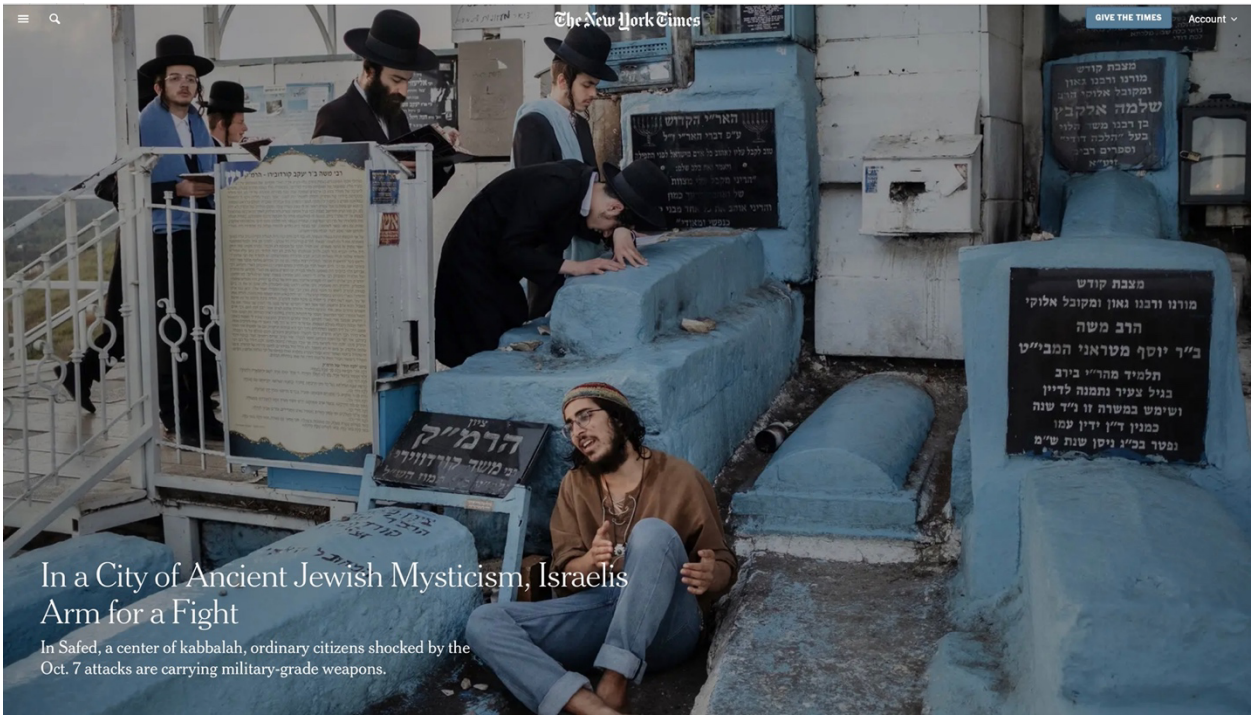


Prayers at Safed Old Jewish Cemetery this month.

By [Damien Cave]

Photographs by Amit Elkayam

Reporting from Safed, an epicenter of Jewish mysticism.

- May 23, 2024

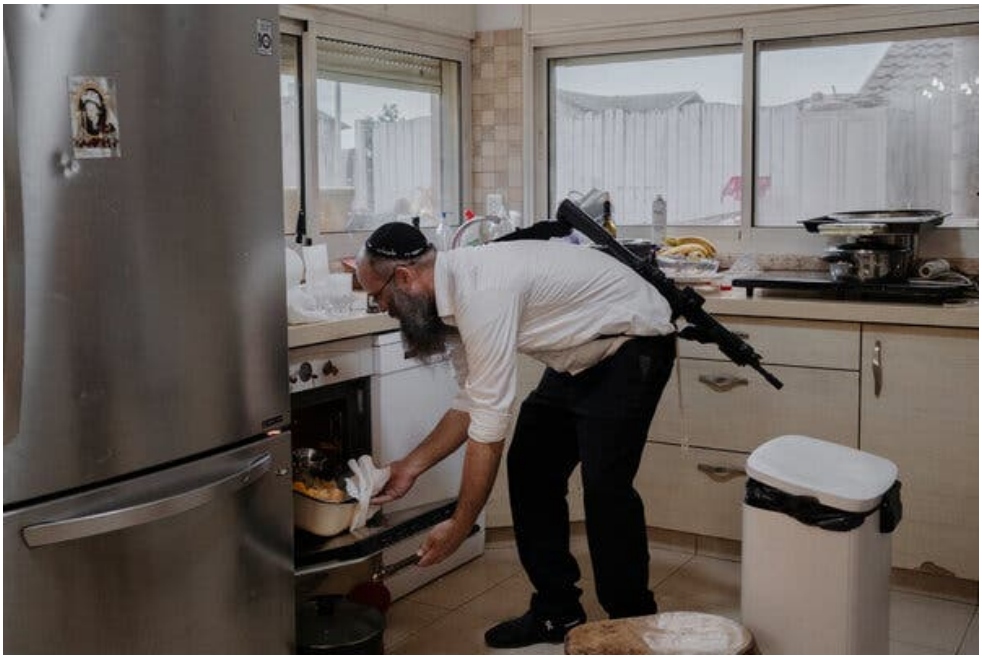
Eyal Ben-Ari tugged at the heavy assault rifle hanging over his shoulder as he tiptoed out of his pink house at sunrise, hoping not to wake his wife or six children.

