

AIPAC spoke recently with Michal Kakoon, a resident of Sderot, Israel, who describes her family's life under constant threat of missile attacks from the Gaza Strip.

What do you do in Sderot?

I've been living in Sderot since 1995 since I got married. My husband immigrated with his parents to Sderot from Morocco and we are raising two wonderful daughters. The oldest one, her name is Gili. She's 8 yrs old, and the youngest, her name is Rotem. She's five years old. It used to be a wonderful place to live in, to raise your children in, but six years ago it all changed. The whole situation got worse and we are living in a difficult situation now.

What is the situation in Sderot like now?

I will begin with what is going on now. At night we sleep all together in one room—the closest one to the shelter—in case the siren goes off. If it goes off we have to take our children quickly and run into the shelter. We have only 15-30 seconds to go there, so we have to sleep all together. In the morning when we are going to work and taking our kids to school and kindergarten we have to leave the car windows open with no radio and without our seatbelts.

Why is that?

When we hear the sirens we have to get out quickly. One morning [a rocket] hit us near the kindergarten. My oldest girl just jumped out of the car and ran as fast as she could to the kindergarten. But my little one, she couldn't move. She was frozen in her seat and she started yelling and crying, "Mommy, mommy, please help me, I don't want to die, I want to live. Please mommy please!"

I ran to her and picked her up, but we didn't make it to the kindergarten and it missed us by only 100 meters and we just flew and hit the ground, both of us. So it was very traumatic for her.

Is she recovered?

She is in a very bad situation now. She is in very bad shape now. She's mentally living in fear and she's always looking for someone to be with. She's not capable of being alone. She plays under the table so she can be safe.

You are a science teacher. How has that affected you at school, your class?

My students, on particular days stay in Sderot, I teach them at the shelter. But it is very difficult for them. Even though we are in the shelter when the siren goes off and missiles hit Sderot, they are very, very concerned about their families and about their relatives and they are really, really scared.

They are not concentrating in any way, studying. They don't have a normal life. You know, people at their age, this is the happiest time of their life. You need to go parties,

decide which dress to wear to which party. You need to have a life. They don't have a life. They are living in fear, constant fear, and they don't deal just with their teenage problems, their normal problems, but they are dealing with terror and fear.

What kind of damage can these rockets do?

Just last Saturday night my nieces' house was hit by a Qassam. There is no house. It destroyed the house completely. By a miracle they weren't home at that time. I don't want to think what would have happened if they were at home.

The next day, on Sunday, my student's house was destroyed. I remember when I went to visit him in their town he said to me, "You don't know what it is to be five minutes before in the kitchen. I was fixing dinner for my brothers and when we heard the alarm we ran into the shelter and the missile hit my bedroom, goes into the kitchen, and destroys the whole house.

We are living in a very small city of 20,000. The community is very small and everyone knows each other—so either it hits your neighbor or your relative. Among all of us, there isn't any citizen in Sderot who hasn't been hurt from the Qassams.

What do you think makes people stay in Sderot? A lot of people have left.

People actually left, but I think there are two major reasons why people still live in Sderot. One, people bought their houses a long time ago when everything was all right and it cost them a lot of money, and now the value of their houses has plummeted. They can't afford to buy another house when they have a mortgage on their houses, so they cannot move.

The other reason is that I'm raising my children to know that Israel is a safe place for Jews. If we are going on running all the time, that will be the end of it. We must stay there and be strong and tell our children that these are our houses, that Israel is home and we won't leave. Because if we are leaving Sderot, the next day we'll have to leave Ashkelon, and the next day we'll have to leave Ashdod and Tel Aviv, etc. etc.

What do you think is the most important thing for American to understand about Sderot?

I think they have to understand that terror is everywhere. We are suffering from it right now on a daily basis, but terror is everywhere. If we are not united to fight terror then we are on a very dangerous path and in a very dangerous situation. It could be worse, not only for us in Sderot, not only for us in Israel, but all Jews and non-Jews all over the world.

Thanks very much for your time, Michal.

Thank you.