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[The “war schizophrenia” of Israel’s peaceniks \(economist.com\)](#)

## The “war schizophrenia” of Israel’s peaceniks

Many lost friends in Hamas’s attacks. They don’t want to lose more in Gaza



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By Wendell Steavenson

It became too much when they published David’s name, address, phone number and photograph along with the words: “The next one to get it.” He left his home and borrowed a house from a friend. “I deleted all my social-media accounts,” he told me. “I don’t answer my phone to any number I don’t know.” **David is a film-maker living in Tel Aviv, who describes himself as “ultra-progressive, left-wing, anti-Zionist, pro-peace”. His views were minority ones before Hamas’s attack; now they have provoked threats. After his personal information was published on a right-wing Israeli Telegram channel, David was forced into hiding. “If you dare to show solidarity or compassion towards the [Palestinian people in Gaza](#) nowadays you are literally risking yourself in Israel. It’s serious shit,” he said.**

David wanted it made clear that he was appalled by Hamas’s rampage. He volunteers as a driver for Road to Recovery, an organisation that ferries Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank to Israeli hospitals for treatment. More than a dozen volunteers and their family members were killed or kidnapped by Hamas on October 7th. **“You are talking to a devastated man. I know some of those killed and kidnapped and injured. I have been to funerals and memorial services. I have seen people I know who have lost everything they had. My heart is broken for them.” But, he added, “My heart is broken for the [thousands of] Palestinians in Gaza who have lost their lives and the more than [hundreds of thousands] who have had to leave their homes. For me there is no contradiction.”**



**It's an irony not lost on peace activists in Israel that those who suffered most from Hamas's atrocities – the inhabitants of the kibbutzim on the border and the young people dancing at the Nova music festival – tended to be left-wing.** Many prominent voices in Israel, including [Binyamin Netanyahu](#), the prime minister who leads a far-right coalition, have called for Hamas to be destroyed. Some have even demanded Gaza be razed. Advocates for human rights and dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians now find themselves challenged by the unfolding events – emotionally, morally, even physically. “It’s very heavy,” Yuval Roth, the founder of Road to Recovery, told me. **“It’s very complicated to experience this war from two points of view. It’s like war schizophrenia. You have to work hard all the time to keep your moral compass.”**

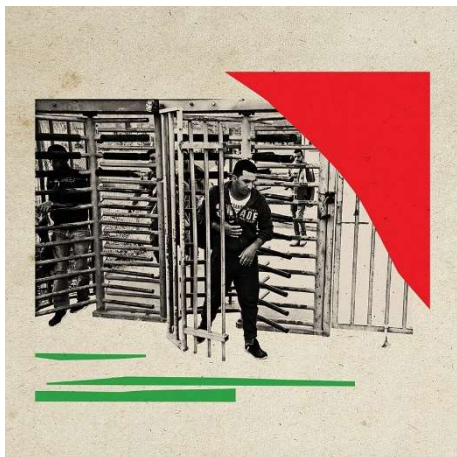
Israel controls the only crossing point from Israel into Gaza and does not usually allow Israeli citizens to visit the territory. Before the war it had restricted the number of permits available for Palestinians in Gaza to enter Israel to around 18,000 workers and a handful of others – mostly medical professionals for attending training or conferences, and cancer patients, often children, for treatment in Israeli hospitals. Personal relations between Israelis and Gazans had become almost impossible.

**Yet David had managed to strike up a friendship with a Gazan woman named Asmaa, even though they had never met in person.** They began chatting on WhatsApp after she responded in English to one of his Facebook posts expressing concern for the inhabitants of Gaza during the last Israeli operation in June 2021.

Asmaa’s home was damaged in that bombing campaign. The walls were cracked and rainwater leaked in. David raised some money from his friends and transferred her cash via one of Asmaa’s friends, who worked in construction in Israel. Asmaa sent him photographs of the new plasterwork with gratitude.

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The pair exchanged holiday greetings at Ramadan and bonded over news of their children, who are of similar ages. David raised more money for a new refrigerator and bought clothes for the kids. Asmaa filmed her children wearing new blue T-shirts, saying “We love you David” as their hands formed heart shapes.