Walking to synagogue in Safed, a hill town above the Sea of Galilee known for centuries as a center of kabbalah, or ancient Jewish mysticism, he said he still didn't feel great about the gun.

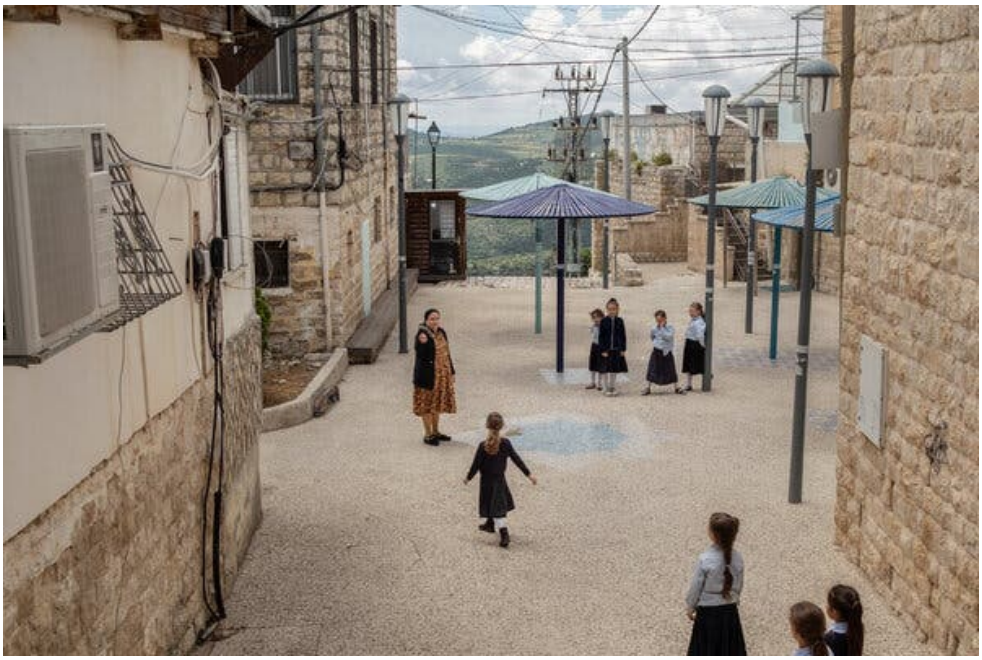
Sleeping with the rifle under his pillow, he worried about it being stolen. After his 13-year-old son came home with a toy replica, Mr. Ben-Ari considered returning the real thing, doubting his decision to join the newly formed civilian militia that had given him the weapon.

"I feel like it's very — artificial," he said, struggling to find the right word in English, looking down at the gun. "It's not human. It's not life."

At the synagogue, men with graying beards and black suits — all fellow members of the Chabad movement, an ultra-Orthodox sect of Judaism — slapped Mr. Ben-Ari on the back. They were happy to see him. Happy to see his gun. It was the only one there, but far from unique. In this small city near the Lebanon border, where Hezbollah's rockets have often rained down in recent months, Israel's deep sense of vulnerability has led to a surge of citizens arming themselves.



Eyal Ben-Ari, at his home in Safed, carrying his personal weapon.



Children playing in the Old City of Safed.

In Safed, as in the rest of Israel, people fear a repeat of Oct. 7, when gunmen with Hamas crossed from Gaza into Israel and killed 1,200 people in rural villages, army bases and cities, according to Israeli authorities. The police and the military were slow to respond that day. In many communities, the only ones fighting back were volunteers with rapid response teams that are known in Israel as Kitat Konenut.

Before the attack, much of Safed didn't think it needed such a group. For decades, this city of 40,000 has drawn the very religiousand very creative, those seeking to commune with nature, art and wine, or pray at Safed's main landmark — a hillside cemetery where 16th-century rabbis lie in graves painted baby blue to signify bringing the sky and heaven down to earth. Madonna, a kabbalah convert, visited in 2009.

These days, tourists are too afraid to come. Safed, called Tzfat in Hebrew, now sees itself a city under siege, Israel in miniature, struggling to reconcile God, love, and light with grief, rage, fear and a craving for protection.

"People are concerned," said Yossi Kakon, Safed's mayor, in an interview at his office overlooking the city. "They want guns."

He stood up. On his hip sat a black pistol, newly acquired.

