

Israel-Hamas war

Israelis turn on peace activists amid trauma of war

—————
In a society largely united by the fight against Hamas, those seeking coexistence with Palestinians face abuse and even arrest

Andrew England in Jerusalem 6 HOURS AGO

Israel Frey knew he risked causing offence when he delivered a Jewish prayer for the dead days after Hamas's devastating October 7 attack on southern Israel. He did not realise it would upend his life.

A small group of residents in Tel Aviv had asked him to offer the *Kaddish* blessing for the 1,200 victims of Hamas's raid because he is a member of the Jewish state's ultraorthodox community. But it was not only the slain Israelis who were on the 37-year-old's mind as he lit candles and recited the prayer, later uploading a video online.

"I said: 'You're not going to feel comfortable about what I'm going to do, but I'm also dedicating a *Kaddish* to the thousands of innocent civilians, the women and children, being slaughtered by us in Gaza,'" Frey recalled.

The backlash erupted within days. Far-right groups reposted the video with Frey's home address. Hate messages flooded in. Hostile crowds surrounded the apartment block where he lives with his wife and two children, setting off fireworks and flares.



Israel Frey: 'The fear was real. It was close to October 7 and people's blood was boiling' © Quique Kierszenbaum

Experiences like Frey's have become increasingly common among members of the dwindling band of Israeli leftists and peace activists since October 7. Fear, suspicion and, in many cases, hatred towards Palestinians swept across a nation outraged by Hamas's rampage through kibbutzim and a musical festival.

"The fear was real. It was close to October 7 and people's blood was boiling," said Frey, a rare journalist-cum-peace activist in the ultraorthodox community. "We were seconds away from people breaking into our home."

Frey fled in the early hours, but more than five months later, he is still too scared to return, instead moving from place to place. "I've lost my community," he said.

Nearly six months on, trauma and rage from Hamas's attack endure. Most Israelis remain united in support for their state's ferocious retaliatory offensive against [Hamas](#) in Gaza, which has killed more than 32,000 people, according to Palestinian health officials, even as global pressure to end the war intensifies.

Regular protests have called for the release of hostages held by Hamas, while smaller demonstrations opposed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government. But activists say much of the Israeli media is fixated on October 7, while providing minimal coverage of the devastation in Gaza.

The tiny minority within [Israel](#) speaking up for civilian victims in Gaza, raising concerns about the conduct of the war, or supporting Palestinian rights and an end to Israel's occupation, risk finding themselves in the crosshairs of rightwing groups and politicians – and even their neighbours.

Palestinians with Israeli citizenship have long been vulnerable. But now Jewish leftists are also being targeted, albeit less harshly, said Michael Sfard, a human rights lawyer.

“Jewish activists are threatened by the political establishment that is intimidating and inciting. It translates to the atmosphere on the street,” Sfard said. “This is a huge shift – Israel was an open society.”

Some have faced disciplinary action at work. Others, like Frey, have fled their homes and been branded traitors. Rights groups working with Palestinians have also faced pressure.

Bank Leumi, Israel's largest lender, froze the account of Gisha, a rights group, because it funded a programme offering legal advice to Gazans seeking permits to enter Israel. The bank also objected to “public messaging” warning against war crimes in the strip, claiming it was “anti-Israel”, the NGO said.

Gisha sued and a judge ruled that there were no reasonable grounds for the freeze. But the bank appealed to the Supreme Court, which set a hearing for August. Bank Leumi declined to comment.

Tania Hary, executive director at Gisha, said the bank's actions reflected the “common mood” that “anything connected to human rights of Palestinians is connected to terror”.

“The space for dissent and critical thinking is shrinking,” Hary said. “We don't see ourselves against Israeli society, but rather for universal values that Israel says it is beholden to.”





Tania Hary: 'The space for dissent and critical thinking is shrinking' © Manuel Elías/UN

Rights groups were already operating in a hostile atmosphere as society veered rightward during the 15 years that Netanyahu has dominated the political landscape.

