

The Public Interest Fellowship in Israel

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TEL AVIV—Israel has always presented amazing contrasts. On its just-concluded 10-day trip to the Jewish state – amid Israel’s war against Iran-backed Hamas in Gaza and the nation’s low-intensity fighting against Iran-backed Hezbollah along the Lebanon border – The Public Interest Fellowship fellows and staff found the familiar contrasts on full display. And wrenching new ones.

With a population of approximately 9.3 million including around two million Arab citizens, the nation-state of the Jewish people is the only rights-protecting democracy in a region – the Middle East and North Africa – of more than 500 million Muslims. Despite its diminutive size, youth, and the security threats to which it has been constantly subject from the instant that David Ben Gurion read aloud the country’s Declaration of Independence in Tel Aviv on May 14, 1948, Israel has built the region’s most advanced high-tech economy, most formidable and sophisticated military, and most robust civil society. And Israel has fostered an extraordinary diversity of Jews: of European, Middle Eastern, and North African descent; secular, traditional, and religious; farmers and entrepreneurs, scholars and chefs, warriors and winemakers, lawyers and doctors and business executives, social justice activists and hit TV-show makers, small business owners and, yes – nations and peoples being what they are – thugs and criminal families.

Five months after some 3,000 Hamas jihadists invaded southern Israel to perpetrate mass atrocities against the nation’s civilian population, new contrasts sear the Israeli psyche. In the face of the terrible national trauma inflicted by Hamas on Oct. 7, Israelis have shown remarkable resiliency. War has brought them together, but it has not dissipated the grievances, resentments, and enmities that fueled and were fueled by the preceding nine months of controversy over the government’s proposed judicial overhaul. Not least, many with whom we spoke stressed the discrepancy between the people’s heroic response to the jihadists’ bloodthirsty assault and the governing class’s multiple failures to protect the nation.

TPIF prepares fellows to explore such complex political realities. Under the leadership of Executive Director Garrett Exner, Deputy Director Serena Frechter, and Director of Operations Nani Beraha, the program brings annually approximately 10 talented young men and women to the nation’s capital for two-year stints to do work – in journalism, with political consulting firms and public-policy think tanks, at not-for-profit initiatives, and in Congress – that advances the nation’s interest in individual liberty, limited government, free markets, vigorous civil society, and a strong America abroad. As the program’s director of studies, I conduct bi-monthly seminars on the modern tradition of freedom; host monthly dinners with distinguished figures from politics, national security, law, and journalism; and convene

seasonal weekend retreats that allow fellows to delve into enduring ideas and contemporary issues. Every other year, TPIF fellows and staff travel to Israel to improve our understanding of America's best friend and partner in the region.

On this trip, TPIF's fifth to Israel, the war forced adjustments to our itinerary. We spent several days in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem, traveled through parts of Judea and Samaria, visited Rahat, a Bedouin city in the Negev, and picked garlic and worked in onion fields near Gaza. Security considerations compelled us to forgo our usual stops in Ramallah to meet with Palestinian Authority representatives, in the Golan Heights to observe the border with Syria, and in the upper Galilee within eyesight of Lebanon.

As on TPIF's previous Israel trips, we met a variety of speakers. We talked to journalists, former politicians and government officials, and active-duty military officers. We heard from men and women of the left, center, and right. We spoke with a distinguished Arab Israeli journalist and an eminent ultra-Orthodox rabbi. We listened to a traditionally garbed Bedouin woman – a mother of six and an entrepreneur who had launched a line of cosmetics – and to a 29-year-old woman who survived the Nova music festival massacre where Hamas gunned down more than 400 people and kidnapped more than 40. We convened discussions with Israelis who wished to expand Israel's presence in and control over Judea and Samaria – home to between 2.5 and 3 million non-citizen West Bank Palestinians – and with Israelis who oppose such expansion and seek separation from the West Bank, as well as Gazan Palestinians. We held conversations with prominent defenders of the Netanyahu government's judicial reform efforts and its conduct of the Gaza war and diplomacy and with prominent opponents of every aspect of the Netanyahu government.

