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Close to the edge

Feeling abandoned by their countrymen, the residents of one Israeli town have endured over 2,000 rocket attacks. Philip Jacobson reports on the psychological price paid by the people of Sderot. Photographs: Shaul Schwarz

A sweltering summer morning, and the hubbub and bustle of the central market place in Sderot is interrupted by the wailing of sirens and the urgent voice of a woman repeating Tzeva Adom, Tzeva Adom, over the public address system. In Hebrew that means “Colour Red”, and it signifies that another Qassam rocket has been launched by Palestinian militants from inside the Gaza Strip and is heading towards the town. As residents of Sderot are only too well aware, it gives them a maximum of 15 seconds to take cover.

Some shoppers respond instantly, scurrying for the freestanding steel-and-concrete shelters, known as “life shields”, dotted around public places. Others panic, running in one direction then another, spilling fruit and vegetables from their shopping bags. A few people ignore the warning, waiting calmly until a shrill whistle overhead is followed by the thud of an explosion in the distance. Moments later the market is back in business, mobile phones ringing constantly as news about the latest attack is exchanged (nobody was hurt). Later in the day, four more rockets land, again without inflicting casualties.

It is more than five years since the first Qassam hit Sderot, which sits on the western edge of Israel’s Negev desert, a little more than a mile away from the high-rise blocks of the Palestinian city of Beit Hanoun. In that time, more than 2,000 rockets have struck homes, schools, offices, factories and a local synagogue. Miraculously, only eight people have been killed (three of them small children) and a few dozen more wounded, but the bombardments – sometimes sporadic, often intense – have become a permanent and frightening part of the fabric of everyday life for Sderot’s 24,000 inhabitants.

Over the past decade or so, other communities in Israel have suffered much heavier casualties from terrorist attacks: suicide bombers have killed scores of civilians and more than 40 people died when Hezbollah’s rockets rained down on towns in the north of the country during the brief war in Lebanon last year. But none have endured such a prolonged and draining ordeal under fire as Sderot, whose long-suffering residents suggest, with gallows humour, that on a map of conflict in Israel, their home should be permanently represented by a bull’s-eye.

As my guide, Hava Gad, directs my car around the town, past buildings where fist-sized lumps of shrapnel have punched through concrete walls and metal doors, she sets out the ground rules for survival. If you can’t reach a shelter inside the 15 seconds, kneel by the nearest wall, head down with hands behind the neck: the rockets’ normal trajectory is west to east, so a good sense of direction is useful. Take your time getting back up, Gad cautions, because Qassams can arrive in irregular salvos. That’s not all there is to learn about staying alive in Sderot. “Driving with the radio on too loud could drown out the sound of the alarm,” Gad tells me, “and the same goes for taking a shower, so make sure there’s always someone else around.” When I reach for my seat belt, she points out that people have been hurt because they were unable to get out of their cars fast enough – “so now we’re the only place in Israel where it is officially forbidden to buckle up”.

Almost as an afterthought, Gad informs me that the Colour Red alert system, triggered when a laser beam detects the sudden increase in heat after a rocket has been fired, is not infallible. In certain weather conditions, such as heavy mist, launches can go undetected. In May, a 32-year-old woman was killed when a Qassam landed on her car without any advance warning.

This was the first death inflicted by a rocket for the best part of six months, during which time Hamas – the Islamic militant faction responsible for the majority of attacks – was observing an unofficial “tahidyeh” or lull (though other militant groups were still firing off occasional rockets). “That was fine while it lasted, but in Sderot we’ve learnt the hard way not to become complacent,” says Hava Gad. Sure enough, the bombardments resumed, quickly building up to a new peak of intensity. Over the next two weeks, more than 300 rockets struck the town.

Twenty fell in the space of a single day, Gad recalls with a shudder. “The alarms went on and on, and it seemed like the explosions would never stop.”