100,000 New Guns

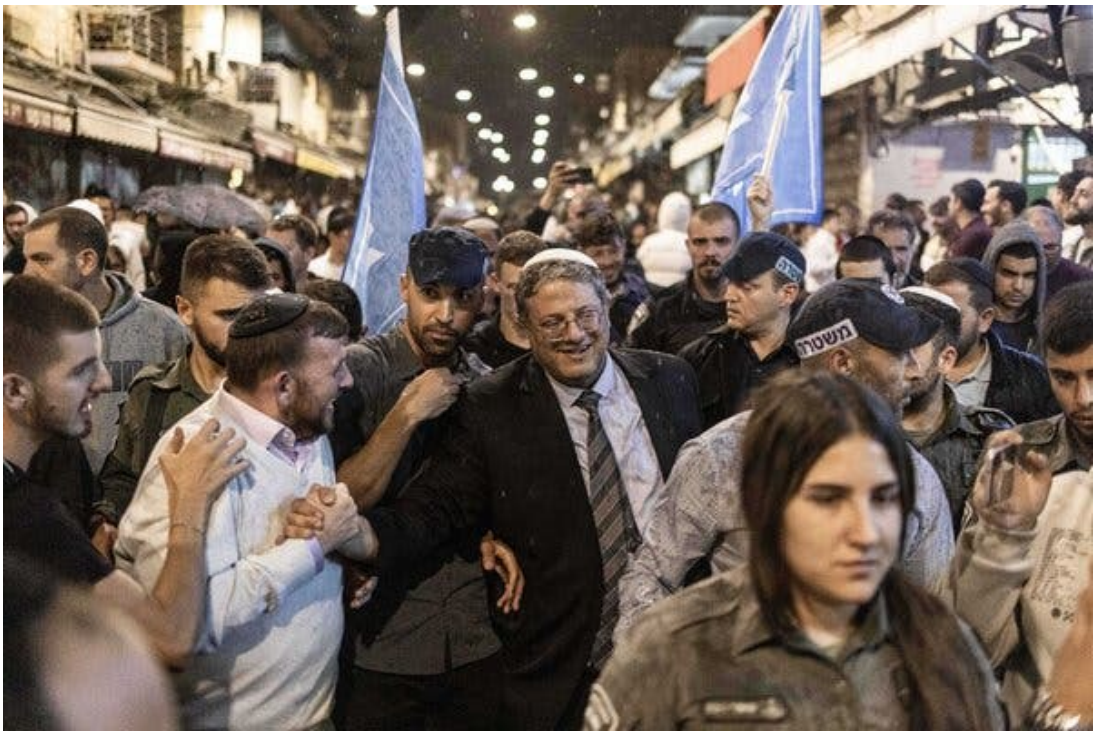
Guns, of course, have long been like stars of David in Israel: too common to discuss.

Military service is compulsory, and full-time soldiers and reservists are required to carry their weapons at all times, which means they show up in unexpected places: with backpack-laden students on public buses; bumping into the legs of fathers pushing strollers in Jerusalem; on the shoulders of young women by the beach in Tel Aviv.

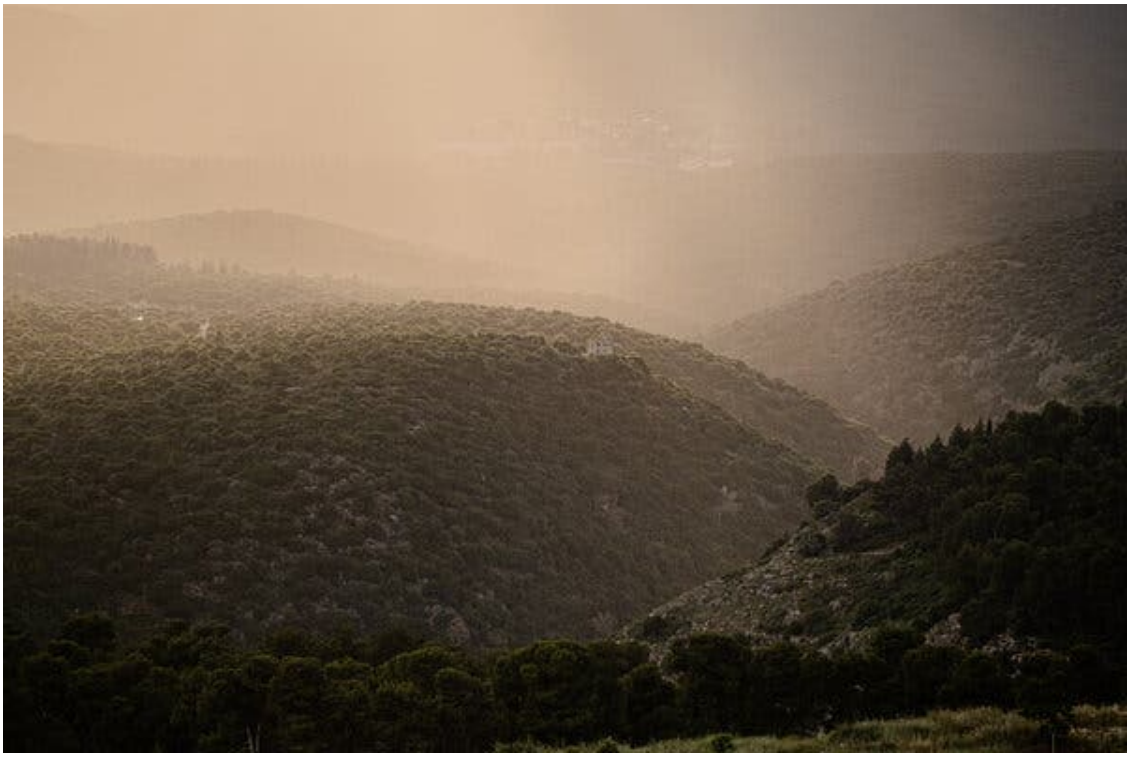
The Kitat Konenut have also been woven into the country's security fabric for decades. Many of the groups formed around kibbutzim and villages near Israel's borders after the Arab-Israel war of 1967.

The earliest volunteers for the Kitat Konenut were often sharpshooters or veterans with elite military training. Over time, the groups seemed less necessary and as some of their old guns started to disappear to theft or loss,

the Israel Defense Forces or IDF imposed tighter restrictions: guns had to be kept at an armory, with keys held by a trusted local leader.



Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's national security minister, has encouraged citizens to arm themselves. Credit...Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times



Mount Meron, a hot spot for missile attacks from Lebanon, seen from Safed.

On Oct. 7, some of those leaders were the first ones killed. Those who had guns saved lives. In the village of Pri Gan, Azri Natan, one Kitat Konenut fighter in his 70s told me he held off gunmen for hours, alone, firing from behind a palm tree in his yard.

Stories like his led Israeli politicians to champion more arms for civilians. Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's right-wing National Security Minister, has made it a personal priority.

In March, after making the process for getting a gun easier and faster, he announced that 100,000 licenses had been approved since October. Another 200,000 were in the pipeline.

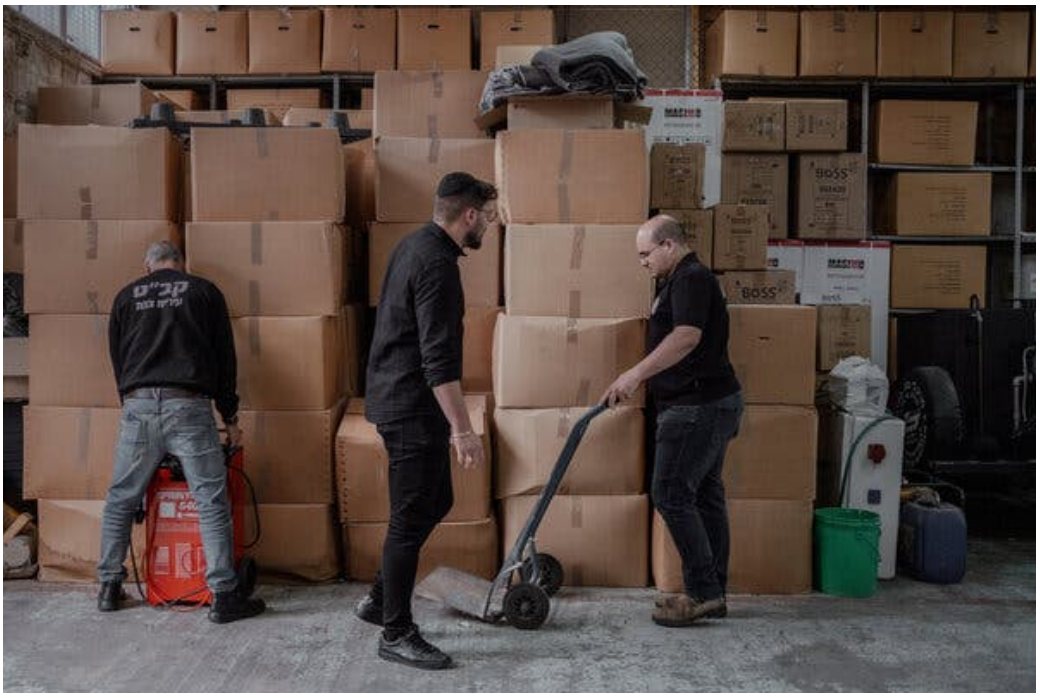
"Weapons save lives," he said.

Critics, however, worry that even with Israel's background checks and training requirements, too many guns are being given out with too little concern for how they might fuel internal tensions.

Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank are among those arming most rapidly, at a time when settler violence is at its highest levelsince the U.N. began recording attacks in 2006. And while hundreds of new rapid response teams have formed in municipalities that are majority Jewish, Arab communities — including those close to Israel's borders — have not been granted the same leeway to form armed volunteer groups.

To many Arab Israelis, who make up about 20 percent of the country's population, Mr. Ben-Gvir's gun campaign looks like a threat — a politically motivated tool for intimidation or state-sanctioned violence, engineered by a government minister from a settlement, who has brandished a weapon in public and has several convictions for incitement to racism.

"Just thinking that Minister Ben-Gvir is behind this means that his motives are racist and anti-Arab," said Asad Ghanem, a political science professor at the University of Haifa. Mr. Ben-Gvir's spokesman did not respond to requests for comment.
Habib Daoud, the owner of a restaurant in Rameh, an Arab town near Safed, said, "People are afraid, yes, but we're more afraid because the guns aren't in our hands."



People working at a city government warehouse, where flak jackets and other equipment are held for emergencies.

The old Arab Quarter of Safed is now the Artists' Quarter.

Safed's volunteer fighters insist their mission is purely defensive. With the exception of local colleges that draw students from across the area, the city's Arab population — a prewar majority — has mostly fled, or been expelled since

1948, never to return, as part of what Palestinians call the Nakba. The old Arab Quarter is now the Artists' Quarter. The main mosque is a gallery with white walls and chic lighting.

The threat, for Safed's Jewish community, feels just over the horizon. It's a community that has voted more strongly for right-wing parties like Mr. Ben-Gvir's in recent years, and so for many now — especially without tourists around — time is spent preparing for the worst. Rabbis and civilian officials now carry pistols. Instead of praying or glassblowing with tour groups, residents are adding bomb shelters to schools. At a city government warehouse, shelves are packed with black flak jackets in shiny plastic.