We also participated in difficult but essential conversations with members of communities that Hamas had devastated. On Oct. 7, the terrorists abducted Thomas Hand's then-8-year-old daughter Emily from Kibbutz Be'eri. She was released as part of the November cease-fire. Pausing occasionally to collect himself, Emily's father told us with tears of wonderment that his daughter had already recovered to 95% of her old self.

Chen Kotler hosted us at Kfar Aza, another kibbutz on the Gaza border that Hamas invaded on Oct. 7. While we were sitting on her porch, our guide – just returned from nearly five months of reserve duty in the north – determined that the explosions in the distance were outgoing Israeli artillery fire.

Chen showed us where the jihadists burst through the kibbutz's back fence, about a mile from Gaza, rampaged through the young adults' quarters and, with advance knowledge of the kibbutz layout, clambered atop her roof, which overlooked the kibbutz armory, to ambush members rushing to arm themselves. On that awful day, Hamas slaughtered 62 kibbutzniks and abducted 19, five of whom the terrorists still hold hostage.

The war was the fixed point around which our conversations revolved. Israelis are a legendarily contentious people – try to agree and as often as not you will be informed with a wry smile that you don't – but those we encountered unanimously affirmed that the war marks a turning point in the nation's short history.

Here, too, we encountered a stunning contrast. Many Israelis share Amir Tibon's assessment. A journalist who, with his family, survived the jihadists' invasion of Kibbutz Nahal Oz, Tibon told us that the response to the Oct. 7 attacks has been Israeli society's finest hour while exposing a dysfunctional governing class and public sector.

The intelligence community did not effectively warn of the murder and mayhem. The security barrier, designed to stop individuals and small groups of terrorists, was swiftly overwhelmed by thousands of jihadists who disabled its cameras and censors and cut through it or knocked it down, flew over it, or bypassed it by sea. In addition, the military was caught unprepared: Too few troops were stationed on the border and, of those, too few stood ready to repel an attack. Most consequentially, the government's strategy for containing and deterring Hamas failed. Several years ago, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu authorized the delivery of tens of millions of dollars in cash a month to Hamas, courtesy of the Qatari government. Netanyahu aimed to divide West Bank Palestinians ruled by the Palestinian Authority from Gaza Palestinians controlled by Hamas, while turning Hamas toward economic development. Instead, the government's policy funded Hamas' massive tunnel infrastructure, enormous weapons stockpiles, and monstrous plans to destroy Israel.

At the same time, Israelis have shown breathtaking valor and unity. Some 350,000 reservists reported for duty within five days of the Oct. 7 attacks. The Israel Defense Forces have made substantial progress toward destroying Hamas as a governing power and military while defying all expectations in minimizing casualties among comrades and among noncombatant Palestinians. In the war's early weeks, restaurant owners made available their kitchens for others who set aside their regular jobs to prepare meals for the soldiers. Israelis from all walks of life travel to the north and south to work in the fields. Many Israelis have raised money to purchase essential equipment from abroad for frontline soldiers: helmets, protective vests, high-tech goggles, and more. And civil society has rallied to provide mental health care and education for the tens of thousands of internally displaced citizens.

At Kfar Aza, Chen Kotler sent TPIF on its way with her own contrast, at once heartbreaking and fortifying, somber and hopeful. She stood in front of the kibbutz gate through which the jihadists stormed on that awful early autumn morning. Behind her lay Kfar Aza's green fields – sand and stone until the kibbutz, forgive the cliché, made the desert bloom. Just beyond the spring crops, we could see Gaza – an easy walk and only a few minutes by motorcycle, pickup truck, or paraglider.

As Chen spoke, her quietly resolute voice occasionally faltered. We barely breathed.

Her features taut and her tone grim, Chen told us that the war with Hamas is not just the kibbutz's war. It's not just Israel's war. It's not just the Jewish people's war. The war against Hamas is civilization's war, she said. And we must win it.

Then, with a soft smile tinged with indelible sorrow, she told us that she believes in shalom – peace – which in Hebrew signifies, beyond the absence of fighting, the achievement of harmony in a broken world. We Israelis seek shalom, she concluded, because we love life.

We thanked Chen for her courage and told her that we would remember her words and share them with others.

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