

Los Angeles Times

Tel Aviv bus bombing shatters any illusions of safety

Attack leaves 21 injured in the Israeli city, which has enjoyed a relative sense of security in recent years.

By Mark Magnier, Los Angeles Times

5:00 PM PST, November 21, 2012

TEL AVIV — A bus bombing in downtown Tel Aviv, the first in the city in years, injured 21 people Wednesday, shattering windows, nerves and illusions.

Coming after a handful of rocket strikes on the outskirts of Israel's largest city in recent days, the attack reinforced the view that no one in the country is secure.

"People in Tel Aviv are used to feeling more safe than other parts of the country," said Matti Schik, 48, a medical administrator who works a few feet from where the bus bomb exploded. "Now that's changed."

Though news of Wednesday's cease-fire was welcomed, many said they didn't expect it to last given the poor record of such agreements in recent years.

"This isn't going away," said Metuka Orevi, a grandmother in Beersheba, in southern Israel, a city that's seen dozens of rocket attacks over the last week. "But maybe we can have a few months of quiet. That's all you can ask for."

Police stepped up security in Tel Aviv after the noontime attack, which occurred as the bus rounded a corner near the justice and defense ministries. Analysts said the lack of fatalities and limited damage suggested a relative amateur used a crude device.

Buses were noticeably empty as word spread, however. Forensic specialists combed the debris for clues.

"It was a terrible thing," said Israel Kornik, a medic who witnessed the explosion. "There was lots of blood."

Tel Aviv has long enjoyed a reputation as a party town somewhat insulated from the airborne attacks seen in areas of Israel closer to the Gaza Strip, although the city came

under fire from Iraqi Scud missiles during the 1991 Persian Gulf War and has experienced other bombings.

"I've never been one to condemn Tel Aviv for drinking espresso while a crisis happens," said Gadi Taub, a public policy professor at Hebrew University. "The fact is they try to live life normally. But this crisis has given them a greater understanding of what southern communities have been going through."

Though the cease-fire lends hope that rockets will stop causing terror and anxiety, some analysts said the long-term picture suggests that the Palestinian weapons will only increase in range and accuracy over time.

"They're learning and making progress," said [Meir Elran](#), an analyst with the [Institute for National Security Studies](#), a think tank. "Some of their people are innovative and entrepreneurial."

At the Natal trauma center for victims of terrorist attacks, a few blocks from where the bus bombing occurred, volunteer counselor Efrat, who would give only her first name, worked the phones from a cubicle, taking notes as she advised frightened Israelis a few hours before the cease-fire went into effect. In the last week, 25% of the calls to the center's hotline have been from Tel Aviv, up from 5% before the latest violence.

Stress throughout Israel's population has surged, mental health experts said, and that's likely to continue even if the cease-fire holds.

Orevi said her 2-year-old grandson had taken it the hardest in the family, refusing to eat or play.

"I stood on my head yesterday trying to liven him up," she said. "No one can say they're not afraid. We're all afraid."

People have their own coping mechanisms. Some have clung desperately to daily routines to maintain the illusion of normality and sense of control, said Yehudit Bar Hai, a trauma expert. Others avoid taking showers, fearful they couldn't react fast enough in a rocket attack. Others have slept on porches, believing that being that much closer to a shelter made them safer.

The stress has also given rise to dark humor.

"You understand how screwed up things are if your brother calls from Gaza to ask if you're OK," said one message on Facebook. "Lost my rocket virginity last week, not a direct hit but Oh baby I felt the earth move," said another.

Repeated trips to air raid shelters, sometimes two or three times a night, have left many Israelis short on sleep.

"Between the sirens, bombings and a 4 a.m. attack that really shook my house, I'm so tired my body feels like it's night right now," said Orly Gal, Natal's executive director. "But we're getting by on adrenaline. Everyone's a bit cranky, but what can you do?"

A few miles south of Tel Aviv in Rishon Le Zion, Israel's fourth-largest city, Sharon Savariego, a 27-year-old high-tech executive, showed off the family bomb shelter, a small room with foot-thick concrete walls. Tuesday night, after a rocket hit the neighborhood, she had desperately tried reaching her family by phone but had trouble getting a connection.

"It was panic until we got through," she said. "I hope we can put all this behind us."

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