

Israel's Doctors at War: First Hand Account From An American Pediatric Surgeon Volunteer

By Michael M. Fuenfer, MD, Post 100

On the Black Sabbath morning of October 7, 2023, Israel was once again forced to defend itself against an existential threat when fanatical, deranged, Hamas terrorists committed the worst atrocities perpetrated on Jews since the Holocaust. More than 1,300 innocent Israelis were murdered, including at least 31 American citizens. Current estimates are that 133 hostages remain somewhere in Gaza, with six surviving hostages identified as Americans. Mainstream media outlets in this country will not accurately report the true extent of this depravity, but there is a plethora of first-hand accounts by survivors, witnesses, and videos taken by the terrorists themselves posted online.

Put into perspective, the attack on Israel that day would be equivalent to the terrorist attacks visited upon the United States on September 11, 2001...times twenty. The sheer magnitude of major traumatic injuries inflicted on that day threatened to overwhelm the medical resources of hospitals in southern Israel. In the ensuing weeks, thousands of missiles rained down upon cities, towns and kibbutzim throughout the country. At the northern border of Israel with Lebanon, Hezbollah terrorists were poised to launch thousands of Katyusha rockets into Israel, and there was growing unrest in the West Bank. Fearing a war on three fronts, the Israeli Ministry of Health solicited medical volunteers from around the world willing to provide medical assistance if needed. I raised my hand, and after a few administrative formalities, I was fastening my seat belt on an El Al flight from Boston to Tel Aviv.

Upon arrival in Israel, I boarded a train north for the two hour journey to the city of Nahariya and the Galilee Medical Center (GMC) where I would be working. As the conductor walked down the aisle, I noticed a 9 mm Jericho semi-automatic pistol tucked securely into his back pocket. Welcome to Israel. Military service is compulsory for the majority of Israelis when they turn eighteen. Men are required to serve on active duty for thirty-two months and women twenty-four. After this period, they remain in the Reserve, subject to being called up to their units until the age of forty, but in this time of national emergency, many mobilized soldiers appear quite a bit older.

In the weeks following the October attacks, over 360,000 Israel Defense Force (IDF) Reservists' peacetime lives were put on hold as they were mobilized to defend the country. At each station, the train platforms were crowded with young Israelis clad in their newly-issued olive drab fatigues, combat boots and overloaded rucksacks enroute to their assigned units. As a general rule, terrorists don't wear uniforms or nametags, and throughout the country there are daily reports of violent, unprovoked attacks on civilians in public venues. IDF soldiers carry their weapons with them everywhere, mostly M-16A1 rifles, M4 carbines and variants of the IWI X95

assault rifle. If you're one of those individuals who is prone to panic attacks at the very sight of an automatic weapon, a country at war is not a place you should visit.

Unlike the case in most countries, when Israel goes to war, everyone goes to war...company CEOs, lawyers, students, rabbis, scientists, teachers, engineers, mechanics, shopkeepers, salesmen, and doctors...especially the doctors. The Galilee Medical Center (GMC) is situated only a few miles from the border with Lebanon, or put another way, an eleven second Hezbollah rocket flight away. During the 2006 Lebanon War, Hezbollah fired 3,970 rockets into Northern Israel in the course of a month, killing forty-three Israeli civilians. One of those rockets exploded in the Ophthalmology Clinic at the GMC. There were no casualties, but this provided the impetus for the hospital to convert the underground floors into wards capable of providing patient care as a contingency for future emergencies. In the days following the October 7 attacks, 96,000 residents of northern Israel were evacuated to the relative safety of the central and southern parts of the country.

At the GMC, all patients, including children in the Neonatal and Pediatric Intensive Care Units, were transported to the confined subterranean maze of corridors and rooms transformed into patient wards, protected by blast-proof doors, and reinforced walls. In the silent, gloomy, darkness of the deserted above-ground portion of the Children's Hospital, patient rooms and cribs lie empty, toys in the playroom carefully packed away, crayon drawings and colorful paintings made by small fingers still adorn the walls.

The makeshift underground wards are crowded, poorly-ventilated and not designed for patient comfort. But for now, that's the way it is, and the doctors, nurses and patients are adapting. Due to limitations on space and resources, each morning ambulances transport the less seriously ill patients to other medical facilities. One of the largest of these is the expansive Rambam Medical Center in Haifa, where a massive, purpose-built underground hospital is capable of accommodating more than 2000 patients.

