

# Israeli border kibbutz on frontlines of 'prolonged war' with Palestinians fears escalation

Hamas Incendiary kites, flaming balloons from Gaza torch thousands of acres in Israel



*David Bing, a farmer from Kibbutz Kfar Aza, finds an incendiary kite on his farm fields, sent over from Gaza with the intention of starting fires in Israel. (photograph by Laura Kelly) more >*

By Laura Kelly - *The Washington Times* - Monday, October 29, 2018

**KIBBUTZ KFAR AZA, Israel** — In this small farming and industrial community in southern Israel, kibbutz residents wake up to a dark, daily reality.

They are typically bleary-eyed and tired from the night before when rockets launched from the Gaza Strip, located only 1 mile west of their community, trigger air raid sirens and send families running to bomb shelters.

A morning text message from security services warns them again to stay inside and close to their safe rooms. With no other details, they have a front-row seat for the debate on whether their country is once again being pulled into a ground invasion or massive assault on the Palestinian enclave on the other side of the border barrier.

For seven months, Palestinians have violently rioted at the border, launching flaming balloons that burned thousands of acres of farmland and shooting hundreds of rockets into Israel. Despite the proximity to Gaza, residents here say the recent tension is not normal.

"It didn't start like this. We were not born [into] this," said **Chen Kotler Abrahams**, a lifelong resident of Kfar Aza. "This is an evolution. It's changing all the time. In the past six months, it's changed dramatically."

Tensions were high on the kibbutz during a visit in mid-October. Over the course of two weeks, residents were sent running to bomb shelters and safe rooms from a mix of false alarm air raid sirens and actual rocket fire from the Gaza Strip.

On Oct. 17, one of those rockets hit a home in the southern Israeli city of Beersheba. Residents said the security services sent a text message instructing them to stay in their homes, sparking fears that Israel would retaliate with force.

Dafna Russo, the director of the kindergartens on the kibbutz, said the tension is wearing on the community members.

"It's different than what we had before because I don't feel like we were always in a prolonged war, but now I feel the people — all of the society — here are very tense," she said.

And, after a summer of protests and violent clashes along the Gaza border, there's no sign the tensions are easing: The Israeli military on Saturday struck dozens of targets across the Gaza Strip in response to heavy rocket fire from the Palestinian enclave the night before.

## Deep roots

Many of the residents were either born on the kibbutz, moved in when they were young or married a longtime local. As teenagers and young adults in their early 20s, they would leave to travel the world or to work in the center of the country and then return when they decided to start their own families.

They recall their childhoods, from the 1970s to 1990s, as a peaceful and idyllic experience. They grew up in a small community surrounded by farmland and traveled to the beach and seafood restaurants in Gaza on the weekend.

But with the Palestinian "intifada" uprising of the early 2000s and the pullout of Israeli settlements in 2005, life changed dramatically. When Hamas, the hard-line Palestinian Islamist group that Israel and the U.S. consider a terrorist organization, took control of the strip in a bloody coup in 2006, Israel imposed a land and sea blockade.

Since then, the years are measured by alternating periods of war and peace — the quiet times reinforcing their decision to stay, the violence pushing them to leave.

Today, about 850 people live on the kibbutz, a small neighborhood that fans out in concentric circles of homes, kindergarten buildings, a dining area and a small shop. Israel's kibbutz movement started in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a combination of the Zionist pioneer spirit to settle the land and socialist ideals to create a shared society. All kibbutz members share the burden and successes of families, work and life.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm killing myself," Ms. Russo said when asked about her decision to stay. She was born on the kibbutz, where she is now married and raising her children. "When it's peaceful, it's peaceful. It's a beautiful place. We have a beautiful community. Most of the people like to help each other.

"But there's no right question. It varies. It's very stressful."

Just a few hundred yards of buffer zone separate Kfar Aza from the border fence where angry Palestinians have been gathering each Friday since the end of March. The demonstrations vary in size from maybe 7,000 to as many as 30,000 people.

The cramped, concrete structures of Gaza City are clearly visible the edge of the kibbutz. When Palestinians burn tires to block the view of Israeli soldiers, the acrid black smoke blows into the community.

David Bing is a farmer from the kibbutz, tending fields of potatoes, avocados, leeks and other vegetables that thrive in the sandy, salty earth. Since March, the army has confiscated almost 1,800 acres of his farmland as a closed military zone to confront the riots in Gaza, built up earthen berms and added barbed wire fencing.