In her cramped office at Sderot’s centre for the treatment of shock victims, Dr Adriana Katz is talking about the invisible wounds inflicted on the hundreds of patients in her care by the relentless barrages. “It’s true the Qassams don’t kill many people, but they have largely destroyed the normal fabric of life in the town. Everyone exists in a state of permanent alert, which is physically and psychologically very destructive.”

Almost every attack results in 20 to 30 people being taken to the centre to be treated for shock, most exhibiting the classic symptoms: crying, stammering, sometimes trembling so violently they cannot control their limbs. In many of the cases, this gives way to what is classified in Hebrew as harada – a state of acute anxiety, often accompanied by feelings of helplessness and depression, that can persist for months on end.

“We do our best to prevent people lapsing into full-blown post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by getting them to take part in group therapy or one-on-one counselling,” says Katz. “The aim is to help them get back into some kind of regular routine, even if it’s just getting on with their jobs or doing the housework. But, of course, that means them returning to the hugely stressful circumstances that everyone here faces.”

One of her patients is a hollow-eyed young woman who stares into space, clenching and unclenching her hands. A rocket exploded right beside her house, Katz explains. “She is simply unable to overcome the terror she experienced.” Katz is sure many people in Sderot are similarly afflicted, but refuse to seek appropriate treatment, struggling by on tranquillisers. “You must have noticed almost everyone here smokes like a chimney,” she adds, stubbing out a cigarette. I ask what would make her job any easier – reduced caseload, more money, more staff ? Katz thinks for a moment.

“To be frank, the mental-health situation here is shocking and it’s getting worse, we need all the help we can get. But the best thing that could happen would be a lasting peace.”

The most tragic victims of the Qassams are Sderot’s children, one in three of whom suffers from PTSD according to a survey published last year. Like their parents, they spend much of their lives “on alert”, dreading the next attack, unable to concentrate at school or enjoy the normal pleasures of childhood at home. “It is a sad fact that there are 10-year-old kids who require tranquillisers daily,” says Liora Fima, head of a local elementary school where about half the pupils were being kept away by their parents.

When Fima invites a class to talk about the rockets, one youngster volunteers that if the alarm sounds “my mother jumps around doing chicken noises to make me laugh, but I know what is happening and I get even more frightened.” Another recounts how her parents encourage her “to make up silly names for the rockets, like Cornflake Qassams, only I can see how scared they are and it stops being fun”. As Fima notes, the paintings on the classroom walls reflect these fears, depicting burning houses and stick figures lying on the ground. “For them, red isn’t the colour of roses, but of blood and flames.”

Although Israeli law states that all schools must be fully reinforced against rocket attack, Fima’s is one of several in the town that still lacks complete protection because of a shortage of funds. “The safe rooms we have are painted bright blue so the children know where to run to when the sirens sound,” she says. “But as things are at present, we can’t risk letting them congregate in the unprotected playground or gymnasium, which means they spend hours cooped up here. Then they go home, where their parents are afraid to let them play out of doors.”

As a spokesperson for the Sderot parents association, Hava Gad knows all about the strains that the attacks impose on family life: her own eight-year-old son, Yanay, worries so much that he can no longer sleep in his own room, spending the night with her and her husband, Tsfania. “He was quite advanced as a little boy, out of nappies before he was two,” she recalls, “but he’s begun wetting the bed, something that other mothers say is also happening to their children.”

With two daughters, Shay, 16, and Hagar, 18, sharing the family’s single-storey house, there is little opportunity for privacy. “I haven’t worked for two years, after losing my job in marketing because I was always rushing off after attacks to check my kids were safe,” says Gad. “Living with the rockets 24/7 is unbelievably stressful.”

“My daughters are normal teenagers, interested in the usual things for girls of their age, but every time they go out at night it’s like planning a military exercise. We have to think about how they’ll get around, check the bomb shelter at the place where they’re going, make sure their mobiles are charged up. Then you sit and chew on your fingernails until they come home.”

