

## THE LITTLE TOWN OF SDEROT

by Paul Liptz

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Sderot is a small town close to the north east border of Gaza. It's like many of Israel's peripheral areas with an undeveloped town center, monotonous buildings, lower middle class inhabitants and by and large, citizens who don't really have the money to sell their apartments and move anywhere else. However, the difference between Sderot and most other areas in Israel is that this particular town has been the object of attacks from Gaza for the last eight years.

Sadly, Sderot had little influence with the decision makers. As long as they only suffered a little, it just wasn't worthwhile making too much of a fuss about it. For many Israelis, it was preferable for a small group of people to be under attack than to get involved in a major war. Anyway, there was a widely held belief that Hamas would agree to some form of a minimal cease fire and even though there is unlikely to ever be a peace treaty with them, many Israelis imagined that one could continue with this low level of conflict for an extended period of time, especially since it was "out there".

Some Sderot residents even seemed to be coming to terms with their vulnerable position. They realized that they had few powerful supporters and while the politicians periodically traveled to this outpost to have their photos taken with the locals, the really important issues of Israel were perceived as the events in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa and in the banks, stock exchange and high tech firms.

In the historical context there was clearly a precedent for an "expendable" group. During the long years between Israel's Independence in 1948 and the 1967 Six Day War the kibbutzim and *moshavim* (collective villages) in the most northern area of the country had constantly been under Syrian fire. It hadn't seemed worthwhile going to war to ensure the safety of a relatively small group of citizens. Thus, year after year, children in the upper Galilee spent hours and days and sometimes weeks in bomb shelters while the Syrians shot down from the Golan Heights onto the defenseless villagers. It was only in June 1967 that the position changed radically and Israel took control of the Heights. I well remember my weeks on Kibbutz Dafna in June and July 1967 speaking to a whole generation of innocent people who would still look up to the mountains and wonder when the next alert would be sounded and the rush to ensure that their children were safe, waiting quietly in the harsh concrete bunkers until the all clear signal was sounded.

In many senses, life in Sderot was more difficult. There were few bomb shelters, despite continuing government promises that they would be built. As nuclear families populate this southern town, they didn't have the same kind of caring community and infrastructure that was of such importance to their northern brethren.

In 2005, during the painful unilateral disengagement process whereby several thousand Israelis were forcibly removed from their homes in the Gaza Strip, most people were convinced that now, with Gaza back in the hands of the Palestinians, everything would be just fine. And I was one of those optimists. However, on the second night after the Israeli withdrawal as I saw the Palestinians destroying the greenhouses and hacking at the water pipes, I realized my dream was ludicrous. I had so hoped that this was the first stage of Palestinian independence and slowly but surely, they would build their infrastructures - hospitals, schools and roads and that life would really become better for them.

The skeptics were correct. The Egyptians also quickly recognized that a Hamas controlled Gaza was a threat and so closed the border between them. Israel was troubled by the realities on the ground. Iranian military equipment was flowing into the area and it were designed for one purpose and one purpose only-to be used against the innocent residents of Sderot and the other small towns and villages in the area. The Israeli government decided to control the entry into Gaza of military equipment but permitted food and humanitarian supplies to flow in. However, tunnels built from Egypt were effectively developed and soon the attacks on Israeli citizens increased. The government stated again and again that it was responsible for the well-being of its citizens and thus could not allow a significant area of the country to be under constant attack. Israel's politicians appealed for understanding and asked global leaders a simple question- "What would you do if there were continuous attacks on your sovereign territory?"

More recently Israeli society came to a harsh realization. The attacks were not merely on Sderot, but some one million citizens in cities like Ashdod, Ashkelon, Kiryat Gat and even Beer Sheva would find themselves threatened. The government had no alternative but to take stern action. It was clear that Israel would be widely condemned for defending itself. It is hoped that civilians in Gaza would not unduly suffer but one can never ensure that in military conflict, innocent people won't suffer.

Israel's goals are clear and simple. Allow our citizens to live in peace and the people of Gaza can live their lives undisturbed. Few Israelis ever want to occupy Gaza again. There are too many good things happening in Israel itself and still numerous challenges before us. Now the time has come to try and establish a new reality.

As far as I'm concerned, the people of Gaza can live their lives as they want. The type of government system is up to them. How they behave towards their women is no longer my concern. Their relationship with other Arab countries is an issue only between them and the Arab world.

I hope our goals are rapidly attained. I have no wish to cause suffering to the Palestinians but there has to be an understanding that we, Israelis, are not just going to sit on the sidelines and allow ourselves to be decimated. We've worked too hard to build what we have and no-one, but no-one, is going to destroy us.

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