

Even As They Protest, Israeli Liberals Reject Solidarity With Palestinians



*Idan Landau -
Photo: Ben-Gurion
University*

Israel's far right is growing, fueled by propaganda. Meanwhile, liberal protesters are tearing down Palestinian flags

Why are liberal Israeli protesters working with Israeli police to rip down Palestinian flags whenever anti-occupation activists attempt to raise them in the context of the widespread anti-government protests in Israel?

There's a structural reason why the occupation of Palestine is absent from the mainstream liberal agenda of the protests, says Israeli academic and left-wing activist Idan Landau: "The leading figures and speakers in these protests are routinely members of the legal, economic and military elites, all of whom were and are intimately implicated in maintaining the occupation."

The anti-government protests, which will [likely reignite](#) this week in the lead-up to Israel's 75th Independence Day, have been led by Israeli liberals upset with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far right nationalist coalition and its attempt to curb the powers of Israel's judiciary.

Israeli democracy, which has always excluded Palestinians under military

occupation, has been in accelerated decline over the last couple of decades. Israel's far right has grown to extremely worrisome levels, with today's government of Benjamin Netanyahu being nothing short of a band of religious and racist zealots; in fact, some of them have even openly [supported](#) pogroms against Palestinian people.

Indeed, as Israeli academic and left-wing activist Idan Landau stresses in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, racism and extremism have spread to a wide range of the population, especially among the youth.

Landau is a professor of linguistics at Ben-Gurion University and writes a political blog (in Hebrew) on Israeli affairs. He has been imprisoned on several occasions for his refusal to serve in the Israel Defense Forces reserves.

C.J. Polychroniou: Israel has been moving further and further to the right over the last couple of decades to the point that today's government is beyond extreme. It is indeed a government pushing a hard-right agenda unlike anything that Israel has seen before. How do you explain Israel's far right shift, and especially the fact that the overwhelming majority of young Jewish Israelis [identify as right-wing](#)?

Idan Landau: A combination of factors, none of which is new, but all increasing in impact over the years. The major current shift is the sheer disregard to "civilized" rules of conduct; the liberal masks are falling off, like the ceremonial respect to the supreme court, or the ritualistic reference to the "two-state solution." These were hollow rhetorical practices for a long while now, but up until the recent government, there were forces in the leadership (like [Yair Lapid](#) and even [Naftali Bennett](#)) who adhered to them. [Finance Minister and head of the Religious Zionism Party] [Bezalel Smotrich](#) and his kin simply dismiss such niceties, and the world, mostly exposed to Israeli politicians rather than to a deeper cross-section of the Israeli public, is shocked to learn of the deep-seated racism and rising populism within the larger Jewish population.

So, what are these factors? First, increasing religiosity, which in Israel translates to a particular xenophobic, "all-the-world-is-against-us," Holocaust-driven self-righteous version of Judaism. One reason has to do with demographic trends: 35 percent of the Jews in Israel define themselves as religious; over a third of them (13.3 percent) are Orthodox Jews. This last group boasts the fastest growth in size in developed countries, 4 percent a year (due to their preference for larger

families), and they alone are expected to comprise a third of the entire population of Israel by 2065. This shift is more dramatic in younger ages: By 2050, a third of the pupils in Israel will be educated in Orthodox schools. Polls repeatedly and consistently find that the most racist and nationalistic portion of the Jewish population is exactly those Orthodox Jews.

Second, public education in Israel has rapidly sunk into a nationalistic propaganda mire. Historical events and narratives inconsistent with official Zionist ideology have been gradually expunged from textbooks, often to absurd degrees. For example, Israeli pupils have no idea about “the green line” — Israel’s only internationally recognized border — because all the geographical maps approved for schools by the ministry of education have purposefully been purged of the green line. So they grow up without knowing of the distinction between “Israel” and “the occupied territories,” they know nothing about the fact that nearly 3 million Palestinians are subject to military law, nothing about land grabs (by the state or by settler outlaws), nothing about the fact that most of the military roadblocks are not placed on Israel’s border (the green line) but deep inside Palestinian territory, etc. Add to that the compulsory military service, which is *the* most effective agent of indoctrination in Israel, driving Jewish youth to see Palestinians as an undifferentiated mass of enemies, to be controlled, confined, checked, punished and subdued — and the product you get by the end of this assembly line is a perfectly loyal devotee of Jewish superiority. With all that baggage they go to the ballot, and that’s how you end up with extreme right-wing parties in power.

Of course, racism and political systems engage in a feedback loop. Not only does racism promote systems of injustice and inequality, but the need to maintain and expand these systems *cultivates* racism in its turn, because one must dehumanize one’s victims in order to go on functioning within and in the service of such systems.

Like elsewhere, the Israeli left is not a unified movement. Is this the reason why the Israeli left is marginalized?

I don’t think so. Even if you manage to pull together all the leftist forces in Israel (by which I don’t mean “anti-Netanyahu,” but people truly committed to justice for Jews and Arabs), you will still end up with a negligible minority. All those human rights groups that have some international visibility — B’Tselem, Breaking

the Silence, etc. — employ no more than 500 people altogether.