As Gad points out, the pressure is intensified by the frustration of being unable to provide the usual blanket of parental security and protection for their children. “I think my husband, whose roots are Yemeni, feels this particularly strongly, because he’s from a background where family responsibilities are taken very seriously.” She describes the difficulties of sustaining a married relationship: “It’s hard to make love when you have a frightened child in the bedroom.”

Behind Sderot’s police station, there is a scrap yard packed with the remains of rockets that have hit the town, all labelled and dated. The Palestinian militants who launched them usually adorned the fuselage with their faction’s emblems, sometimes adding defiant slogans in Hebrew. The first Qassams – named after a firebrand Muslim preacher who died fighting the British in the 1930s – were knocked up in Gaza’s backstreet workshops from 6ft lengths of iron drainpipes or lampposts with four stabilising fins soldered into place. Launched from crude sloping racks and propelled by a mixture of sugar, oil, alcohol and fertiliser, they had a range of less than five miles and carried just 11lb of explosives to scatter the shrapnel load.

Over the past few years, the rockets’ range and destructive capability have increased as the militants experiment with fuel mixes and bigger payloads – though lacking a guidance system they remain inaccurate. The latest version, Qassam-3, packs over 20lb of explosive and can reach more than 15 miles inside Israel. This puts the port of Ashkelon just within range and several rockets have already landed on the city’s outskirts.

“They’ve improved targeting by calculating the angle of each launch, then listening to Israeli radio reports of where the rockets landed,” says Noam Bedein, a young Israeli journalist. There is a fairly predictable pattern to the attacks on Sderot, Bedein notes. “It starts between 7 and 9am, when the kids leave for school and the buses are full of people going to work, then resume as they head home in the late afternoon.”

At night, sporadic bombardments ensure that people are kept awake and on edge, while Jewish religious holidays rarely pass without sirens. In May, a Qassam crashed through the roof of the Ohel Yitzchak synagogue shortly after 400 worshippers had left the building: the only casualty was an alsatian dog at the house next door.

Although surveillance cameras mounted in a blimp that floats above Sderot record every movement on the Palestinian side of the border fence, the Israeli military cannot prevent swift hit-and-run attacks. Once, when Bedein was at an observation point overlooking Beit Hanoun, a Qassam team appeared on the roof of a building there. “They were really slick, got the rockets off fast. By the time I heard the explosions, they were pulling out. We could hear them shouting “Allahu Akbar”. Israel’s retaliation usually involves airborne missile strikes against known militant bases and workshops involved in producing Qassams.

Sderot's mayor is a fast-talking lawyer, Eli Moyal, who took office almost a decade ago, expecting "to be looking after things like education, leisure facilities and getting the garbage collected".

No shrinking violet, he offers comparisons of himself with the New York mayor Rudy Giuliani at the time of 9/11. Neither of them expected to become national heroes, he observes, but events thrust both of them into the role.

Journalists flock to interview Moyal, but he is no fan of the media's reporting from Sderot, blaming it for presenting a distorted picture of the town, where he has lived most his life. One reporter who asked him about the exodus of Sderot residents – around half the population has left since the attacks intensified earlier this year – got both barrels. "The 50% that aren't leaving are the real story, but nobody's filming them," he snapped, "nor the 17-year-olds studying for exams while the Qassams are falling."

Another sore point for Moyal is the free holidays in the Israeli resort of Eilat that Sderot residents have gratefully accepted from Arcadi Gaydamak, a Russian-born billionaire who announced recently that he was founding a new political party aimed at the many Israelis fed up with high-level corruption and misconduct. Nothing against this man personally, Moyal insists, but where was the government when people are reaching breaking point under fire? "We're talking about a national problem of the highest order."

Moyal has not endeared himself to his own community by arguing that the state-funded reinforcement of homes against the Qassams amounts to "capitulation", implying terrorism will remain a fact of life in Sderot. The rockets have never killed anybody inside a building, he notes: even if every home was given full protection "we still have to go outside, to the shops or schools". Provocative stuff, but Moyal insists most people in Sderot love him dearly – even though he has been assaulted in the street more than once and is trailed by a bodyguard.

