

*"Despite the war, you came here to express solidarity and report to the world about the atrocities that took place here," said Daniel Benlolo, executive director of KKL France, to the French opinion leaders delegation visiting Israel last week.*

## FRENCH OPINION LEADERS TOUR ISRAEL, MEET SURVIVORS, ACTIVISTS, LOCAL AND MILITARY OFFICIALS

A delegation of French media professionals and influencers, led by KKL France, arrived in Israel to experience for themselves the Israeli reality in the wake of the Oct 7 horrors, to meet with experts and decision makers from a variety of viewpoints, and to hear first-hand testimonies from survivors and families of the dead and missing

"KKL-JNF was among the first bodies to mobilize in the aid of the communities in the Gaza envelope," said **Yuval Yeini**, acting CEO of KKL-JNF. He noted that, among other things, KKL-JNF has assisted in evacuating residents, running educational activities for children, and funding for local authorities to reequip local emergency response teams and purchase ambulances. "Just as KKL-JNF was a partner in establishing these communities, so too will it assist in their rehabilitation later on," he declared.

"It's important to us that journalists see with their own eyes the situation in Israel," said KKL France President **Robert Zbili**. "What happened in Israel can happen in other places as well, and those who harm Jews now may later branch out to [harming] other populations."

**Daniel Saada**, former Israeli ambassador to France, gave an overview of the political



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situation, stressing that "the world has now discovered what Hamas is, but we have known this organization for many years. Gaza could have become a Palestinian paradise, on the way to a two-state solution, but instead we got terror and hell. Anyone who thinks Israel has been weakened will discover that we have never been stronger."

**MK Alon Shuster**, Deputy Defense Minister, former Minister of Agriculture and prior to that Mayor of the Sha'ar HaNegev Regional Council, is a resident of Kibbutz Mifalsim in the Gaza Envelope. Describing the current situation, he said: "The terrorists wanted to eliminate hope for a better future, and this hope indeed suffered a fatal blow. We have embarked on a war that we



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have no choice but to win. If we succeed in dismantling Hamas as a military power, not only the Israelis will have a better future, but also the Palestinians. The people of Israel have undergone a 180-degree transformation, from polarization to unity."

Brig. Gen. Res. **Yossi Kuperwasser**, former head of the research division in the IDF's Military Intelligence division, explained: "On the other side of the border lives a society that engages in incitement and calls for the expulsion of the Jews by force through terror, what they call jihad. Their terrible cruelty raises a question: Are they human beings? Yes, these are people who have been brainwashed since childhood."

He noted that this was not a spontaneous pogrom, as the Jews had known throughout history, but an organized military operation carried out by forces that had been trained and armed by the Iranians. "What happened on October 7 not only changed the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians, but also [fomented] change globally. We had no intention of going to war and taking over Gaza, but we can't exist next to Hamas."

### **Pain and fortitude**

The next day, the delegation embarked on a tour of the Gaza Envelope. On the way, they felt the atmosphere of war; the roads and communities are almost empty, with

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only soldiers and members of security forces remaining. In Ofakim they met **Binyamin Malka**, ZAKA commander in the city and chairman of the religious council, who was responsible for identifying the bodies and preparing them for burial.

"I have been active in ZAKA for many years, and I have never seen such atrocities," he said. "The terrorists abused women and children, beheaded, and amputated limbs. The sights don't leave us."



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The members of the delegation entered an Ofakim apartment where hostages had been held, and were shocked by the bloodstains and the bullet-pierced walls. This is evidence of the battle that took place here when fighters from the counterterrorism unit broke in, eliminated the kidnappers and rescued the resident couple.



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From there, the group continued to Sderot, the city that has been dealing with terror and rocket fire from Gaza for more than 20 years. "Sderot is strong and we will rebuild it," said **Dorel Cohen**,

a representative of the municipality. France Chief Rabbi **Olivier Kaufmann** recited the Kaddish in front of where the Sderot police station used to be. The station was completely destroyed in a battle against the terrorists who took it over.

At the Sheba Hospital in central Israel, they met Prof. Arnon Afek, Associate Director General of the Sheba Medical Center. "This is much more than a war between Hamas and Israel, it is a war between civilizations," Prof. Afek said.

The hospital treats civilians and combatants injured in the terrorist attacks and in battles against the terrorists. Among them was **Gal Levy**, a survivor of the Nova music

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festival massacre near Kissufim, shared the moments of terror he experienced. "We heard bullets above our heads and everyone began to flee. I hid and got shot in the leg. I smeared myself with blood and pretended to be dead. I bled for 4 hours until they saved me."

**Elishai**, an officer in the Paratroopers Brigade, fought in Kibbutz Be'eri and was wounded in battle. "The terrorists went from house to house and from family to family. They beheaded and murdered babies in their cribs. I felt that I was fighting on behalf of the Jewish nation, and as soon as I recover, I intend to fight again. I can't just stand by."



