

ISRAEL-HAMAS CONFLICT

JEWISH LEADERS VISIT ISRAELI SISTER CITY

Sha'ar HaNegev  
forever changed  
after Oct. 7 attack

BY CALEB LUNETTA

Where children used to play in the street, now sit tanks. Where crops used to grow, soldiers dot the fields. Homes and schools, where hundreds of San Diegans have visited over the years, are reduced to rubble and razed buildings.

Sha'ar HaNegev — San Diego's sister city in Israel — suffered a brunt force of the attack on Oct. 7 by Hamas, a militant group in Gaza designated as a terrorist organization by the United States.

Last month, a group of 16 San Diego Jewish community leaders visited the rural region in Israel's southern Negev desert, which lies within eyesight of Gaza, on a mission to reconnect San Diegans' deep ties to the community thousands of miles away.

It's a city they've been to dozens of times, and as recently as earlier this year.

But the San Diego group did not find what they remembered.

"This bucolic place is innovative and artistic," said Heidi Gantwerk, president of the Jewish Federation of San Diego, who went on the trip. "Now, everywhere you look, you see the Israeli Defense Force."

Bullet holes. Ransacked houses. San Diego residents had donated millions of dollars to help build a community center in Sha'ar HaNegev, and over 200 San Diegans made the trip to its grand opening earlier this year. The building has now become a "hamal" — a place where military personnel and civilians meet to provide food, security and support.

"The Black Shabbat hit very hard here in San Diego because we know many of the people who were victims, who died, who were taken hostage," said Gantwerk, using the term many Israelis now use for the Oct. 7 attacks, which occurred on the Jewish sabbath. "This was not something happening far away for us. It was happening to us, toward our family."

Last year, the Israeli community's mayor, Ofir Libstein, and Gantwerk co-wrote an opinion piece together in the Union-Tribune about Libstein's aspirations for the region: the Arazim Industrial Zone. It would be the first cross-border employment, training and medical center providing more than 10,000 jobs to Gaza citizens.



GUY YECHIELI PHOTOS

Members of the San Diego County Jewish Community tour a home in Sha'ar HaNegev that is riddled with bulletholes. Officials said many homes were damaged or destroyed in the kibbutz.



Heidi Gantwerk, president and CEO of the San Diego Jewish Federation, speaks with a musician at a space for survivors of the attack and victims' loved ones.

"Peace instead of terror. Jobs instead of rockets," Libstein and Gantwerk wrote. "Transparency instead of corruption. Hope where Hamas does not allow hope to exist. There is a better way. And it is just across the border."

On Oct. 7, Libstein, his mother-in-law, his son and his nephew all died.

Following the beginning days of the Israel-Hamas war, Alan Viterbi, who marked his 31st visit to Israel on the recent trip, felt the world would not believe that Jews had been slaughtered once again.

"For many people in the United States, but especially for members of the Jewish community, Oct. 7

was one of the worst days of our lifetime," Viterbi said.

The Jewish Federation decided that Gantwerk, Viterbi and over a dozen local Jewish leaders should travel to the sister city to show support, lay the groundwork for reconstruction and bear witness to the atrocities.

"When I hear someone's story, that's impactful for me," said Rabbi Jason Nevarez of Temple Beth Israel in University City, who was also on the trip. "It doesn't make it about the politics of the situation. It makes it real."

Of Sha'ar Negev's 9,000 citizens, 78 died, 23 were taken hostage and more than 8,000 are now displaced in

their own country, Gantwerk said.

On Oct. 7, Israel reported roughly 1,200 people were killed and 240 were taken hostage, the Associated Press reported Thursday. Since then, approximately half of the hostages have been released.

Roughly 20,400 Palestinians have been killed in the last two months in the offensive against Hamas, according to the AP.

What they saw

Sha'ar Nagev is an agricultural hub made up of 10 kibbutz — communal farming settlements in Israel along the border with Gaza. Residents grow everything from potatoes to apricots to

olives, according to Gantwerk.

But they're also a growing art, culture and entertainment center. Navarez said the community is 95 percent heaven due to the serene landscapes and people — and 5 percent hell because of the sporadic rocket attacks and violence.