In Safed, the responses to the war fall on an especially wide spectrum. At one end, there is unconditional love and Kabbalah's emphasis on bringing light to the world, with expressions of sadness for the suffering in Gaza wrought by war sitting alongside a hunger for safety; at the other are dark visions — an apocalyptic belief that the Jews of Israel are at the start of a holy war, a bloody battle to end all wars and produce a Messiah.

'We Can't Rely on Anyone'

Mr. Ben-Ari falls somewhere in the hazy middle. At home one evening, his nurturing instincts were on display when one of his daughters accidentally tipped over a giant jar of instant coffee in the kitchen and he simply smiled at the powdery mess.

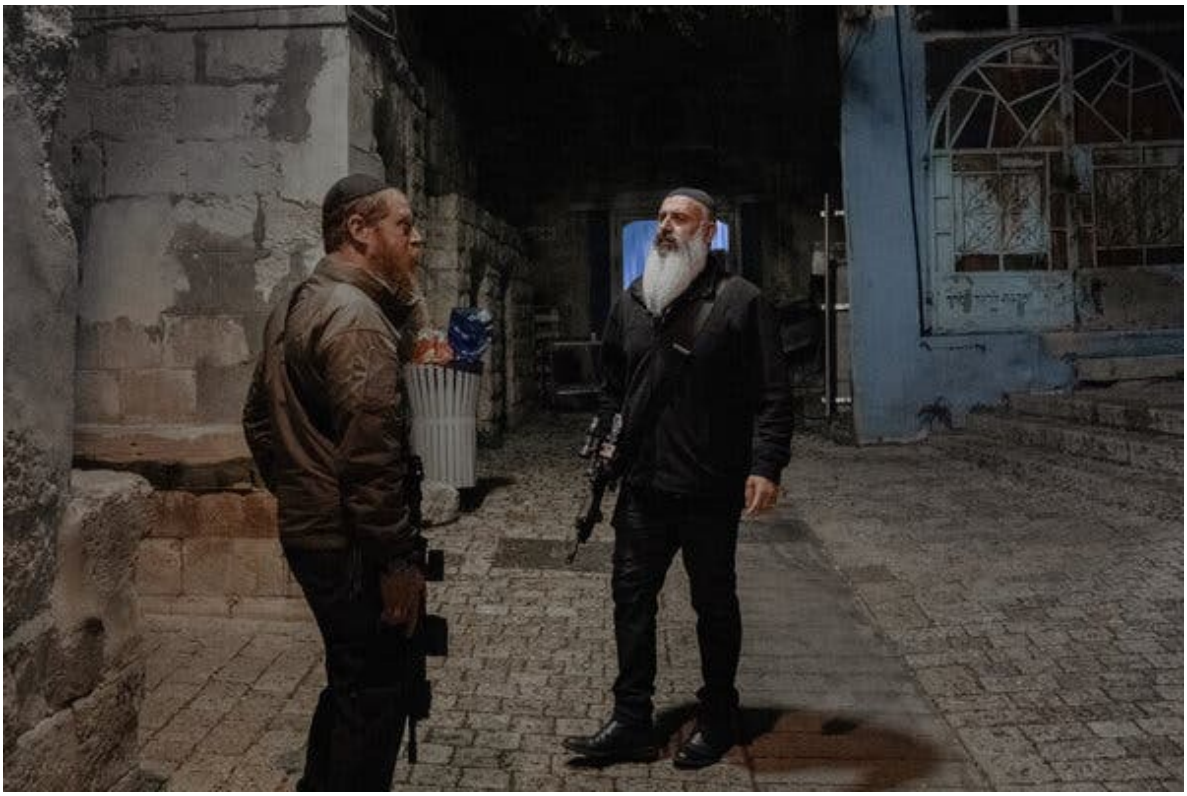
He grew up on a kibbutz. He said he became religious only after serving in the military and going to India with plans to become a yoga teacher. Now he laughs at the memory — "that was a long time ago," he says — but with his faith and his job as a social worker, he still seems eager to make people feel better. The gun doesn't exactly help.

"My clients, many of them, are afraid of it," he said.