**Whenever there were rocket attacks on Tel Aviv, Asmaa checked in with David. After the Israeli bombardment of Gaza in May, she sent a video from the funeral of a child who had been killed. David sent her a photograph of himself holding a Palestinian flag at a demonstration.** His friend, standing next to him, held a sign that read: “Stop the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people.” “This friend of mine lost two family members in the attacks,” David told me, “One killed and one kidnapped.”

After Hamas’s attack, Israel began a fierce bombardment of Gaza. David tried to stay in touch with Asmaa. On October 8th, the second day of the war, Asmaa sent him a short video of a school where families had been displaced after the bombing had destroyed their homes. The next day she wrote:

“Israel demolished all the mosques and many houses, and hundreds were martyred.” David replied that he was saddened and was praying for her family. (The Israeli government maintains that it attacks only Hamas’s military infrastructure, which is often hidden in buildings used by civilians.)

**Hamas, too, has for a long time tried to sever bonds between Gazans and Israelis. Palestinians who have worked with peace organisations and medical charities have been imprisoned**

Later that day Asmaa sent him a video of several small suitcases. “We are escaping now,” she said. “Israel is bombing. There is no safety here. Pray for us please.” Asmaa and her family moved to a relative’s house. On October 11th she told David that she was worried her youngest son was not well; she had taken him to a clinic and filmed a video of the boy, crying, with an intravenous drip in his hand.



Two days went by without any further news from Asmaa. David knew the power supply and mobile-phone coverage in Gaza were patchy, and he could see that she was offline. He continued to write messages that went unanswered. On October 13th he wrote: “Are you alive, my friend?” After a few hours, Asmaa answered: “We are not OK. There is no water or electricity. The situation is bad. I live in north Gaza and they told us to go to the south but they bombed the roads. Now it is very difficult to move from one area to another.” She had found refuge in a single room with 30 other people and hadn’t changed her clothes for days.

**David clings to his belief that his friendship with Asmaa “is evidence of the fact that most people are not so different from each other. We all want to have a safe and steady life for our families”**

On October 15th Asmaa wanted to know if there was any news of a ceasefire. David couldn’t reassure her. She asked him if he could send her some money through PayPal – she needed to buy food, water and nappies. Through a relative of Asmaa’s in Europe, David sent her 1,000 shekels (\$250). A day or two later she sent David a video showing what she had bought: cooking oil, rice and flour, bottled water and rolls of toilet paper. She could now, at least, bake flatbreads in a makeshift wood-fired oven.

**David is not the only Israeli to have suffered a public backlash for expressing sympathy for civilians under bombardment in Gaza.** Dror Sadot, who works for B’Tselem, an organisation that has documented human-rights abuses in the West Bank and Gaza since 1989, told me that its social-media accounts had been targeted more than usual by right-wing Israeli groups. **“After these terrible crimes Hamas committed, people just want revenge,” said Sadot. Activists worry that the progressive left, already diminished, would shrink even further.**



**Hamas, too, has for a long time tried to sever bonds between Gazans and Israelis. Palestinians who have worked with peace organisations and medical charities have been imprisoned. One Israeli activist I talked to said he had felt “horrible” after an interlocutor in Gaza had been jailed for several months as a result of contact between them a few years ago. “Ever since then we’ve been working under the radar,” he told me. “We are very, very careful about who we’re in touch with.” When I called people in Gaza to talk about their relationships with Israeli humanitarian organisations, they told me they wouldn’t speak on the record.**

**David clings to his belief that his friendship with Asmaa “is evidence of the fact that most people are not so different from each other. We all want to have a safe and steady life for our families. It’s a cliché but it’s also reality.”**

As we spoke the siren wailed and we took shelter in the safe room of his borrowed house. In Tel Aviv there is usually a 90-second interval between the alarm and the popping thud of the Iron Dome defence system intercepting a Hamas rocket. After a couple of minutes we went outside again and sat on the terrace.

I asked David if he could message Asmaa to see if she would be willing to talk to me. For half an hour, WhatsApp showed only one tick indicating the message was undelivered. Then he saw, with relief, the second tick. “She’s alive!” he said. Asmaa said that she did not want to talk to a journalist. “No please, I am afraid.” She sent three emojis of a tearful face. “All the children are crying,” she wrote. “Situation is very difficult here.”

**Wendell Steavenson** has reported on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine for *1843 magazine*.

Additional reporting by Meni Gross and Elise Apap. Some names have been changed

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