

In Tel Aviv, business is still business — for now

Workers, visitors take in stride the rockets fired at Israel's financial center, but patience is not unlimited

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An Iron Dome missile is launched in Tel Aviv, to intercept a rocket fired from Gaza, November 17, 2012 (photo credit: AP/Oded Balilty)

Rockets are flying in the direction of Tel Aviv and other areas once thought out of range of Gaza terrorists, but for now, business is still business, according to several executives, CEOs, entrepreneurs, and others who spoke to The Times of Israel about their experiences this week.

While some said that meetings were canceled or moved from the upper floors of office buildings to coffee shops on the ground floor — the better to run to a bomb shelter, just in case — many said that residents and workers in Israel's financial center still feel more or less immune to the possibility that "their" city could experience a major attack.

At an event in nearby Petach Tikvah Tuesday night, for example, witnesses said that participants in an investor conference ignored the Red Color alert sirens blaring outside. The event, taking place at the offices of a high-tech company in the city's Azorim Hi-Tech Park, continued chatting and deal-making, even as a voice came over the loudspeaker indicating that yes, it really was a siren, and for their own safety everyone ought to get to a "protected zone." Most, if not all, ignored the voice, although a couple nervously checked their cellphones for news — breathing a sigh of relief when they discovered that the Iron Dome anti-missile system had intercepted the Hamas "delivery."

On Sunday, a group of 15 of China's biggest investors landed in Israel for a series of meetings and conferences, as well as a dinner, led by Edouard Cukierman, director of a prestigious Tel Aviv investment firm that bears his name, and private equity fund Catalyst. "I was very impressed and touched by the arrival of the delegation," Cukierman told The Times of Israel. "Of course they had questions about safety and procedures, but they understand the issues very well, and still insisted on coming here — and staying here, following their original plan."

The investors, who are working with Cukierman's firm on developing joint projects between Israeli and Chinese firms, even got a chance to see Iron Dome, one of Israel's greatest technological achievements, in action. "Iron Dome is very significant not only because it is an important defensive system, but because it shows off Israel's tech accomplishments in such a direct and clear manner," said Cukierman. "They are very impressed by Iron Dome and in the technologies behind it, and how they could be used in the civilian and consumer spheres."

Besides the Chinese delegation, Cukierman said he entertained two other delegations of foreign investors this month — and their reaction was the same as the Chinese group's. "If anyone were to tell me that they were afraid to come here at a time like this, I would completely understand," he said. "But I do tell them that while there is what to be nervous about, the truth is that

you are much more likely to get hurt or killed driving on Israel's highways than you are by these missiles. I don't want to downplay the danger, because all it takes is one unlucky strike to change everything, but for now, we in the Tel Aviv investor and tech community are managing."

Even so, it's clear that this can't go on indefinitely.

If there is anything that is slowing down business, said Avi Baresat, who runs the Hollandia mattress factory in Sderot, it's the season that Hamas chose to bring this battle to a head. His town is next to Gaza and is among the first to be hit when things flare up in Gaza. "We in Sderot are of course used to these rockets and missiles," he said. "For us they are an unhappy fact of life, and we live with them every day."

Obviously, the danger is much greater now than in the past. If during a "normal" week Sderot might absorb two or three rockets, the town has been subjected to far more attacks during the past week — similar to the flare-up in 2012, during Operation Pillar of Defense. But for his workers, said Baresat, things are worse this time, because the kids are home from school. "In 2012, parents had some peace of mind because their children were being cared for at school, so they could concentrate on doing their jobs," he said.

"This week, the situation is far different," Baresat said. "The kids are at home — all the camps and programs closed down — with nothing to do, and this worries parents a great deal. As a result, nearly half my workers didn't show up today, and I expect things to get worse." Orna, a public relations specialist at a Tel Aviv agency said the same thing. "I had to skip work the past several days because my kids are worried. It's true that their programs are still going on, but the sirens have been making them very nervous, and I feel I need to spend more time with them, I am hearing the same thing from many others here. For now, business is going more or less smoothly, but if this goes on much longer, I think things will change drastically."

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