

**PREMIUM REPORTS**

# **Israeli Gun Ownership Surges After Hamas Terror Attack**

Israel has historically made it tough to own a gun. Since Oct. 7, almost a quarter of a million Israelis have applied for a gun permit.



(Illustration by The Epoch Times, Getty Images)

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By **Dan M. Berger** | Dec 10, 2023 Updated: Dec 12, 2023

While Israel has universal military service, it has traditionally been difficult for Israelis to own guns as private citizens.

Israel's gun laws are as strict or stricter than those in heavily gun-controlled "blue" U.S. states.

Israelis must meet criteria establishing the need and qualification for gun ownership before they can undergo required training and then buy a firearm.

Public attitudes on the subject historically have been split, much like those of Americans.

However, the Oct. 7 massacre has changed attitudes, and the laws are easing. On that day, Hamas terrorists murdered 1,200 Israelis, kidnapped 240, and wounded more than 3,500 in surprise attacks.

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They videotaped their violent actions and posted them online for the world to see.

It was a day when families, mostly unarmed, cowered in fear in safe rooms, waiting for police or soldiers to show up.

And it was a day where the first—and sometimes only—effective defense came from kibbutz security forces, from private gun owners, and from reservists who didn't wait for orders to rush to the aid of besieged communities along the Gaza frontier.

**236,000**

By mid-November, more than 236,000 new requests for gun permits had been received since the attack, according to Israel's National Security Ministry.

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"The demand is really rising because people felt unsafe," Aviv, 30, a high-tech specialist who asked that his last name not be used, told The Epoch Times.

A resident of Mesilat Zion, halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, he applied for private gun ownership and received

notification on about Dec. 1 that he had qualified.

Aviv is a former infantry commander and a former gun-carrying security guard for Israel's public affairs minister in Jerusalem. Still, he must next take a certification course, and only then will he be able to buy a gun.

"We saw what happened in the south, so we felt unsafe and also ... no security in our homes. People want to have guns or at least have the feeling that they can protect themselves," he said.

The transition to more people carrying guns hasn't been without strife.

The head of the National Security Ministry's Firearms Division resigned on Dec. 3. He told the Knesset that Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir's confidants had been approving gun licenses without legal authority.



## Critics Worry About 'Trigger-Happy' Israelis

An incident on Nov. 30 highlighted both the pros and cons of private gun ownership. Two Palestinian brothers, said to be affiliated with Hamas and armed with an M16 rifle and a handgun, attacked civilians at a Jerusalem bus stop. They killed three people and wounded five.

The armed civilian who killed both terrorists, Yuval Doron Castleman, 38, a lawyer and former policeman, was then himself mistakenly killed by two armed reservists on a brief leave from Gaza.

Israeli newspapers bannered headlines such as "Legacies and Consequences of Trigger-Happy Israeli Soldiers."

Military Police arrested reservist Staff Sgt. Aviad Frija on Dec. 4 and charged him with the fatal shooting of Mr. Castleman, who had stopped his car and rushed at the terrorists, shooting them.

Staff Sgt. Frija appears to have shot Mr. Castleman even after he dropped to his knees, dropped his weapon, put his hands in the air, and yelled, "Don't shoot!" according to a since-removed video of the scene posted on X, formerly known as Twitter.



Israeli police officers and volunteer rescue workers at the scene of a shooting in Jerusalem on Nov. 30, 2023. (AP Photo/Ohad Zwigenberg, File)

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Critics of the Netanyahu government—and particularly its dukes-up national security minister, Mr. Ben-Gvir—decried the incident as the type of vigilantism that they accuse him of encouraging.

Mr. Ben-Gvir had been calling for greater arming of the Jewish public before Oct. 7, and since then has greased the wheels to approve more gun ownership applications.

Criticisms of broadened gun ownership have come variously from Palestinians worried that they'll be gunned down to Jewish women concerned that guns might be used by abusive spouses.

## Who Can Own a Gun in Israel?

Israel's gun laws have restricted private gun ownership by

establishing groups of people who qualify.

For starters, applicants need to be citizens or permanent residents and to have been in Israel for at least three years, although these conditions can be waived if the applicant has served in the Israeli military or national service.

The applicant has to speak Hebrew well enough to answer questions and fill out forms, and there are age restrictions tied to military service or lack thereof. A doctor has to certify the applicant, who also has to complete firearms training.

The applicant also has to meet at least one eligibility [criterion](#), such as living or working in the occupied territories or near the border.



Israelis arrive to sign up and collect a gun and ammunition, at a weapons distribution point for people allowed to carry arms, at the Ayelet HaShahar Kibbutz, in northern Israel, near the Lebanese border on Oct. 12, 2023. (Jalaa Marey/AFP via Getty Images)

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Other qualifiers include licensed tour guides, farmers, those transporting explosives, current or past police officers, active firefighters or rescue personnel, certified rescue volunteers, professional marksmen, security guards, firearms instructors, licensed hunters, and veterinarians.

