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Rob Roberts: Destroying Hamas is the only goal that matters to Israelis, whatever the ICJ says

The country remains unified against the terrorists

By **Rob Roberts**
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A visitor looks at a giant backlight screen bearing the portraits of the Israeli people who were killed during the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas in southern Israel at the National Library in Jerusalem, on January 25, 2024. (Photo by AHMAD GHARABLI / AFP)

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JERUSALEM/TEL AVIV — Atop a building with a stunning view of the Western Wall, a

smitten young man has prepared an Instagram-worthy plan.

A runway of red and white flowers has been assembled; they lead to an engagement ring made of more flowers, its golden letters asking in Hebrew: will you marry me?

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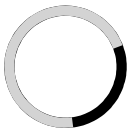

This is Israel's darkest moment in generations. But Israelis have seen a lot, so they endure.

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On Friday, the International Court of Justice ordered Israel to "take all measures within its power" to prevent "genocide" against Palestinians, but the preliminary ruling in the case brought by South Africa did not demand a ceasefire. The decision was hailed by Hamas, and South Africa called it a "decisive victory." Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected the decision as "vile."

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As the ruling came down, the people of Tel Aviv sat in cafes, talking and laughing and smoking more cigarettes than they really

should. They were deterred more by rain and the impending sabbath than by what the ICJ might have to say.

Israel is a country used to enduring double standards, but the world still managed to surprise them by largely responding to Hamas' massacre of civilians by blaming the victim and by quickly forgetting — or cheering on — unspeakable atrocities that feel ancient.

I am visiting Israel as part of a sponsored tour for Canadian journalists, a trip organized by businessman Larry Maher on behalf of community leaders partnered with Toronto's Temple Sinai Congregation. Our group spent time at both ends of this country, talking with residents about an unseen enemy amid staccato thumps of heavy weaponry.

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The country's population has shrunk towards the middle — there are evacuation zones in the Gaza border zone because of what Hamas did on Oct. 7, and also in the north, because of what Hezbollah appears poised to do from Lebanon.

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Amir Tibon, an Israeli journalist from kibbutz Nahal Oz in the south, is staying north of Tel Aviv; his family and many others hosted by a sympathetic kibbutz.

Tibon tells his family's Oct. 7 story with slight embarrassment: despite 10 and a half hours in a safe room, his house being shot up by terrorists, his story has what in this context is a happy ending. He doesn't exactly know why neighbours on either side were killed while he, his wife and two young daughters lived. The kibbutz lost 15 of 450

members, and two of seven hostages taken by Hamas remain in Gaza.

Tibon is now writing a book about the events of that day in his kibbutz, as well as the story of the kibbutz itself. But he is forced to write it from his current home, where kibbutz members recently agreed to accommodate the visiting refugees for a full year, as this embattled country figures out whether it wants to return to the communities overrun by terrorists.

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Israelis need time because they have many things to figure out, including resolving the tension between bringing back the hostages and fully prosecuting the war.

There are posters everywhere in this small country with the faces of the hostages, and the slogan: “Bring Them Home Now.” The

square in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art has been transformed into Hostages Square, with a Shabbat table set for the missing Israelis, booths representing the various kibbutzes struck Oct. 7, and a tent where visitors can buy supportive T-shirts and wristbands and hostage family members come and tell their stories. There's a mock Hamas tunnel to walk through for a more immersive experience.

Nearby, several floors of a tech company tower have been transformed into a mission control for hostage families organized into the Hostage and Missing Families Forum. Office space and meeting rooms with rugelach and Coke Zero are upstairs, downstairs are a cafeteria and a mailroom with shirts and packages of posters and shirts, including one marked Toronto.

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But “Bring Them Home Now” has an implicit “at any cost” subtext, and while empathy for the families can be measured in megatonnes, there is a sense that destroying Hamas can take backseat to no cause.

It is hard, meanwhile, for an outsider to fully understand the dynamic around the future of Netanyahu. Complaints about the prime minister’s failure to protect the country on Oct. 7 and his divisive pre-war judicial reform agenda are omnipresent. And yet Israelis seem to have no appetite for an immediate fight over his future.

Sharren Haskel, a Toronto-born member of the Knesset, is a Bibi foe, but told us over breakfast: “This is not Netanyahu’s war.” Like many Israelis radicalized by the horrors of Oct. 7, she doesn’t see a two-state solution, because Israel has no partner it can work with.

“As long as Hamas exists, there will never be a solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict,” she says. “We cannot reward terrorism.”

This is one favour Hamas did Israel: the terrorists’ almost-cartoonish level of evil unified a famously argumentative country. Many of the people killed on Oct. 7 were the country’s peaceniks. But the peaceniks are furious and feeling ruthless.

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Our group has heard repeatedly this week that Oct. 7 changed Israel. But Friday's ICJ ruling reinforced something that Israelis had long understood: the world is not a fair place.

They find themselves in a circumstance forced upon them. From their perspective, if Hamas is not destroyed, the terror will continue.

National Post

Rob Roberts is National Post editor-in-chief.

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