Before the attack on Oct. 7, many kibbutz members planned to fly kites over the Gaza border wall with messages of peace. The high-flying pieces of paper tied to string are part of the Kites for Peace program, an annual event.

Rather than using kite strings to instill hope, in some instances they were tied around a family's "safe room" doorknob, with someone holding it tight for hours, Gantwerk said.

"We heard from people who, with their small children, stayed in a safe room for 30 hours, with nothing to drink, no bathroom, with no electricity," Gantwerk said. "They hoped their dog would stay quiet and their toddler wouldn't cry. Because if they did, that could be the end."

Photos of the trip show caved-in roofs, bullet holes peppering living room walls and exposed rebar twisted with fallen tree branches.

The San Diego County leaders also visited victims of the Nova Music Festival, which was attacked by Hamas, and met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog. They spoke with social workers and academics studying Jewish diaspora.

IRAN ACCUSES ISRAEL OF KILLING TOP OFFICIAL

High-ranking general  
dead in missile  
strike in Damascus

BY KAREEM CHEHAYEB

An Israeli airstrike Monday in a Damascus neighborhood killed a high-ranking Iranian general, Iranian state media said.

Iranian officials and allied militant groups in the region vowed revenge for the killing but did not immediately launch any retaliatory strike.

The killing of Seyed Razi Mousavi, a longtime adviser of the Iranian paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in Syria, comes amid ongoing fears of the Israel-Hamas war sparking a regional spillover. Iran-backed groups in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq have launched attacks on Israel and its allies in support of Hamas.

Clashes along the Lebanon-Israel border between Hezbollah and Israel have continued to intensify, with daily exchanges of missiles, airstrikes and shelling across the frontier.

In the Red Sea, attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen against ships they believe to be connected to Israel have disrupted trade and prompted the launch of a U.S.-led multinational naval operation to protect shipping routes.

Iran-backed militias in Iraq operating under an umbrella group dubbed the Islamic Resistance in Iraq have also launched more than 100 attacks on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, which they have said are in retaliation for Washington's

support of Israel.

The group claimed an attack on a U.S. base next to the commercial airport in Irbil in northern Iraq on Monday. A U.S. military official, speaking on condition of anonymity in accordance with regulations, confirmed the attack and said it had caused injuries but did not provide further details.

Israeli strikes killed two other generals earlier this month in Syria.

Israel on Monday struck the Sayida Zeinab neighborhood, located near a Shiite Muslim shrine, Iran's official news agency IRNA and Britain-based opposition war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. IRNA described Mousavi as a close companion of Gen. Qasim Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force who was slain in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq in January 2020.

Neither the Israeli military nor Syrian state media immediately issued a statement about Monday's attack.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi in a statement said that Mousavi was "martyred while serving as an adviser for the resistance front, defending holy shrines in Syria as well as safeguarding Islamic ideals." He threatened that the "Israeli regime will definitely pay for this crime."

Hossein Akbari, Iran's ambassador to Syria, condemned the killing, saying that Mousavi was in Syria as a "formal military adviser."

"(Israel) will definitely get a response to this crime at the right time and the right situation," Akbari said, speaking from Damascus.

Chehayeb writes for The Associated Press.

GAZA

FROM A1  
tions by Israel's rocket defense system. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries.

The Egyptian proposal falls short of Israel's declared goal of crushing Hamas. It also appears to be at odds with Israel's insistence on maintaining military control over Gaza for an extended period after the war.

But Netanyahu faces heavy domestic pressure to reach a deal to bring home the more than 100 Israeli hostages who remain in captivity in Gaza.

As he vowed to continue the war during a speech in parliament, relatives of the hostages interrupted him and called for their immediate return. "Now! Now!" they shouted.

The rising death toll of Israeli soldiers from the ground operation also threatens to undermine public support for the war. The Israeli military announced the deaths of two more soldiers Monday, bringing the total killed in the war to 156.

Netanyahu's War Cabinet was expected to meet late Monday. It was unclear if they would discuss the Egyptian proposal.

Hamas did not officially react to the proposal. But it is unclear if Hamas would agree to relinquish power after controlling Gaza for the past 16 years.