Current or past military servicemembers qualify if they were officers ranked first lieutenant or higher, noncommissioned officers ranked first sergeant or higher, or infantry riflemen.

**1,700**

**LICENSES**

Since the massacre on Oct. 7, Israel's National Security Ministry has significantly accelerated the approval process for gun permits, now granting.

Those who complete training for or have worked in various security-related agencies are qualified.

A recommendation from Israeli police also can bring approval.

Someone who inherits a gun can seek authorization to either keep it active or deactivate it while retaining it as a memento.

Those who own guns must keep them under two locks to deter theft, Aviv said, which means keeping the weapons inside a gun safe inside a locked building.

People whose guns are stolen can face repercussions if they can't prove that they kept them under the required two locks, he said.

Since Oct. 7, Mr. Ben-Gvir has loosened restrictions and sped up the process of permit approval.

The department approved about 94 permits per day a year ago. Now, it approves 1,700 per day.



Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir (C) shakes hands with a volunteer of the new civilian guard unit while handing out M5 automatic rifles, during the unit's inauguration ceremony in the southern city of Ashkelon, Israel, on Oct. 27, 2023. (Menahem Kahana/AFP via Getty Images)

Mr. Ben-Gvir said after the Oct. 7 massacre that he wants to "allow as many citizens as possible to arm themselves."

Previously, only 1.5 percent of the population had a license to own a gun.

Since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, the necessary interviews can be done by phone.

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The legal restriction on the amount of ammunition that a private individual can own rose to 100 rounds from 50 rounds.

Those who had returned weapons rather than undergo frequent required refresher courses and recertifications can now get them back.

Mr. Ben-Gvir had already added staff to the firearms licensing department.

"I want more weapons on the streets so that the citizens of Israel can defend themselves," he had said in January.

Yedidya Yamin, 47, is a retired career military officer who owned a gun before Oct. 7.

Now working in IT for the city of Tel Aviv, he qualified as a former officer of appropriate rank—the law at one point required captain or above, but that was lowered to first lieutenant in a previous round of easing restrictions.

Mr. Yamin told The Epoch Times that he had the option of taking a rifle with him from the army but opted to buy a handgun instead as it's smaller and less conspicuous.



Handguns are displayed for sale in a shop in the Givat Zeev settlement in the West Bank on Feb. 12, 2023. (Gil Cohen-Magen/AFP via Getty Images)

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He didn't carry it much before Oct. 7, taking it with him on family trips as much to keep an eye on it and guard against theft as for protection.

Now he carries it, he said.

A reservist, Mr. Yamin has been called up and works as communications head for the Israeli Defense Forces' national spokesman.

He owns an inside-the-belt holster, keeping the gun inconspicuous, but he has now added an outside-the-belt holster.

It's quicker on the draw if he needs to use it and more comfortable if he's wearing it all day, Mr. Yamin said.

When shopping for the weapon, he said: "There were 40 people inside the store looking for equipment and to buy guns. And you can feel the anxiety—that people want their security to be in their hands."

## The 2021 Riots

Mr. Yamin's wife, Eleanore Yamin, 45, a mother of eight and a real estate lawyer, told The Epoch Times that she still doesn't qualify for gun ownership.

People's anxiety skyrocketed on Oct. 7, she said, but it played on fears that Jewish Israelis already had following the 2021 outbreaks of violence between Jews and Israeli Arabs with full citizenship.

There were riots and acts of violence by both sides, plus a round of rocketing by Hamas and retaliation by Israel.



But Jews were stunned by attacks on people in their homes or on streets where they had once felt safe, in areas where Jews and Arabs live together, such as in Lod.

The 2021 events, known as Shomer Homot in Israel, exposed a real vulnerability, Mrs. Yamin said: Israeli police and the army couldn't attack Israeli Arabs when they were rioting, because they were citizens.

"I live in Netanya," which is next to several Arab communities, she said. "We were sure something was going to happen. And the police couldn't do anything because you can't just go around shooting, you know, Arabs. And you can't go on a military operation against your own citizens.

"So if the police can't do anything and didn't do anything, and also the army, what else is there? You have to protect yourself.

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**Israeli Jews are worried they face violence not only from Hamas but from Hezbollah in the north and a potential uprising by Israeli Arabs.**

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"People feel they should learn from what happened then. After Oct. 7, people were afraid that it would happen again, with riots all around the country."

Aviv expressed the same concerns.

Israeli Jews are worried that they face violence not only from Hamas but from Hezbollah in the north and a potential uprising by Israeli Arabs.



Orthodox Israeli Jews hold the Israeli flag as they march through Jerusalem's old city Muslim quarter on May 18, 2023. (Amir Levy/Getty Images)

And many know that during a terror attack, those carrying personal weapons are the first to respond, even before the police or soldiers can arrive, Aviv said.

"In many, many cases, it's actually the guy who carries a personal gun that was in the right place at the right time to stop the attack and prevent something far more serious from happening," he said.

Aviv has seen a nearly universal response from men with his background, veterans who qualify to own guns. If they weren't

interested before, they're all having the conversation now about whether it's time to do it, he said.