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In the evening, they heard a lecture by **Itamar Marcus**, founder and director of the Palestinian Media Watch, followed by a lecture from Atty. **Maurice Hirsch**, a lieutenant colonel in the reserves and a veteran of the Military Advocate General's Office, on the subject of martial law. "The Hamas Charter is an anti-Semitic document that undermines the existence of the State of Israel," Hirsch said. "The State of Israel is entitled to launch an attack in self-defense. Israel complies with international law and attacks only military targets."

### Shelling and sirens

The next morning, they visited the i24 news editorial board and met Frank Melloul, the CEO, and journalist Matthias Inbar. The two spoke to them about the situation in Israel and about journalistic work under fire.

From there, the delegation continued to Kibbutz Lehavot Haviva, which is hosting some 100 families from Ashkelon and other southern Israeli communities that have evacuated from the combat zone. The evacuation of these residents was made possible thanks to the support of the KKL-JNF. The delegates were impressed by KKL-JNF's educational activities for children; one activity they saw was a game to identify Israeli landmarks by rolling a ball around on a giant parachute. Afterwards, they visited a kindergarten being operated there for children from the south.



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Evacuee **Rivka Barel** was holding her toddler son Eitan in her arms as she told the group, "We really needed to get away from the war. The sirens and explosions cause great anxiety in the children, and they actually asked to leave. Here they can play freely and enjoy KKL-JNF activities."



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"I've had a very significant experience here, from the encounter with the deep sadness and great anger of those who experienced the 7.10 attack," said delegation member **Denis Olivennes**. "It is clear to me now that a political solution, not just a military one, is needed."

From there they continued to Jerusalem for a tour of the Knesset and an impression of the Israeli parliament. They met with Knesset Speaker **Amir Ohana**, who told them: "We went through one day of holocaust here. The terrorists didn't just come to kill, they came to convey a message. On behalf of the Knesset and all citizens of Israel, I would like to express my appreciation that you are here. We will need your support going forward as we defend ourselves."

On the way back to Tel Aviv, a "Red Alert" alarm sounded, and the members of the delegation personally experienced what Israeli residents must cope with on a daily basis. Everyone quickly got off the bus and lay down face-down on the side of the road with their hands covering their heads. Fortunately, the missile was intercepted by Iron Dome and no one was hurt.



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In the evening, the journalists heard lectures by members of the Israel Defense & Security Forum (IDSF): Maj. Gen. **Yaakov Amidror**, former head of the National Security Council (NSC); Brig. Gen. (res.) **Hasson Hasson**; and **Or Issachar**, head of the Research Department.

"The State of Israel is the forward post of the world, and what we are experiencing here the entire world is going to experience," Hasson said.

"This war was forced on us by Hamas, not by words but by deeds," Amidror said. He stressed that the objective was to dismantle Hamas' military capabilities and ensure that there would be no more terrorism from Gaza. "This is a war to restore security in the south of the country, restore Israel's deterrence in the Middle East, and fight the axis of evil that Iran leads," Amidror concluded.

### **Loss and mobilization**

There are 240 people being held hostage in Gaza; they include babies and the elderly, children and adults, civilians and soldiers. The delegation visited heartbreaking exhibits in Tel Aviv calling for their return home. In the plaza of Tel Aviv Art Museum (now known as "Captives Square"), there stands an enormous table set for a festive dinner, but the chairs remain empty. Another display depicts bloodstained baby shoes. Visitors are invited to write their impressions on a large board nearby. An hourglass illustrates how time is running out save them.

Family members of abductees are here, talking with visitors and sharing with them their difficult feelings, feelings of uncertainty and deep concern for their fate.

'Brothers in Arms' is an Israeli protest movement that is mobilizing their huge network to procure equipment and get it to security forces and civilians in the conflict zones. The French delegation visited the organization's 'Civilian Emergency HQ' at the Tel Aviv Exhibition Center, where they met volunteer **Michel Cef**, who said: "Already on October 7, we mobilized in order to create unity and collect necessary products for the benefit of soldiers and residents."

He spoke about the movement's various activities - rescuing families from conflict zones to safer areas; finding housing solutions for evacuated families; assisting the security forces in locating



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missing persons; supporting the families of fallen soldiers, missing persons and abductees; transporting reservists; supplying hot meals for the families of the wounded; rescuing farm animals and pets left behind in conflict zones; purchasing medical kits; establishing a memorial site in memory of fallen soldiers and murdered civilians; collecting necessary equipment for families and soldiers; and assisting farmers with agricultural work. The French journalists toured the movement's large collection center, and even helped prepare packages of clothing to be delivered to families and soldiers.

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All trips come to an end, but the places the delegation visited, the people they met, and the stories they heard have surely left their mark and will help media professionals tell Israel's story in the context of the harsh reality it faces.

"It was important for us to see what happened here, to understand the scale of the catastrophe," said **Elisabeth Levy**, a journalist from Paris and a member of the delegation. "We got the impression that Israeli society is strong, and alongside the pain and grief, people are already working for rebuilding and renewal."



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