Activists complain of smear campaigns, legislation and bureaucracy all designed to delegitimise and impede their work. The pressure increased after Netanyahu formed Israel's most far-right government in 2022, and shot up further after October 7, activists said.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, the ultranationalist national security minister, is seen by activists as one of their biggest tormentors. After a court ordered the release of a Jewish pro-Palestinian activist arrested in October on suspicion of "behaviour that may violate public peace", Ben-Gvir criticised the judge, writing: "This is what domestic enemies look like. Shame."

"The witch hunt is against anyone who puts his head out of line," said Rami Elhanan. The 74-year-old son of a Holocaust survivor is a member of the Parents Circle-Families Forum, which brings together Israeli Jews and Palestinians who have lost relatives during the decades-long conflict.

Forum members like Elhanan, whose 14-year-old daughter was killed in a Hamas suicide attack in 1997, have for years arranged meetings between bereaved Jews and Palestinians and high school students to preach peace and coexistence. But in August the education ministry banned the group from schools.

The forum faces hostility from the political establishment, rightwing groups, parents

and students, with accusations that it is bringing “terrorists” into the classroom, Elhanan said. “You need to be a very powerful and brave schoolmaster to stand up to them,” said Elhanan.



Jewish professor Nurit Peled-Elhanan was suspended after disputing the comparison of Hamas to the Nazis © Quique Kierszenbaum

His wife, Nurit Peled-Elhanan, a college lecturer, has faced her own backlash. When she read a message on a teachers’ WhatsApp group comparing Hamas to Nazis and calling for the forced displacement of Palestinians, she felt compelled to respond.

She wrote that it was not an accurate comparison as Nazism was the ideology of a state that set out to exterminate defenceless minorities under its rule. Referring to Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory, she cited French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, saying that “after decades that his neck is under your heel, [when] you lift your heel, and he looks into your face, what kind of look will you see?”

Within hours, she was suspended despite more than 100 serving and former lecturers writing in her support. “It was the first time they attacked a Jewish leftist,” said Peled-Elhanan.

The suspension was dropped, but she is not sure whether she will return to the college. “People are afraid, that’s the point — losing their jobs or being reprimanded. These [far-right] people have a lot of weapons . . . and we are the enemy.”





Activists say the Israeli media is only providing minimal coverage of the devastation in Gaza © Saeed Qaq/SOPA Images/LightRocket/Getty Images

Meir Baruchin's outspokenness landed him in prison. A veteran history and civics teacher, he had long used Facebook to raise awareness about the plight of occupied Palestinians.

After Hamas's attack, he posted about Gazans killed in Israel's offensive, including a picture of dead babies, noting that "entire families are being wiped out". On a teachers' WhatsApp group, he said Israeli forces had raped Palestinians in the past.

Within weeks, the local municipality fired him and complained to police. The education ministry suspended his teaching licence. In November, he was arrested, charged with the intention to commit treason and detained for four days. He was released, but the case is still pending.

A labour court ruled in January against the municipality and education ministry, ordering his reinstatement and awarding him damages. But when Baruchin returned to school, protesting students hurled abuse at him.

"I was literally under siege inside the teachers' room," said Baruchin, who has a son and daughter in the Israeli military. "They curse me . . . They wished me to die. They wished for my children to die."

Fellow teachers have been afraid to publicly back him, he said. "I get hundreds of responses from fellow teachers, from my school and from teachers that I don't know, telling me, 'I'm fully behind you, but I have children to support'."

Baruchin now delivers lessons via video. His support for Palestinian rights has cost him childhood friends. “They fail to see the Palestinians,” Baruchin said. “They are traumatised.”

On Fridays, he joins a few dozen other peaceniks protesting in Jerusalem. At a tiny demonstration this month, activists beat drums and held up placards saying “there’s no military solution”, “ceasefire now” and “stop the genocide”. Police tussled with demonstrators, seizing and ripping their signs. A few passers-by hurled abuse at the protesters.

Some on the left hope the mood will shift as the trauma of October 7 eases. Elhanan said several relatives of victims of Hamas’s attack have joined his forum; some of those killed in attacks on kibbutzim were peaceniks. Others have reached out to the group, including three liberal schools.

Yet Elhanan acknowledged that “we are swimming against the current”.

“Israelis don’t see what’s happening in Gaza,” he added. “Israelis don’t listen to people like us.”

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