"For me, I'm thinking today, as somebody who's working the field, not if there will be a war or something like that," Mr. Bing said. "I'm thinking, like, if it will be, then I won't put my potatoes in on time."

In mid-October, on a drive through the farm fields right next to the border, Mr. Bing picks up a large kite made from blue tarp and another device with a burned plastic sandal attached. These are the incendiary kites and balloons from Gaza that have torched almost 9,000 acres of forest and farm fields in Israel.

Mr. Bing and Ms. Abrahams, both long-time residents, said they have recorded three to five fires daily since mid-April and around 800 rockets fired since the summer of 2017. The Israel Defense Forces says it has destroyed 17 Hamas terrorist tunnels, at least one that burrowed under the border fence into Israeli territory heading toward Kfar Aza.

## Teaching the children

Older kibbutz members tell their children to be cautious approaching balloons and that if they see a balloon and don't know where it came from, to leave it and call a grown-up.

"It's very difficult to take their innocence in such a young age," Ms. Abrahams said.

Alon Alsheich, who lives on Kibbutz Niram near Kfar Aza, argues that Israeli residents living the area should not give in to hopelessness in the face of the disruptive Palestinian tactic.

"We knew that it worked, so we knew it's going to continue. Knowing it's so primitive and low-tech it would be a great challenge," he said. "I don't know why, I don't know where it came from. But I said, 'OK, I'm going to stop this. I'm going to stop these balloon fires.'"

Mr. Alsheich, working in Israel's tech-savvy startup community, organized a hackathon to bring people from all over the country to see what available civilian technology could be used to counter the ad hoc devices. As it stands, civilians and the military are keeping watch for incoming balloons or kites, trying to neutralize them before they land or chasing after fires when they start.

From the hackathon, Mr. Alsheich and his associates connected with researchers and companies working on drone technology, sensor detection and firefighting. Mr. Alsheich, along with six others, founded a company called Yalla (Hebrew and Arabic slang for 'Let's go') to raise funds and investment in these endeavors.

"We say in Israel, 'Making lemonade out of lemons,'" he said, adding that the goal is to use the security crisis to make a profit by proving the effectiveness of these technologies in Israel and outsourcing them to other places with similar challenges of fighting fires.

"We are very not political because we deal with money," he said. "But there's no [question] that what we do at least postpones the war."

For seven months, Israelis in the south have dealt with threats from the fires, but the firing by Hamas of traditional rockets provokes a much stronger response. After a rocket hit an Israeli home in mid-October, Israel responded by targeting over two dozen Hamas posts within the Gaza Strip, including suspected command outposts, rocket launching sites and munitions shops.

"After the first person will die here from the fires, they will be shooting kids, anyone that will hold a balloon with something burning or a grenade tied to it," Mr. Alsheich said. "To tell you the truth, I don't know who could blame them. Because if their kids are sending balloons with grenades that will hit my kids, I don't know, it's a really difficult question what to do. Really difficult."

Since the beginning of October, Yalla has exceeded its fundraising goal — with 385 investors contributing almost \$170,000. Mr. Alsheich hopes to be operational before the end of the year, the sooner the better to counter the threats for the communities in the south, including his own.

"Wars were always an incubator for technological advancement, and we're so lucky to have a war in our backyard," he said. "Let's make the most of it."

Copyright © 2018 The Washington Times, LLC. Click here for reprint permission.

### The Washington Times Comment Policy

The Washington Times welcomes your comments on Spot.im, our third-party provider. Please read our Comment Policy before commenting.

### Popular In the Community



<p><b>RICK SCOTT SUES BROWARD COUNTY,...</b></p> <p><b>Michael Z. Willi...</b> 3h</p> <p>How many more ballots will they find?...</p>	<p><b>PATRIOTS OF THE CONSTITUTION MILITIA...</b></p> <p> <b>PurplePopcorn</b> 3d</p> <p>... "It's my country," Miller said. "If we're..."</p>	<p><b>JUDGE BRIAN MORRIS BLOCKS KEYSTONE...</b></p> <p><b>3DOTNEWS</b> 3h</p> <p>How much longer are people going to allo...</p>	<p><b>MATTHEW WHITAKER APPOINTMENT IGNITES...</b></p> <p><b>Guy Smith</b> 4h</p> <p>Brennan is sweating. Whitaker is no Jeff...</p>	<p><b>FEDS POLI</b></p> <p></p> <p>It is star</p>
---	--	--	---	---