Many hospital staff doctors throughout Israel are IDF Reservists and quite a few from the GMC were mobilized to their IDF medical

units, leaving some departments, including Pediatrics short-staffed. Several attendings had been working continuously without a day off for over four months, and although the physical and mental strain was evident, morale remains high, and an atmosphere of camaraderie fostered by shared sacrifice and a commitment to patient care predominated. The medical staff, residents, and medical students were fluent in English, but the majority of patients and parents were not. As someone not fluent in conversational Hebrew, the language barrier and the electronic medical record system served as obstacles to a certain extent, but other medical staff members were readily available

to serve as translators.

The population of Northern Israel is a very diverse one, comprised of Muslims, Jews, Christians and Druze sects who have been living and working together in peace for generations. This was clearly evident among the staff of the GMC whose inclusivity encompassed all religious affiliations and diasporas throughout the world. In the Operating Room, the surgeons were speaking Hebrew, the anesthesiologists were conversing in Russian, and the nurses conducting

conversations in a language that I was unable to identify. The Director of the GMC is a Christian Arab. Peaceful coexistence is an attainable goal when all parties commit to it.

As Israel enters into its eighth month of war, blaring sirens warn of incoming missiles and rockets with regularity, terrorist attacks are a daily occurrence. Hezbollah has thousands of Katyusha rockets aimed at Northern Israel, Iran is on the precipice of having the ability to produce nuclear weapons, and its proxies in Yemen and Syria continue to attack U.S. troops, and disrupt seaborne commerce in the region.

This is the Middle East today. The IDF is conducting the most complex and difficult military campaign in the history of warfare. It is implementing extraordinary measures to minimize civilian casualties, even with the knowledge that in doing so, the risk to its own soldiers is greatly enhanced. Despite these many challenges, the IDF will prosecute this war on its own terms, and defend their country with resolve, strength, and the determination to achieve total victory. They always have. They always will.

It was my privilege to be given the opportunity to contribute in some small way to the care of children caught up in this terrible conflict.



Dr. Michael Fuenfer on left, Dr. Nadav Slijper, Chief of Pediatric Surgery on right

Perspective on the War in Gaza by a 1973 Yom Kippur War Veteran

By Itzhak Brook, MD

I was a battalion physician in Sinai during the Yom Kippur War. Those who fought and survived the 1973 Yom Kippur War hoped that the bitter lessons of that war had been learned and that Israel would never experience a similar catastrophe.

Tragically, one day after the 50th anniversary of that war, history repeated itself with the devastating Hamas attack of October 7. The similarities between these events are chillingly striking.

The Yom Kippur War began with an attack by Egypt and Syria on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. There were many signs that war was imminent. Both countries visibly massed hundreds of thousands of soldiers on their borders with Israel. Substantive warnings came from Israeli intelligence services, as well as from Jordan's King Hussain and the spy Ashraf Marwan, the son-in-law of the late Egyptian President, Abdul Nasser. Notably, a week before Yom Kippur, Russian military advisors in Syria and Egypt sent their families back home. Israel's front lines were poorly defended; there were only five hundred reserve soldiers stationed on the Suez Canal facing Egypt and only three thousand on the Golan Heights facing Syria.

After the victories of the 1967 Six-Day War, when the Arabs had been quickly and soundly defeated, both the Israeli military and the general population were still collectively steeped in hubris. They ignored the costly War of Attrition of the early 1970's, and seemed to ignore the rearming of Arab armies which had acquired new anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, thereby erasing both the air and armored corps superiority of Israel.

By 1973, the military defense of Sinai was based on a line of fortifications called the "Bar Lev Line", as well as a plan to ignite gasoline over the Suez Canal should the Egyptian army try to cross it. The Israeli army had also installed a sophisticated system intended to provide early warning of an incipient attack. None of these worked as the Egyptian army attacked on Yom Kippur. The Bar Lev Line was overrun within hours; both the plan to set fire to the canal and the early warning system were complete failures.

The Israeli government was held captive by the premise created by the Chief of Military Intelligence that the Arabs, lacking sufficient military aircraft, were incapable of mounting an attack against Israel.

Similarly, on October 7, 2023, Hamas lured Israel into believing that they were not planning to attack. Rather, as the entity holding power in the government, they projected the illusion that their resources were focused on the economic rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip. The plan to invade Israel was kept secret by

Hamas leadership and was not even revealed to their own invading forces until the morning of the attack.

