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## Far from home, Israelis abroad watch the war with Gaza up close

Israelis living abroad face a strange reality of feeling deeply connected to events here and simultaneously very far away. Some express relief, however, that their children aren't here to see it.

By Dina Kraft | Nov.21, 2012 | 9:59 AM | 1

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Pro-Israel rally in Los Angeles on Sunday, attended by many Israelis living in the city. Photo by Adam Milstein

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BOSTON - "Tsav 8", read the Facebook status of a friend from Carmi Daniel's Israeli army reserve unit. And that's how he knew, sitting 6,000 miles away at a work conference in upstate New York, that his unit had been served emergency call-up orders.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the night at the kibbutz home of his parents in central Israel, the phone was ringing every hour with an automated message from the army announcing the call-up for the 37-year-old Daniel for what, at the time, seemed like a possible ground war in Gaza.

"My mother called and said it was the first time she's been happy that I'm in Canada and not Israel," said Daniel, the shaliach, or emissary, of the

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Hashomer Hatzair youth movement in Toronto and director of a summer camp run by the movement in Ontario.



For Israelis living abroad, either temporarily like Daniel or for the long-term, watching the latest chapter of Mideast violence unfold from afar brought a feeling of disconnect and even disorientation. As they listened around the clock to live-streams of Israeli radio and television broadcasts, followed events on-line through news sites and social media and talked to friends and family back home by phone, there was a sense of immediacy and presence.

But around them, from New York to Berlin and Buenos Aires, everyday life continued untouched by the events they could not leave behind, even from a distance.

“It’s surreal to have something so serious and all-consuming going on in my country and here I am in a place where everything is normal,” said Daniel.

From New York, Eyal Solomon, 46, spoke of the feeling of straddling two worlds.

“It’s very hard to be here with part of my family there in Israel,” he said. “I find myself checking the Israeli [online] newspapers dozens of times a day. I need to know exactly what is happening every minute.”

His work colleagues have been peppering him with questions about the crisis and ask him how his family has been faring.

Solomon, a marketing director for a software company who plays gigs at night as a jazz musician, has spent the last decade in New York but he wishes he was back in Israel at a time like this.

“There is this false feeling when you are somewhere that you have more control over what’s happening,” he said.

But in Los Angeles, Adam Milstein, who is active in the city’s large Israeli community (about 200,000 strong by some estimates), said he feels he can be most effective from the United States where he has lived for the past thirty years.

As a board member of the Israeli Leadership Council, an organization of Israelis living in the Los Angeles area, he helped organize a local pro-Israel rally last weekend, attended by some 5,000 people. About half of the crowd was Israeli, he said.

“For those of us who are very active we can do even more here by raising awareness, funding programs, participating in organizations that help Israel,” said Milstein who divides his time between his commercial real estate business and pro-Israel philanthropy.

But still, there is the tug of displacement.

“We are here. But spiritually we are there,” he said.

For Tziona Koenig-Yair, a student at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government this year and originally from Moshav Bnai Darom just northeast of Ashdod, it’s been a time of answering fellow students’ questions about the fighting while keeping close watch on the news, only disconnecting to go to sleep.

“It’s disorienting to wake up and know it’s already afternoon in Israel,” she

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said. "Feeling disconnected is definitely a strange feeling."

"Our place is there and it's hard to be here and not there," said Koenig-Yair, 42, national commissioner for Israel's Equal Employment Opportunities Commission. "The only relief is having our kids not going through it." Her youngest of three children is a seven-year-old girl who already knows the sound of sirens well from growing up in southern Israel.

For the first two months after arriving at their home for the year in a Boston suburb, her daughter would panic every time the sirens in a nearby firehouse sounded and ask why they were not heading to a shelter.

Daniel, who is father to two young boys, aged 2 and 4, also feels a sense of relief at being abroad when he thinks of his children.

"I'm not exposing them to this and the questions of what is a siren and a shelter and why do we see planes in the sky ... it's not a conversation any child needs to have at this stage," he said.

In West Virginia, Debbie Hill, an American-born Israeli photographer who lives in Jerusalem, had just arrived to visit her family when the fighting broke out. Although for the first time in two decades she has not been covering a major episode in Israeli-Palestinian fighting, she is still seeing men with guns.

Outside her father's home Tuesday morning she saw hunters dressed in neon orange and camouflage gear with shotguns strapped to their backs.

"It's deer season," she said.

She's a long way from Jerusalem indeed.

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