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The 2021 riots were a turning point, Aviv said.

Up until then, most Israeli Jews relied on the army and the police and didn't worry too much about Arab neighbors, he said. But Arab mobs killing Jews changed his mind.

The violence during the period, the worst domestically in Israel since the Second Intifada began in 2000, went both ways, Aviv said.

"Before that, I hadn't felt the need to carry a personal gun. But that was the first time I felt like ... this can arrive inside my house," he said.

Jews didn't think that they needed to carry weapons inside Israel. Now, many do.

"Maybe we have a threat inside our borders and in the main cities, and it's really close to us," Aviv said.

He said his anxiety soared after Oct. 7 as he wondered what would happen next. But it has eased since then as threats from Hezbollah or Israeli Arabs haven't materialized.



An Israeli man points a pistol during clashes with Palestinian men ahead of the annual Flag March, which is part of Jerusalem Day, in Jerusalem on May 29, 2022. (Amir Levy/Getty Images)

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## Cutting Red Tape

A man who asked to not be named, who lives in the Jewish community of Elkana in the West Bank, told The Epoch Times that he has had a gun for a while, but since Oct. 7, he carries it all the time.

His town, just inside the West Bank east of the Tel Aviv metro area, has Arab communities around it, but there's never been any trouble. That's why he didn't find it necessary to carry before.

All of his friends and neighbors carry guns now or want to, he said. He qualified for gun ownership because he lived in the West Bank. His neighbors also qualified but never wanted one, he said.

"Now they're applying," he said.

He dreads the thought that "you sit in the shelter and wait and nobody comes."

"I don't like to carry a gun," he said.

He's satisfied with what he has, one with a 12-round magazine rather than a larger and more powerful type that some friends favor.



An armed man stands in a coffee shop as Israelis prepare for the start of Hanukkah in Jerusalem on Dec. 7, 2023. (Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

Mr. Yamin said he sees the imminent need for more widespread gun ownership but worries about it over the long term.

He predicts that there will be more domestic violence, school shootings, and neighborhood disputes escalating into lethal

conflicts.

"You know, it's a very warm country. We also have a [hot] temper," Mr. Yamin said.

Someone who has a gun and gets into a fight with his neighbor can think, "Let's take it out and solve this problem easily," he said.

"This is the thing I'm afraid of," Mr. Yamin said.

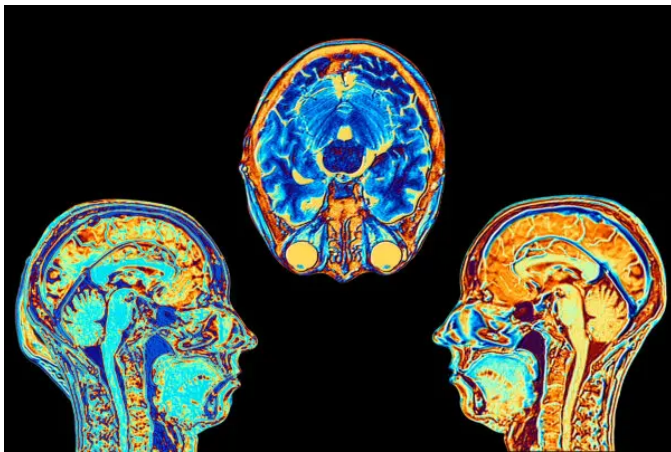
He called the liberalization of the firearms laws a bad idea and said only qualified people should carry firearms—people who will make the right decision about whether to shoot.

Mr. Yamin said he would prefer it if those who qualify under the current relaxed standards return their guns after the crisis is over, but he knows that won't happen.

Mrs. Yamin defended Mr. Ben-Gvir against notions that his ministry's firearms licensing division had acted improperly.

Many of his constituents live in the West Bank, which many Israelis refer to as Judea and Samaria, and qualify as such for gun ownership.

Mr. Ben-Gvir's subordinates who sped up things were just "cutting the red tape," Mrs. Yamin said.



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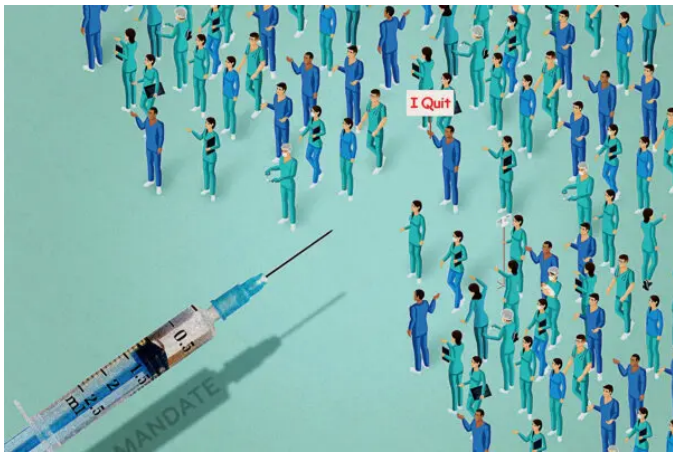
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