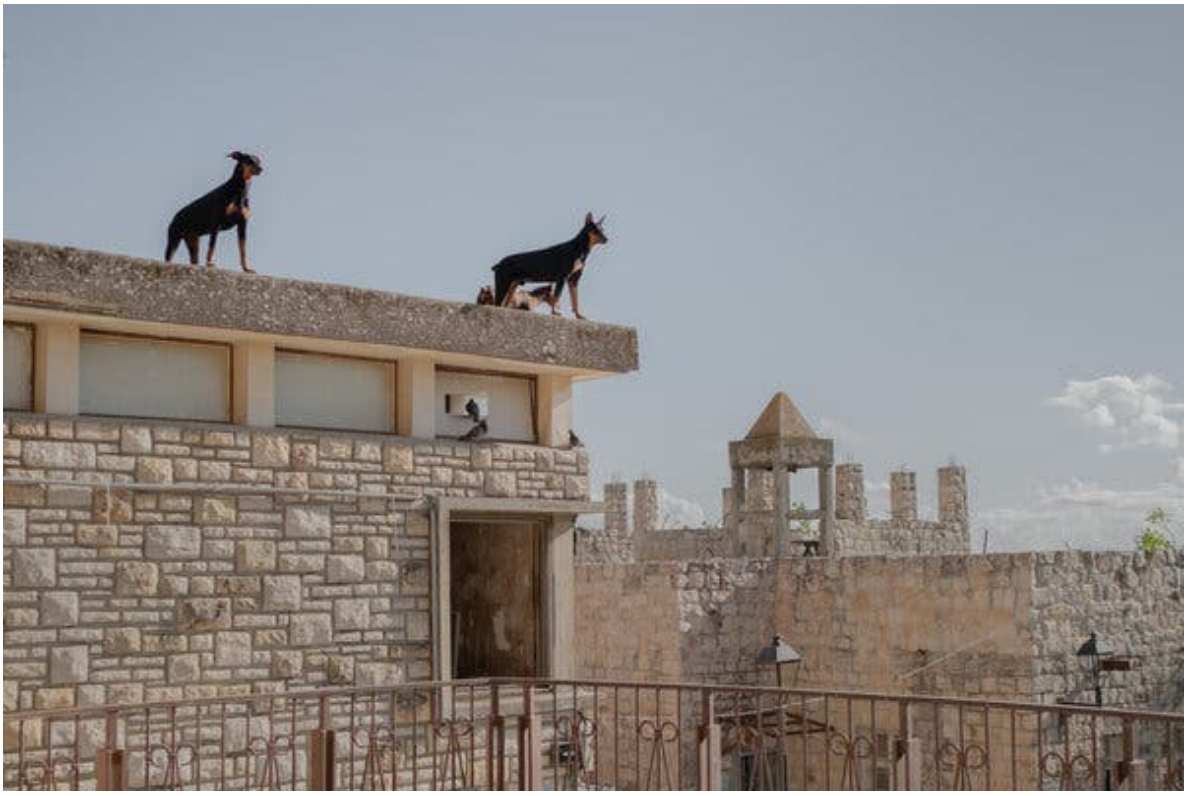
His wife, Lihi Ben-Ari, is too.

"I don't like it," she said, sitting at the kitchen table with two daughters sculpting clay.

"At first, it was fine — we were scared," she said. "Now?"



Shmuel Tilles, left, and Netanel Belams are among the leaders of the Kitat Konenut of Safed. They spoke during a night walk in the Old City.



Looking over the Old City of Safed.

She walked to a bedroom and pulled out the toy assault rifle belonging to their son, delivering a scolding glare that softened into a shrug of what-do–you-expect.

“The soldiers have become the superheroes,” she said. “Everyone wants to be like one.”

Mr. Ben-Ari, 44, said he was constantly telling his son that his military-grade weapon was just for defense, “that it’s not something we like.”

“It’s a duty,” he said.

That is also the argument made by Safed’s Kitat Konenut leaders. One night, Netanel Belams and Shmuel Tilles, described by city officials as the commander and deputy commander of the group, agreed to meet at a wine shop at the base of the Artist’s Quarter.

Mr. Tilles, the shop’s owner, greeted customers seeking craft beer or a nice Cabernet with “Shalom,” meaning peace, while holding a high-powered rifle with red-dot sight for quick target acquisition at close range.

He and Mr. Belams hesitated to describe their previous military service but confirmed they had both worked with the special forces. Over craft beer in plastic cups, they explained that their mission now was simple.

As Mr. Tilles put it, speaking in English with the hint of a Bronx accent brought to Israel by his parents decades ago: “Our job is to bring security to our people.”

He said they effectively formed the Kitat Konenut on Oct. 7 when around 15 seasoned combat veterans in Safed, in close contact with the Israeli military, got ready in case Hezbollah decided to bring their own forces into Israel. When that didn’t happen, they made plans to officially form a rapid response team that would coordinate with the authorities in an attack.

More than 100 men volunteered. The commanders selected 60 to 70, favoring those with combat experience. The government provided weapons and paid for training, which they’ve done around once a week.