The attack on October 7 took place on the Jewish holidays of Shabbat and Simchas Torah, when relatively few soldiers were stationed on the border with Gaza. The reduced number of soldiers reflected the belief of the commanders of the Israel Defense Force (IDF) that Hamas was incapable of mounting an effective attack and that any potential invasion would be prevented by both a fortified security wall and a system of automated weapons.

IDF had erected observation towers and relied on surveillance balloons to monitor activities in Gaza. Meanwhile, they diverted troops from the border to deal with the growing unrest in the West Bank.

As has been extensively documented, Hamas bulldozed and bypassed the supposedly impenetrable Israeli wall by flying over it and attacking from the Mediterranean Sea. The renowned IDF were powerless to stop the catastrophic onslaught.

In hindsight, there were multiple warnings that Hamas had been planning an attack on Israel for months, if not longer.

First, its attack plan, known as "Jericho Walls," was known to Israeli intelligence. Second, both the Egyptian and the US intelligence agencies had warned Israel about the risk of an imminent assault from Gaza. Third, Hamas fighters had been viewed practicing the takeover of Israeli military and civilian locations using models of Israeli communities. Finally, analysts and spotters trained to analyze border irregularities warned that Hamas had begun preparations for an attack.

Just as in 1973, neither the military high command nor the political establishment took these warnings seriously, belittling the capabilities of Hamas and dismissing the warnings from intelligence sources and their own border spotters.

And, as in the Yom Kippur War, those on the frontlines were sacrificed and those who rushed in to assist them were outnumbered and outgunned. While only Israeli soldiers took the brunt of the attacks during the Yom Kippur War, on October 7, the full range of the Israeli population was victimized, including children and the elderly.

The October 7 massacre shook Israel to its core; its long-term effects are yet to be realized.

It is critical that, for Israel to survive and fulfill its promise as a democratic and safe haven for all its citizens, it must engage in a thorough and painful investigation to unearth the roots of this massive failure in strategic intelligence and national arrogance to learn, understand, and incorporate the bitter lessons of October 7.

History must not be allowed to repeat itself.

Lest We Forget

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fighting as "The Terrible Tailor." His reputation was so fearful that opponents sometimes refused to box him. By the 1920s Taran had begun to develop a new sort of reputation, this time as a criminal. His first arrest was for loitering in 1918, but within just a few years he followed that up with auto theft, violating the liquor laws, assault, and grand larceny. He had been associated with so many crimes that his 1923 application for citizenship was denied for "failure to establish good moral character." He promised to do better, but in 1924 he was arrested for bootlegging and 85,000 gallons of alcohol were seized by Federal agents. Taran was reported to be a member of a million-dollar Twin Cities liquor ring, though at trial he was acquitted in just twenty minutes. He continued to be involved in bootlegging and the criminal underworld, earning himself a close call with a bullet in his chest in 1925, and 10 year prison sentence for grand larceny in 1928.

Prison did not change Taran's ways. He teamed up with Herman Paster, husband of his niece Celia Nilva Paster. This led to prison time for both Taran and Paster (18 and six months, respectively) on black market liquor charges. Paster and Taran partnered in a distributorship of jukeboxes, pinball machines, and "other coin-operated devices." Unfortunately, some of those coin-operated devices were slot machines and illegal, leading to more prison time. Taran moved to Florida and led a less colorful life, but Paster continued to move in the Twin Cities underworld. Paster was murdered in his Highland Park home as he read a newspaper. Three bullets shot through the window of the home's den, one hitting Paster in the head. Headlines read, "St. Paul Police Figure Slain in Gangland Shooting." While it was reported that Paster had no shortage of enemies, his killer was never found.

While the names of all three of the Nilva brothers occasionally appear in news articles about Taran and Paster, it seems that they were generally able to avoid the trouble that followed their notorious relatives. By all accounts, Jake was a determined man with a great love of his family and his country. His family noted that, in answer to questions of why he would choose such hazardous duties in the military, Jake would say, "I like living in this country, and if it is good enough to live in, it is good enough to die for." In the effects returned to his family after his death was a snapshot taken of Jake on leave in Australia, seated at the base of a World War I monument inscribed with the words "Lest We Forget." At the dedication of Post 722, the Nilva family recounted that photo and answered that they shall not forget.

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