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# **Palestine: I fought house to house in Gaza ... I know force alone won't bring peace**

Tuesday 31 October 2023, by [BERNSTEIN Ariel](#) (Date first published: 29 October 2023).

## **An IDF veteran calls for a political solution that offers hope for both Israelis and Palestinians**

On the morning of 7 October, I woke up in Tel Aviv to the sound of alarms. Soon after came a constant stream of horrific news. As we began to piece together the [gruesome picture](#) of Hamas's atrocities that morning, it became apparent that Israel was facing another war in Gaza - this time on an entirely different scale.

I write these words 20 days after that cursed Sabbath, during which many hundreds of my people were slaughtered, and nine years after I was sent to fight Hamas inside the [Gaza Strip, back in 2014](#).

I recall myself at 20, a soldier in the Nahal special forces unit, taking those surreal first steps into Gaza, a place that, until then, we had only seen in the news.

We had little sense of what Gaza was like, of how people lived their lives there, of who they were; we thought of Gaza only vaguely, as a treacherous place where everyone wished us dead. I remember being overcome with anxiety, dreading that some of us might not return.

We were there for about two weeks. Our mission was to conquer the Al-Burrah neighbourhood of Beit Hanoun and to clear the neighbourhood of terrorists while supporting the engineering forces sent to destroy Hamas's tunnels.

Fighting in Gaza was different from anything I had done before in the West Bank. I had never seen the IDF use such intense firepower. Since the Israeli military had ordered civilians to leave the neighbourhood, anyone who remained was - so we were told - a Hamas operative or supporter, and therefore a legitimate target.

I did not question the commands I was given; I was too concerned about making it out alive with my friends. During our two weeks in that neighbourhood, we were continually informed of suspicious movements, ambushes and booby-trapped houses. Hamas fighters spotted one of our teams in the next house, fired a missile and killed an officer, Lt Roy Peles. The explosion tore his body apart and his friends from the unit had to collect the pieces.

We occupied vacant houses whose residents had fled, leaving behind traces of normal life such as family photos and schoolbooks.

We saw the corpse of an elderly woman probably caught in the crossfire, her face deformed as she lay in the rubble.

A team from a nearby unit encountered a Palestinian family of 10, none of whom was a terrorist.

Gradually it became more difficult to believe we were in a battlefield. It was, after all, also a civilian neighbourhood. These memories of the fighting and the destruction we left behind us will forever haunt me.

My experiences in Gaza led me to a clear conclusion: we must push for an agreement with the Palestinians that will put an end to the occupation and the siege of Gaza. Life in Gaza is not sustainable. I have been astounded at how our society refuses to reflect on the situation in Gaza.

I have been asking myself for years why I fought in [the 2014 conflict](#) if it was not followed by political action that would prevent the next one. Our leaders lied to us that we could manage and contain this conflict without ever having to solve it. For these reasons I immersed myself in activism. It was clear to me that Gaza was a ticking bomb waiting to explode.

Like every country in the world, Israel has the right - indeed, the responsibility - to protect its citizens. That is why I chose to become a soldier.

But we have no right to use our military strength to exact revenge, and we must see it as our goal to attack only military targets while keeping collateral harm at a minimum.

Now another ground invasion is supposed to fix the problem "once and for all": haven't we learned anything? Nine years and five military campaigns have passed since I was in Gaza, and the same mistakes are being made all over again.

A military response cannot, on its own, bring security. I fear that the reckless policies that led us to this crisis will continue dictating the government's decisions in this war.

Today I am no longer a combatant. I have become an activist against Israel's occupation of the [Palestinian territories](#) and an advocate for peace.

My current battle is ideological, a battle against extremists within our society who incite strife and hate. Together with Palestinian partners, we try to convey the urgency of ending the occupation and reaching a civil political agreement.

In Israel these days, remaining in solidarity with Palestinians and holding on to a vision of peace and shared life is seen as naive at best and as treason at worst.

The 7 October massacre ignited a tribalist "us versus them" instinct among most of us, leaving little space for complexity.

While fighting in Gaza, I prayed for a voice of reason - in the government and the general public - who would say clearly and unequivocally that revenge cannot be our plan of action, that our force should be used as a tool and not a goal. Alongside the memories of the war's destruction in Gaza, I clearly remember one moment of light: when the ceasefire was announced.

Now, I want to be that voice of reason for the soldiers sent into yet another war. Military force will not resolve this problem if it is not paired with a political solution that offers hope for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

The international community must help us achieve this. The first step is to call for de-escalation and the return of our hostages. When the war ends and the firing stops, we must realise it is not an end, but just the beginning. Both nations living on this land deserve a future of more than mutual destruction.

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**P.S.**

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