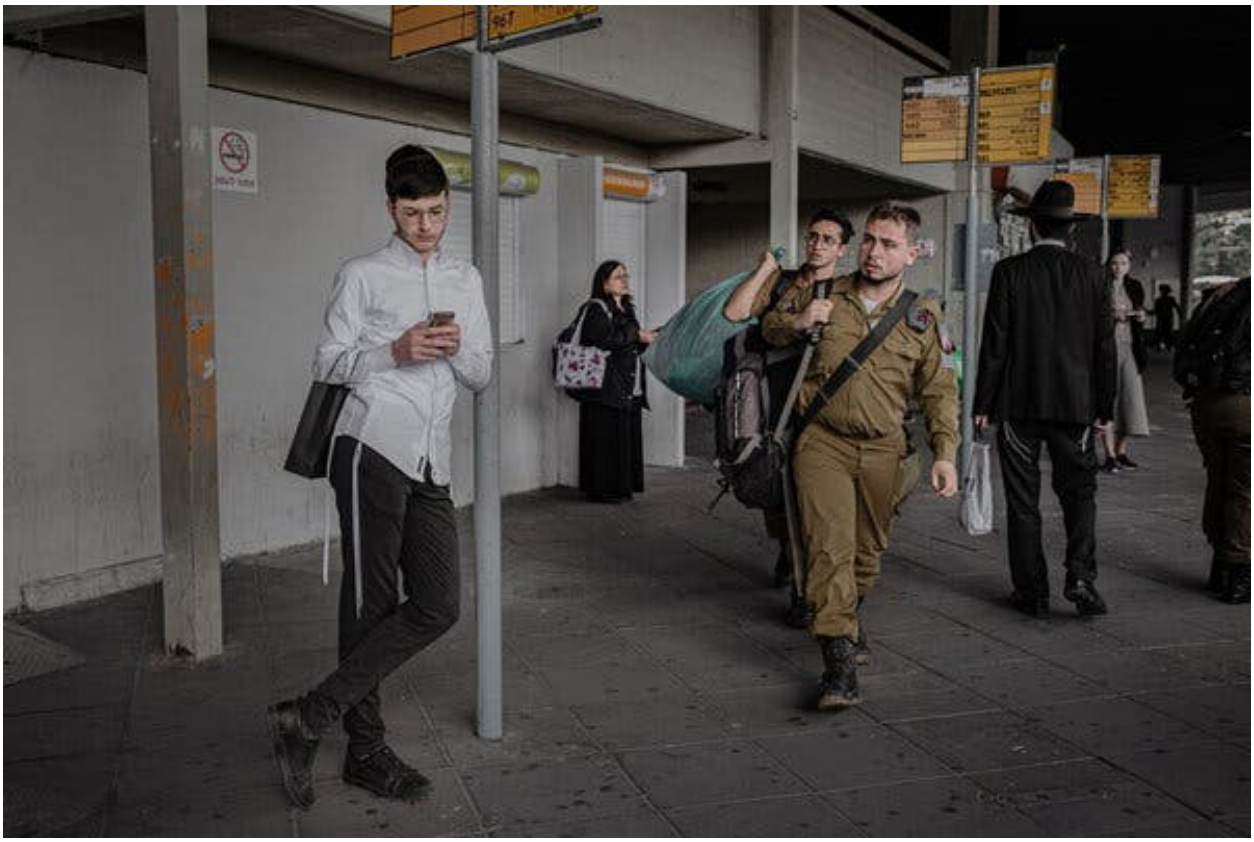
In photos of their sessions, most of the men — including Mr. Tilles and Mr. Belams — have the long beards associated with the Orthodox community,

known as Haredi in Israel. They are a small minority in the Israeli military because of a longstanding exemption from conscription for those studying in seminaries, but their presence in Safed has been expanding for a while and the war has made them more unified and organized.

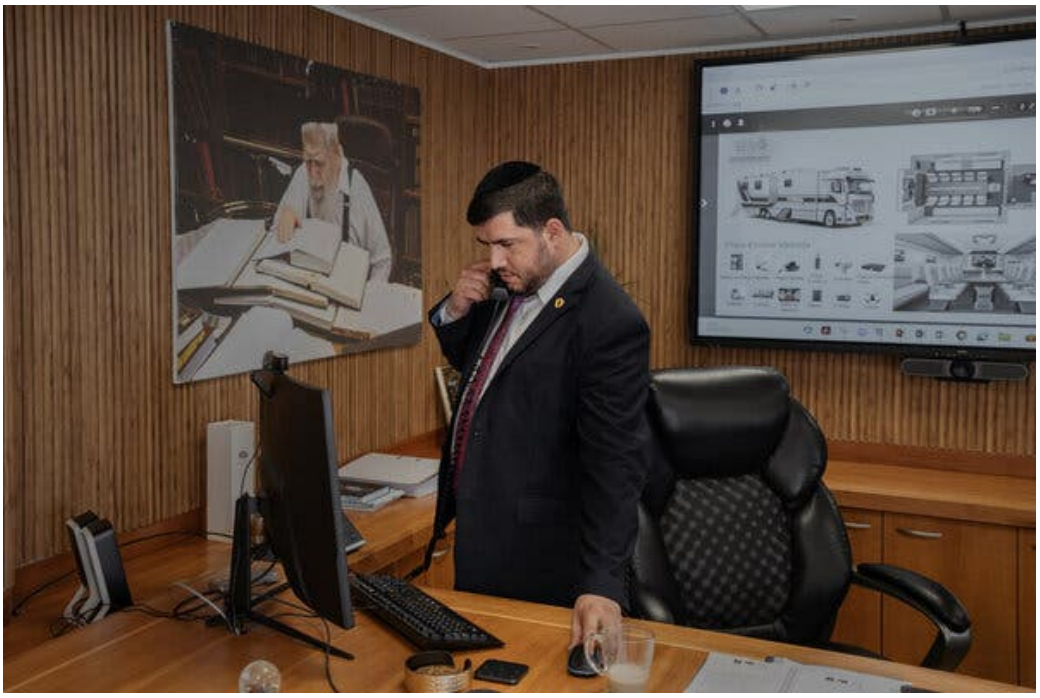
Politically, they mobilized a few months ago to elect Mr. Kakon — Safed's first Haredi mayor. And with the Kitat Konenut, they have found a new community role. Terms like "religious Rambo" are now thrown around by secular officials in Safed with a degree of admiration.

And yet, in a crisis, it's hard to tell how obedient they would be to the traditional chain of command. Mr. Belams in particular did not hide that he sees his role as ordained by God.

"After Oct. 7, we saw that we can't rely on anyone — not the IDF, the police or the state," he said. He added that he believed he was on the front line of a holy war that would bring about the end of times and the messiah's coming to Earth.



Soldiers and a religious man at the central bus station. It's not unusual to see guns in public in Israel.



Yossi Kakon, the mayor of Safed, at his office. “People are concerned. They want guns,” he said.

“This is the start of Gog and Magog,” Mr. Belams said, referring to a battle prophesied in the Bible that some Jews believe will lead to Messianic redemption.

