on the frontline. We are trying to lift their moral. Everyone is trying to cheer each other up and transmit hope. Hamas wants us to live in fear. They filmed the atrocities they committed in Israel and put the videos on social media to show us the barbarity they are capable of, intending to fill us with fear. But, if we allow them to break our spirit, it as if they have already defeated us. We won't allow this to happen and we will win this war, as we did in the past when we were attacked.

Many are saying the quickest way to end a war is to negotiate a peace agreement, is that possible for the Israelis after what has happened?

Yes, peace is always better, if it is possible. Israel wants peace with the Palestinians. But, both sides need to agree. We feel all our efforts for peace have just exploded in our faces. How can you have peace if the other side, Hamas, has one objective, the destruction of Israel? They have openly declared they want to kill every Jew and eliminate Israel from the map. Israel has lived too long next to terrorists and we learned to live with the situation. Now, it's clear, we can't anymore. Israel is surrounded by enemies. We have even had to move our civilians from the northern border with Lebanon for their safety. All we can do is protect ourselves.

The Palestinians are often portrayed as the underdog and Israel the oppressor, why is that?

The Palestinians are very good at turning social media into a propaganda machine. They have very different values to us. Our first priority in this war is to bring all the hostages back home safely and then to eradicate the threat from Hamas. If the Israeli military are

going to bomb an area of Gaza, they warn the authorities, so innocent civilians can evacuate the area. Instead, Hamas want civilian casualties, death and destruction so they can show the images to the world and claim they are victims of Israel. They even stopped their own people fleeing the area before it was bombed. They ordered the people to go back and bombed the roads so they couldn't leave. They use their civilians as shields to gain sympathy. They don't care if women and children die. They have used them for suicide terrorist attacks in the past in Israel.

Iran has already stated it is ready to intervene on Hamas' side. The Abraham Accords is hanging in the balance. Are Israelis worried this war could become much bigger?

This is our biggest concern. We know a possible scenario is that the current situation could develop into a greater war involving Iran, Lebanon and Syria but also America, China and Russia. There is a possibility this could become a Third World War. The situation is very complicated. We know that Hamas had been planning the attack from Gaza for at least a year. They didn't attack because of internal divisions in Israel, as some say. Perhaps, it gave them the courage to attack now, but I believe they would have attacked us regardless.

What do you think of the protests in support of the Palestinians recently?

The only way explanation I can think of, is that people don't know the history, what has happened and what is going on in the Middle East. Minority groups like LGBTs are defending Hamas when they will be the first to pay the price if Hamas gains more power. Over the years, millions of dollars have been poured in to Gaza to help the Palestinians and they are still poor and hungry. Why? Israel has given them investments, electricity, jobs, water, food, support. Many other countries have poured money into Gaza but they have done nothing to help their people and to stabilise their economic situation. Everyone knows the money went into private bank accounts or to buy arms to attack Israel and not to help the people. The most worrying aspect is that Hamas rules Gaza because the Palestinians voted for them. It's difficult for us to trust the Palestinians with another peace agreement.

Photo: An Israeli woman looks at photos of Israelis missing and held captive in Gaza, displayed on a wall in Tel Aviv