Moyal rejects the notion that because Sderot is a "development town" – Israeli shorthand for a working-class community containing a high proportion of poor immigrants, in this case from North Africa, Ethiopia and most recently Russia – the government has turned its back on them. "Of course we are suffering. We're becoming a ghost town where people don't go to work and kids stay away from school. But that's got nothing to do with ethnic factors; the crisis persists because the government doesn't understand the needs of its citizens here."

Hava Gad sees it differently: "Nobody else in Israel gives a damn about us," she says, scornfully dismissing the politicians who pay a flying visit "then scurry away like frightened mice". If rockets were hitting Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, she maintains, the government would quickly be galvanised into action. Sderot had high hopes when Amir Peretz, who grew up in the town, became Israel's defence minister, Gad recalls, "yet he was as useless as the rest of them". Although Peretz is no longer in office, when the foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, arrived, there were angry protests. Demonstrators chanted "Livni, you're a whore" and pelted her car with rubbish. As for Ehud Olmert, Israel's prime minister, his two most recent visits to Sderot were not announced in advance, seemingly to avoid a similarly hostile reception. "He needn't have bothered coming," says Gad, "because all he had to tell us was that there's no way to stop the Qassam attacks."

During the clashes that erupted in the Gaza Strip in June between the rival militias of Hamas and Fatah, the rattle of gunfire and explosion of rocket-propelled grenades could be heard clearly in Sderot. While the conflict raged, only a handful of Qassams were launched at the town, but once it became clear that the tough Hamas fighters had triumphed, residents hunkered down in anticipation of a renewed blitz.

"These days, rockets are really the only weapon the Palestinians have to strike at Israel," says Noam Bedein: the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Gaza two years ago removed soft targets in the Jewish settlements there, and improved security measures have sharply reduced suicide bombings inside Israel. Adding to the threat posed by the Qassam-3, militants in Gaza have fired at least one Katyusha 122mm rocket in the direction of Sderot (it fell short due to a faulty launch). These Russian-made battlefield weapons pack a much bigger explosive punch than the Qassams and have a considerably longer range: Israeli intelligence services believe Katyushas have been smuggled into Gaza from Egypt, though not yet in any great number.

Since seizing control of Gaza, Hamas has held back from resuming attacks on Sderot, but the Qassams are still falling regularly: responsibility for recent strikes has been claimed by other militant factions, including Islamic Jihad. Military sources in Jerusalem claim Hamas has “licensed” such groups to continue the bombardment because its leaders fear that with the Palestinian Authority – nominally Israel’s partner in peace negotiations – now ousted, they will become prime targets for even more ferocious retaliation.

Meanwhile, the rest of Israel appears to be waking up to Sderot’s plight: around 30,000 people turned up for a solidarity concert in Tel Aviv’s Rabin Square, organised by the lead singer of Teapacks, one of Israel’s best-known pop groups, who comes from the town. Kobi Oz told the crowd his sister had complained to him that Sderot felt “abandoned” by the rest of the country. Unusually, the mayor shunned the limelight: an Israeli TV channel had just revealed that police were investigating Moyal’s handling of large sums of public money earmarked for improving the protection of buildings against Qassams.

Most welcome of all, a bill has been introduced in the Knesset (parliament) that will designate Sderot as a “frontline community”, enjoying the same status as the northern towns bombarded by Hezbollah’s Katyushas. Residents would be eligible for an aid package that includes hefty reductions in income and property taxes, financial assistance for improving home protection, free daycare services for children, and improved educational facilities.

Eighty people from Sderot were crammed into the Knesset’s public gallery as the bill sailed through its first reading with a handsome cross-party majority. When the result was announced, they leapt to their feet, clapping and cheering.