Mr. Tilles tried to make clear that fighting was not their first choice. “I’m into wine. I don’t even want to do this,” he said. “It’s only because of the threat.”

He added, however, that the same kabbalah tenets that tell him to “make this a place that God could dwell in with peace and love” also say that “when somebody comes to kill you, you’ve got to protect yourself first.”

Asked about the war in Gaza, he argued that because Hamas, in his view, teaches children to hate and murder Jews, Israel has to fight with an expansive definition of national defense.

“It’s a war over here. There’s no such thing as innocent,” he said. “You can’t say we have to give our enemies food in order for them to one day come back and kill us.”

For many of his neighbors, it is a question of priorities. Is Safed (or Israel) more likely to thrive by focusing on war and weapons, or through introspection and deeper change?

At a small gallery near the wine shop, Avraham Loewenthal, an artist and kabbalah devotee originally from Michigan, tried to elevate the conversation.

“The war is really between love and hatred — between focusing on the bad in others or trying to understand them and find the good,” he said. “Are we blaming others for all the bad in the world or striving to see how together we can make it better for everyone?”

He said he felt deep pain from the suffering of the people in Gaza and also that Israel has no choice but to keep fighting to disable Hamas and other terror groups. Asked if he was able to extend his unconditional love to those shooting rockets at Israel — in February an attack killed one soldier in Safed, and wounded eight more — he initially gave a roundabout answer. A few days later, he emailed a clarification.

“It is hard to believe there is goodness in people who are doing horrible things,” he wrote. “We need to do everything we can to stop them, but trying to see God in everyone is what we are here to do.”

Seeing Threats Among the Neighbors

At Mr. Ben-Ari’s home, the journey also continues. His wife is still struggling with how to reconcile her faith with his weapon.

“It’s not our way,” she said at one point.

Mr. Ben-Ari said he felt a little better knowing that his rabbi approved — he asked before joining the Kitat Konenut. But he still can’t shake the sadness of seeing divisions being sharpened. After the Hamas attack, one of his daughters started saying “I’m afraid the Arabs are going to take me.”

“She’s 4,” he said.

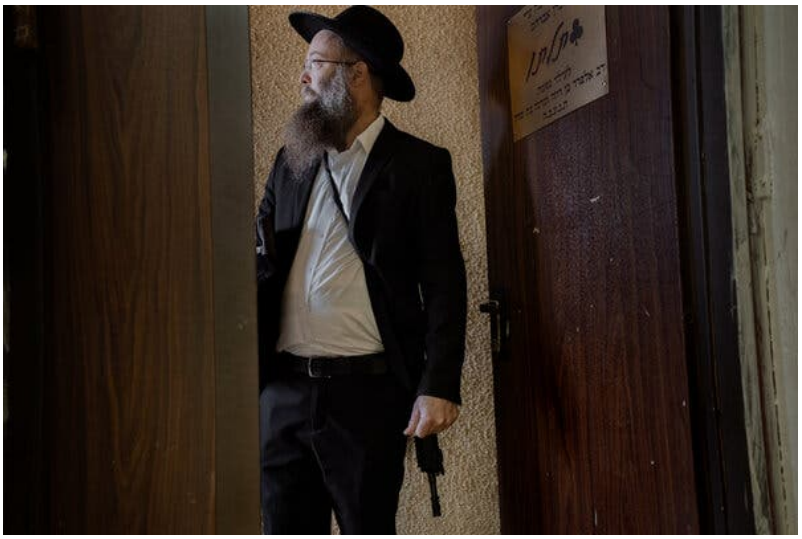
He admitted that after Oct. 7 he also lost “that safety feeling” around Arabs in Israel and elsewhere. Safed’s right-wing chief rabbi, Shmuel Eliyahu, has a long history of pushing for Jews to expel Arabs outright (his office declined interview requests), but Mr. Ben-Ari seemed heartbroken by his own personal shift. Fear, sadness, responsibility, he made clear, they were hardening hearts and daily life in Safed.

Did that mean he would keep the gun if or when the war ended?

The weapon sat in his lap, marked by two colorful stickers: one identifying the weapon and its owner as part of the Kitat Konenut; the other a symbol for the Chabad movement.

Mr. Ben-Ari paused and thought for a minute about the question. Then he said yes.

“The situation needs this,” he said, as his children played all around him. “It needs me.”



Eyal Ben-Ari entering his synagogue, armed.

Adam Sella contributed reporting from Safed.

Damien Cave is an international correspondent for The Times, covering the Indo-Pacific region. He is based in Sydney, Australia.

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/23/world/middleeast/israel-safed-guns.html

We need to remember who all is, ferociously, at the heart and centre of this. These people do not see the Middle East as we do, and it is a life or death matter for them. These Jews have built a way of life, and—to understate it—have “put down roots.” If this is a “colonization” thing, they insist they are asserting the original “indigeneity” rights violated on this land with a “hard realism” determination to claim them back. We in the West, and other outsiders, have erred greatly all along, but in trying to right things we must still exhibit restraint in acting out our issues from afar (in Canada or Iran) on anyone, Jew or Arab, in this intractable quagmire. There will be reckonings, terrible ones, but they should not come to satisfy us or be the product of our further moral over-reach or failure, pick your characterization. Trouble is, both sides depend upon outside allies, and if one side were to lose support, the balance would tip precipitously with calamitous consequences. TJB