

AIPAC recently spoke with Stav Cohen, a First Lieutenant in the IDF, to learn more about the ongoing attacks in Sderot. Here is what she had to say.

*AIPAC: Lieutenant Cohen, thank you for joining us today.*

Lieutenant Cohen: Thank you.

*We read every day about Israelis coming under fire of Qassam rockets. What can you tell us about the rockets themselves? What are they, how are they constructed?*

They make them out of metal leftovers, sometimes from pipes, or whatever metal they can get their hands on to get the maximum effect. At the beginning, when it started about six years ago, they were very little and their impact wasn't that noticeable. The media wasn't making a big fuss about it, because unless a Qassam fell straight on your head, you wouldn't be hit.

They became smarter, improved them over the years, and in the past few years the Qassams have been really, really good—so their impact is very strong. A Qassam can ruin a house, for example. Not a whole house, but it can damage the ceiling and get into the house, which it couldn't do before. In the past few years a lot of people have been killed. In the beginning, Qassams were never able to kill a person, but now people are being killed and seriously injured.

I have a good friend who lost his legs. A Qassam fell about three feet away from him and his legs were amputated. So their impact is way stronger. My house was also hit two-and-a-half years ago. It hit the back yard but what it did, all the windows were broken and everything made of glass was shattered. The walls had holes in them. Luckily no one was home so no one was hurt, but everything that was in the house was damaged.

*No one was home when the rocket hit the house.*

You hear of miracles every day. You really can't believe that it happened, but my mom's friend called her for a kitchen emergency and said she had to come and help her with something. She had to cook. My mom drove over to her house with my baby brother and ten minutes later it hit [our] house.

*The people who are living in Sderot right now, what kind of warning do they get of an incoming rocket? Is there any sort of warning? How much time do they have to seek shelter, etc?*

There is a warning. It's called color red. There are people from all over Sderot and when a Qassam is about to fall, you hear the alarm going, color red, color red. You have about 10-30 seconds to seek shelter. Most of the houses that were built in the last few years have shelters, but the older ones didn't have shelters when they built it. Basically they have nothing to do. They hear the alarm, they know it's coming, but they have nowhere to hide. We're talking about 60 percent of the houses, so that's a lot.

*How often does the siren going off, alerting people to incoming fire?*

We have days with one to two. We have very unquiet days, which could come up to 30 or 35 Qassams a day, which basically means 'don't leave the house at all.'

*What was it like growing up in Sderot? I assume it was quiet different during your childhood. If you could please, contrast the Sderot of yesterday with the current situation.*

I could say my childhood was very different, because this was a very safe town, a small town. Everybody knows everybody. This whole mess started a few years ago and it transformed our lives. What we call normal and routine, other people would be terrorized by it; they wouldn't believe that we can live like this, our everyday life. I have a little brother who's three-and-a-half years old. His few first words were 'mom,' 'dad,' and 'color red,' you know, the alarm. And all children are like this. They're very scared.

A lot of children have emotional issues about this. Some days we're not allowed to leave the house. It's very difficult for the children, even its worse. Most adults have the emotional ability to deal with this kind of stuff, but children, it's very, very difficult for them. A lot of children have nightmares. Actually one of my relatives, she's 12 years old, and she started peeing in bed again, in her sleep. She went back to four years old because she was so scared at night.

*In your capacity as a soldier, I understand you're at a base that is close to Sderot, is that correct?*

Right now I am. I just transferred. I asked to be close to home so if something God forbid happened I could come home very quickly. My base is a 40 minute drive away from here. I used to be way, way far away, and when this happened to my house I was very far away.

*You're a first lieutenant in the IDF. What if anything is the army able to do to stop the firing of these rockets?*

I'll be very honest with you. The army is not doing right now I think 40 percent of what it's capable of doing as retaliation. First of all, I think they have a problem with public opinion. In America, or Europe, the way we're portrayed, it's very wrong because we're being attacked, and when we attack back they show our attack back without showing how we were provoked. So we have a big problem with that, and I don't think the Army's doing all it can do.

I think the IDF has some amazing abilities, and it's not using them. It's using some right now, but not using all.

*On the Palestinian side, what's involved in the firing of a Qassam? I understand that it's pretty easily launched, which makes it harder for the Israeli army to intercept these rockets before they are fired. What are the Palestinian terrorists need to do in terms of taking a Qassam and aiming it at an Israeli city and firing it?*

It's basically very easy, like you said. It takes four men to do it, and about 10 seconds. So

basically, by the time you see them, because we have helicopters in the air, people scouting for someone, but by the time you spot them, they've already launched it.

*Who is it that's actually firing the rockets? Is it members of Hamas, or members of other assorted terrorist groups?*

It's mostly Hamas. They're the ones who actually developed it as well. The Islamic Jihad sometimes takes part in that, but it's mostly Hamas.

*This brings us to the end of the interview, but I would like to ask you before we go, what message would you like for people to know about what's currently going on, or what would you tell people in terms of helping shape the way that they think about the Qassams and what's taking place in Israel right now?*

The main thing that I think bothers me and bothers most Israeli citizens is the fact that we're being attacked constantly, but the public opinion in Europe and America is not good right now. I think it's everybody's job to fix that, because I think public opinion right now is what's stopping us from doing a lot of what we can do to prevent the Qassams from being launched at us. So basically everybody who's listening right now, do your best to talk to people around you and change public opinion and let the truth out.

*Thank you very much for your time today.*

Thank you.