

Taking time for chess in troubled lands

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Chess can be a finicky, demanding pastime, but the game has also proven surprisingly hardy in tough times.

World wars can shut down play — after the ill-fated Olympiad in Buenos Aires in 1939, the next edition of the biennial international team event was not held until 11 years later in Dubrovnik — but even countries devastated by armed conflict

and internal upheaval somehow manage to keep the game going.

We saw that in 2022 as Ukrainian chessplayers — some just on leave from the front lines — staged tournaments and benefits in defiance of a full-scale Russian invasion.

It's happening again in Israel, where despite the raging clash now in the Gaza Strip following the terrible events of Oct. 7, the Israeli Open Championship went ahead last month in a country that is known for its love of the game.

GM Ilya Smirin, a familiar name in the U.S. for his many successes on the American circuit, took the honors in the 132-player field on tiebreaks over GMs Eytan Rozen and Ido Gorshtein and IM Yeshaayah Tzidkiya.

Whatever the situation outside the playing hall, there was some spirited competition at the board, including FM Mark Ljubarov's upset of GM Ori Kobo in a taut struggle that did credit to both players. This King's Indian Saemisch (5. f3) goes in a very different direction from most KID games on 11. Nf4 g5 12. Nh3 g4 13. f4!? gxh3 14. fxe5 Ng4, and White gets into early trouble missing the equalizing line 15. Bg5 f6 16. exf6 Bxf6 17. Bxf6 Qxf6 18. Rg1 Qh4+ 19. g3 Qf6 20. 0-0-0, with play



Krayz-Baron after 22. Bc1

for both sides.

But Black misses a good positional shot (21...b5! 22. cxb5 axb5 23. a3 Rfb8, with good queenside pressure), and by 27. c5 Ne7 28. b4, Ljubarov has fought his way back into the game and is threatening to mobilize his now-potent queenside majority. After 31. Bxe2 Bc6 32. Bd3, Black's extra pawn is in some ways a liability, shutting his dark-squared bishop out of the fight.

A fierce fight erupts as both players seek to resolve the blocked center to their advantage: 33. Bc2 Re8 (f4!? 34. Bf2 Bf6 35. Rg1 Be7, and it's hard to see how Black breaks through) 34. a4 Kg8 35. Kc4 fxe4 (Black gets another pawn, but the tripled e-pawns are like a wall dividing his position in half) 36. b5 axb5+ 37. axb5 Bd5+ 38. Rxd5! exd5+ 39. Kxd5, and now Black had to find 39...Bf8! to hold the game: e.g. 40. Bxe4 (c6 bxc6+ 41. bxc6 Rd8+ 42. Kxe4 Rc8 43. Ba4 Kf7 44. Kxe5 Re8+ 45. Kd4 Bd6) Kf7 41. b6 Ra8 42. Kxe5 Ra5 43. Bxb7 Bxc5 44. Bxc5 Rxc5+ 45. Kd6 Rb5 46. Bd5+ Kg7 47. b7 Rxb7 48. Bxb7 h5 49. h4 Kh8, with a well-known book draw as the Black king cannot be ousted from the corner.

Instead, White turns the tables with 39...Rd8+ 40. Ke6!, the only winning move, leaving the pawns alone but keeping the Black king out of the action.

Ljubarov breaks the blockade with 43. bxc6 Rc7 44. Bb6, winning decisive material after 46. Bf5 e4 47. c7 Rxc7 48. Bxc7 Be7 (e3 49. Be5+ Kh6 50. Bf4+ picks off the pawn).

Careful not to trade off the dark-squared bishops that would lead to another draw, White delivers the knockout on 57. Be7 Be3 58. h4 Bd2 59. Bf3 — the threat is 60. Bf8 mate, and 59...Be3 allows 60. Bg5 mate; Kobo resigned.

far more picturesque) 24. Nxf3 (Kh1 and the Black knight simply runs the quarry to ground with 24...Nxb4) Bxf3 25. Qf1 Ne4!, piling on the pressure.

It's over on 26. Be3 c6 27. Bc2 (Bxc5 Bxe2 28. Qxe2 Nxc5 29. Bc2 e4, and White is down the exchange with no compensation) cxb5 28. Bxc5 bxc5, and White resigned, not needing to see 29. Bxe4 (Reel f5) Bxe4, and Black is up a full piece.

Ljubarov-Kobo, Israeli Open Championship, Acre, Israel, January 2024

1. d4 Nf6 2. c4 g6 3. Nc3 Bg7 4. e4 d6 5. f3 0-0 6. Be3 a6 7. Qd2 c6 8. d5 e6 9. dxc6 Nxc6 10. Nge2 Ne5 11. Nf4 g5 12. Nh3 g4 13. f4 gxh3 14. fxe5 Ng4 15. Bf4 dxe5 16. Bg5 Qxd2+ 17. Bxd2 hxg2 18. Bxg2 Bd7 19. Bf3 Nf6 20. 0-0-0 Bc6 21. Be3 Rac8 22. a3 Kh8 23. Rhg1 Rfd8 24. Kc2 Rxd1 25. Rxd1 Ng8 26. Bh5 Be8 27. c5 Ne7 28. b4 Nc6 29. Ne2 Nd4+ 30. Kc3 Nxe2+ 31. Bxe2 Bc6 32. Bd3 f5 33. Bc2 Re8 34. a4 Kg8 35. Kc4 fxe4 36. b5 axb5+ 37. axb5 Bd5+ 38. Rxd5 exd5+ 39. Kxd5 Rd8+ 40. Ke6 Bf8 41. Bxe4 Rc8 42. c6 bxc6 43. bxc6 Rc7 44. Bb6 Re7+ 45. Kd5 Kg7 46. Bf5 e4 47. c7 Rxc7 48. Bxc7 Be7 49. Bxe4 Bf6 50. Ke6 Bd4 51. Bf4 Bc3 52. h3 Bd4 53. Ke7 Bc3 54. Ke8 Bf6 55. Bd6 Kh6 56. Kf7 Bd4 57. Be7 Be3 58. h4 Bd2 59. Bf3 Black resigns

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1. e4 e5 2. Nf3 Nc6 3. Bc4 Nf6 4. d3 Bc5 5. c3 0-0 6. Nbd2 h6 7. Bb3 a5 8. h3 b6 9. 0-0 Ba6 10. Nc4 Re8 11. a4 d5 12. exd5 Nxd5 13. Re1 Qf6 14. Re4 Re7 15. Qd1 Rae8 16. Na3 Qd6 17. Nb5 Qd7 18. Re2 Bb7 19. Bd2 Nf6 20. Rd1 Qxd3 21. Bxh6 Qg6 22. Bc1 Nd4 23. Nh4 Nf3+ 24. Nxf3 Bxf3 25. Qf1 Ne4 26. Be3 c6 27. Bc2 cxb5 28. Bxc5 bxc5 White resigns

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