

Older persons, new challenges: Caring for vulnerable persons during wartime in Israel

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While older people in Israel have been through a lot, they are still a resilient group. Nothing exemplifies this better than the quick actions of Rachel and David Edri, older residents of the southern town of Ofakim. When Hamas terrorists broke into their home on the Black Sabbath of October 7th and kept them hostage for 15 hours (!), Rachel plied the gunman with food and drink long enough for she and her husband to be rescued. In recognition of her initiative, heroism, and what in Yiddish is called “sechel” [common sense plus moxie], she recently got a big hug from another redoubtable elder, President Biden.¹

I am not quite as heroic as Mrs. Edri. Simply a geriatrician, I care for older people in Israel, usually under less stressful conditions. As is usually the case in the specialty, our clientele is generally in their ninth, 10th, or even 11th decades, most suffering from the usual comorbidities. This combination makes our older patients, like those everywhere, particularly vulnerable—even in times of peace.

What is less well known is that older persons are particularly vulnerable in humanitarian disasters.² The shocking outbreak of hostilities which began on October 7 with the Hamas pogrom perpetrated mostly on civilians (including many older persons) has again tested our ability to keep these people safe. Clearly, during war, older citizens suffer from the same dangers that now threaten us all—rockets flying indiscriminately all over the country, each one of more than 10,000 to date a war crime.³ Writing this piece in my study just today, I have had to run three times to our bomb shelter upon hearing the sirens wailing (see Figure 1).

But in addition to the general dangers, older people face multiple other hurdles. Just to get into a bomb

shelter can require a speed and agility that can challenge even younger, much fitter people. In the towns close to the Gaza Strip, one has less than 10 s to find shelter. In Jerusalem where I live, we luxuriate with a 90 s limit.

Sadly, this is not our first encounter with Hamas rockets, repeated fusillades going back decades. During these attacks, many older persons have just been hurt on their way to a shelter—sustaining head injuries and fractures (spine, wrist, and hip). Not to mention frail wheelchair- or bed-bound persons who can only pray that their house will not be hit.

As well, those living with dementia will have difficulties understanding what is going on and what exactly to do when the sirens go off. This is especially true for the 25,000 older persons who live in long-term institutions in the country, who comprise an even more vulnerable group. Many of the nursing home buildings are not adequately protected against rocket fire. In an attempt to shield the residents, however inadequately, top floors have been emptied with patients enduring very crowded conditions in lower floors and basements never designed for such care.

Because of threats on both the southern and northern borders, 240,000 Israelis of all ages have already been displaced⁴ and are sheltering in unfamiliar surroundings mostly in hotels, sometimes whole families in one room. In the rush to leave their homes, equipment, glasses, hearing aids, canes, and above all medications have been left behind. And it breaks one's heart to think of the more than 30 older folks, several over 80, kidnapped by Hamas and living in tunnels underground in Gaza. Who is feeding them? How can they manage without their medications? What terror must they be enduring?



FIGURE 1 Rockets from Gaza hurtling toward Israeli city of Ashkelon. Reprinted with permission from Reuters. Source: https://www.reuters.com/pictures/under-iron-dome-israelis-take-cover-rockets-fall-2023-10-20/?adsafe_ip.

Furthermore, a large proportion of Israel's older persons immigrated decades ago, often as refugees. Many are Holocaust survivors, or were traumatically driven out of surrounding Arab countries in the 1950s. Elsewhere I have written about how the expression “Never Again!” has had its punctuation cruelly and bizarrely transmogrified into “Never Again?”⁵ For example, succeeding where the Nazis had not, Moshe Ridler, a 91-year-old member of Kibbutz Holit on the Israeli side of the border, was brutally murdered by Hamas on that Black Sabbath of October 7⁶ (see Figure 2).

More recently, many older immigrants to Israel arrived after decades behind the Iron Curtain. All of these people have lived through multiple wars both abroad and here in Israel, and are now re-experiencing psychological and physical trauma. And everyone here knows that among the nearly 240 innocent civilians (both Israeli Arabs and Jews) kidnapped by Hamas, a number of them are mere children and more than 30% (!) are over age 65. These dire facts cannot help anyone, especially older persons here, sleep well at night.

However, Israeli society has many strengths. For example, the country has developed an excellent health-care system with special services for its older citizens⁷ and one which is extremely “wired.” Thus, the medical records of displaced elders can be accessed through their

HMO wherever they land up. But the connection to one's personal family doctor, so important for older people with complex medical histories, is largely lost.

Ironically, the recent COVID-19 “adventure” spurred progress in structures and programs of the medical system needs in today's crisis, including telemedicine, enhanced home care, and so forth. Furthermore, services for older persons are well developed and coordinated. The Ministry of Health has a highly competent Division of Geriatrics with teams all over the country (Disclosure: I once headed this operation). Today, I chair the National Council of Geriatrics, an advisory body to the Ministry comprised of geriatricians, nurses, other health professionals, and senior representatives from each of the country's four HMOs. These services cover all citizens, from cradle to grave, and teams are working together during this crisis with a tremendous spirit of goodwill.

Also on the positive side, most older persons here enjoy significant support from families and neighbors (if not displaced). Social solidarity is strong, especially in a crisis such as this one.

However, through all of this we try not to forget what older persons in Gaza must be going through. It breaks one's heart to even imagine it, but tragically, the citizens of the Strip actually elected Hamas; and now, so many



FIGURE 2 Mr. Moshe Adler, 92 in February, murdered by Hamas on October 7, 2023. More than 80 years ago, at age 11 he escaped from a Nazi concentration camp, eventually making his way to Israel, where he helped build Kibbutz Holit on the border with Gaza, where he lived and worked(!) until his murder (photo via Pnina Hendler).

innocents on both sides of the border—young and old—are paying a terrible price for that choice and Hamas' inhumane acts.

Let us just hope that the ongoing events do not further exacerbate these dire processes—both in Israel and Gaza. Here, the younger members of our society, my

youngest son too, are now defending us all—including our older citizens, both Israeli Arabs and Jews. These seniors deserve our care and protection. After all, they built this fine but threatened country.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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How to cite this article: Clarfield AM. Older persons, new challenges: Caring for vulnerable persons during wartime in Israel. *J Am Geriatr Soc.* 2023;1-3. doi:10.1111/jgs.18710