

GUEST ESSAY

I'm Going to War for Israel. Palestinians Are Not My Enemy.

Oct. 13, 2023

By Nir Avishai Cohen

Mr. Cohen, a major in the reserves of the Israel Defense Forces, is the author of the book "Love Israel, Support Palestine."

Sign up for Your Places: Global Update. All the latest news for any part of the world you select. [Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

I was in Austin, Texas, for work on Saturday when I received a call from my commander in the Israel Defense Forces to return to Israel and head to the front line. I didn't hesitate. I knew that the citizens of my country were in real danger. My duty first and foremost is to join the fight against those who unleashed a massacre on my people. I boarded the first flight I found out of Austin to head home to join the I.D.F. reserves, where I serve as a brigade operations command officer.

During my long flight to Israel, my mind couldn't rest. I was trying to write down my feelings and thoughts about everything happening — and everything that's about to happen — in my beloved country.

Little by little, the dimensions of the horrors of the most brutal attack that Israelis have experienced since the establishment of the state were being revealed. Hundreds of Hamas terrorists slaughtered more than 1,200 people, including women, children and older people. About 150 citizens and soldiers have been taken captive. There's nothing in the world that can justify the murder of hundreds of innocent people.

But I'd like to say one thing clearly, before I go to battle: There's no such thing as "unavoidable." This war could have been avoided, and no one did enough to prevent it. Israel did not do enough to make peace; we just conquered the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, expanded the illegal settlements and imposed a long-term siege on the Gaza Strip.

For 56 years Israel has been subjecting Palestinians to oppressive military rule. In my book "Love Israel, Support Palestine," I wrote: "Israeli society has to ask itself very important questions about where and why the blood of its sons and daughters was spilled. A Messianic religious minority has dragged us into a muddy swamp, and we are following them as if it were the piper from Hamelin." When I wrote these words last year, I didn't realize how deep in the mud we were, and how much more blood could be shed in so little time.

I am now going to defend my country against enemies who want to kill my people. Our enemies are the deadly terrorist organizations that are being controlled by Islamic extremists.

Palestinians aren't the enemy. The millions of Palestinians who live right here next to us, between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan, are not our enemy. Just like the majority of Israelis want to live a calm, peaceful and dignified life, so do Palestinians. Israelis and Palestinians alike have been in the grip of a religious minority for decades. On both sides, the intractable positions of a small group have dragged us into violence. It doesn't matter who is more cruel or more ruthless. The ideologies of both have fueled this conflict, leading to the deaths of too many innocent civilians.

As a major in the reserves, it is important to me to make it clear that in this already unstoppable new war, we cannot allow the massacre of innocent Israelis to result in the massacre of innocent Palestinians. Israel must remember that there are more than two million people living in the Gaza Strip. The vast majority of them are innocent. Israel must do everything in its power to avoid killing innocent people and to focus on destroying the militant army of Hamas.

This war, like others before it, will end sooner or later. I am not sure I will come back from it alive, but I do know that a minute after the war is over, both Israelis and Palestinians will have to reckon with the leaders who led them to this moment. We must wake up and not let the extremists rule. Palestinians and Israelis must denounce the extremists who are driven by religious fanaticism. The Israelis will have to oust National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and their far-right circle from power, and the Palestinians will have to oust the leadership of Hamas.

I try to look for shreds of hope. The Yom Kippur War, the most difficult war that Israel had known until this week, started by surprise in 1973. After a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt was finally signed in 1979, the border with Egypt — one that was once the site of the dead and wounded — became a border of peace.

Israelis must realize that there is no greater security asset than peace. The strongest army cannot protect the country the way peace does. This current war proves it once again. Israel has followed the path of war for too long.

At the end, after all of the dead Israelis and Palestinians are buried, after we have finished washing away the rivers of blood, the people who share a home in this land will have to understand that there is no other choice but to follow the path of peace. That is where true victory lies.

Nir Avishai Cohen, a major in the reserves of the Israel Defense Forces, is the author of the book "Love Israel, Support Palestine."

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.