Izzat Rishq, a senior Hamas official who is believed to be based in Qatar, issued a statement repeating the group's position that it will not negotiate without a "complete end to the aggression." He said Hamas would not agree to a "temporary or partial truce for a short period of time."

Words of the proposal



AVI OHAYON GPO VIA AP

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (center) receives a security briefing with commanders and soldiers in the northern Gaza Strip on Monday.

came as Israeli airstrikes heavily pounded central and southern Gaza.

In the Maghazi refugee camp Monday, rescue workers were still pulling bodies from the wreckage of a strike the previous night. Records at the nearby Al-Aqsa Hospital seen by The Associated Press showed at least 106 people killed, making it one of the deadliest strikes of Israel's air campaign.

The United Nations' World Health Organization visited the hospital on Monday. Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

"The hospital is taking in far more patients than its bed capacity and staff can handle. Many will not survive the wait," he said in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

The war has devastated large parts of Gaza, killed more than 20,600 Palestinians and displaced almost all of the territory's 2.3 million people.

U.N. officials have warned that a quarter of the population is starving under Israel's siege of the territory, which allows in only a trickle of supplies.

They encountered holy men who prepared hundreds of bodies for religious burial.

A new path forward

The Arazim Industrial Zone that Mayor Libstein had so earnestly lobbied for — even to San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria — is not likely in the near future.

Israel and the government in Gaza are going to have to chart a new path forward.

According to Jewish community leaders, a new educational system needs to be created in Israel — one that deals specifically with trauma related to the war. They also said people in the region would need help rebuilding their infrastructure, cities and kibbutzim.

The San Diego visitors said they were impressed with how longstanding internal political divisions, economic classes and geographical divides in Israel dissolved in order to feed soldiers, clothe and house refugees, and transform schools, businesses and government buildings into sanctuaries operated by civilians.

"They have mobilized in every way imaginable to support the families of the victims, soldiers, the elderly, disabled and to get the hostages freed," Gantwerk said.

Despite the loss of her family members, Libstein's widow, Vered, has joined with others in her country in advocating for her community both at home and abroad — just like her husband had.

"When Ofir had politicians or famous people come to his house, she never came out or participated — she wasn't interested," Gantwerk said. "When San Diego came, she came out because she knew how much that meant to (Ofir)."

She came to Southern California briefly for the first night of Hanukkah this month to meet with San Diego groups — those that loved her husband and family — and sat down with Gloria like her husband had done before.

Gantwerk recalled that after walking out of Gloria's office, Vered turned to her and said, "Now I understand. San Diego is my home, too."

"Here's a woman who in one day lost her husband, her mother, her son and her nephew ... and she does not have a word of anger or revenge," Viterbi said. "She said you have to be optimistic. We have to be looking to the future. And we have to fulfill the dreams that her husband had."

caleb.lunetta@suniontribune.com

and the rival, internationally recognized Palestinian Authority, to agree on the establishment of a government of experts, he said.

The government would rule Gaza and the West Bank for a transitional period as Palestinian factions work toward presidential and parliamentary elections, he added.

In the meantime, Israel and Hamas would negotiate a comprehensive "all-for-all" deal, he said. This would include the release of all remaining hostages in return for all Palestinian prisoners in Israel, as well as the Israeli military's withdrawal from Gaza and the Palestinian militants' halting of rocket attacks into Israel.

More than 8,000 Palestinians are held by Israel on security-related charges or convictions, according to Palestinian figures. Some have been convicted in deadly attacks on Israelis. While their release would be controversial, Israel has a history of agreeing to lopsided releases.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry spoke by phone Monday with Iran's chief diplomat, Hossein Amirabdollahian, on the war in Gaza, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry said. The statement said Shoukry discussed efforts to achieve a comprehensive cease-fire. It didn't offer further details. Iran is a major supporter of Hamas.

In Washington, the White House declined to comment about the Egyptian proposal.

U.S. officials remain in close contact with Egypt and Qatar about getting more hostages released and several proposals have been floated, according to a person familiar with the talks.

Magdy, Jobain and Federman write for The Associated Press.