The left is inclined to periodic fits of self-flagellation, or finger-pointing toward internal elements declared guilty of its impotence. I find these practices a boring nuisance.

The sad truth is that the bedrock of the left — the simple principles of justice, equality, freedom, the sacred value of human life — are in themselves unpopular amongst Israelis. “Unpopular” in the sense that they are all deemed inferior to grander principles, deriving from the privileged rights of Jews in the land of Israel. Whatever the “organizational” faults of the fragments of the left are, they are overshadowed by the powerful opposition they *all* face from the Israeli consensus.

This opposition operates in various ways. The public legitimacy of human rights organizations is gradually eroded by relentless campaigns of defamation, all of which originate in the government itself. So-called GONGOs (government-operated NGOs), such as “Im Tirtzu” and “NGO Monitor,” are entirely dedicated to persecuting leftist activists, academics, artists, etc. Municipalities constantly bar their institutions from hosting events or lectures by political dissidents. The Israeli counterpart of *Fox News*, *Channel 14*, now ranks second in ratings. This is Netanyahu’s home base, an outlet that spews out naked propaganda and fake news every single day. Large chunks of the programming are aimed at demonizing human rights groups, Arab members of the Knesset, or generally, any critic of Israeli policies. A frequent sight these days (which was not so common a few years ago) is street gangs using “Leftist!” calls as an abominable insult, chasing and beating demonstrators that simply stand in solidarity with Palestinians.

In addition, mainstream liberal Israelis — that dormant mass of people who just want to go on with their convenient lives with no disturbances — would go out of their way to condemn the radical left, to dissociate themselves from any struggle that dares to include the Palestinian perspective, and would insist on fighting for “democracy” with no representatives of the most immediate victims of this “democracy,” namely Arabs (inside Israel or in the territories). I believe that it is this mainstream hostility toward the vision of the radical left that is chiefly responsible for its marginality; it becomes more and more difficult to just get these messages through, to win precious prime time on TV and even report daily

atrocities occurring in the territories, let alone express nonconsensual views.

Of course, one has to remember permanent anomalies of the Israeli left, that go years back. A major one is the extreme weakness of labor unions, a reflection of a hyper-capitalist market based on short-term jobs. Unions normally provide the infrastructure necessary for long-term protests, but they are completely absent from major struggles for human rights in Israel, and in fact, the biggest union (the "Histadrut") is dominated by the right-wing Likud party. That is, it sides with government.

Massive protests forced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to suspend his divisive judicial reform plan. Do you think his plan to undermine judicial independence by controlling the composition of the country's Supreme Court is really finished?

Not at all. The upcoming weeks will be quite critical. Netanyahu's coalition will not survive retraction of the reform; and his only chance of avoiding conviction (and jail) depends on keeping this coalition together and passing the reform. So it's all or nothing for him. Meanwhile (and this is obviously not a coincidence), the borders are heating up with military clashes, invasions to Palestinian cities are intensified, terrorist attacks too. All this chaotic ecosystem, with a populace under a growing sense of insecurity and stress, surely plays in Netanyahu's favor. Drastic changes in the regime are more easily implemented in such times, as we know very well from the historical record. I will not venture any guesses here, whether we're stepping into a constitutional or a military crisis, but the game is far from over, in my opinion.

How do liberal and left groups relate to the occupation in their protests and opposition to the far right?

As I mentioned, the occupation is entirely absent from the mainstream liberal agenda of the protests. This is to be expected, given that the leading figures and speakers in these protests are routinely members of the legal, economic and military elites, all of whom were and are intimately implicated in maintaining the occupation. So most Israelis felt not the slightest dissonance to see in these demonstrations Moshe Ya'alon, former chief of staff and defense minister, who was in charge of major war crimes during the invasion of Gaza [in] the summer of 2014, warn against the "risks to democracy" implied by the recent legal reform.

Notably, legal experts (including former judges of the supreme court) constantly focus on the pragmatic harm of the reform: Without the cloak of a functioning, independent legal system that can investigate war criminals and put them on trial, Israeli military officials will be exposed to prosecution at the International Criminal Court in The Hague. In short, their plans to travel abroad are at risk. The issue of whether or not they *are* war criminals that *should* have been indicted in Israel is not even discussed. Other absurdities involve ex-Shabak officials (Shabak is the Israeli Security Agency, its domestic secret service), whose careers were founded on secrecy, extortion and sometimes torture, expressing concern over the “anti-democratic” nature of the reform. All of that takes place within the “liberal” camp in the protest, which is by far the dominant one.

So for the most part, the occupation does not concern the protest. Yet there is a consistent representation of anti-occupation groups within the protests, which I think is quite important. They insist on raising Palestinian flags, which is considered “a provocation,” so both liberal demonstrators and cops would often approach them and violently tear down the flags. Yet they raise them again and again, together with signs like “There is no democracy with occupation,” and these are gradually being tolerated; the liberals learn (it’s always a painful process for them) that the mere visibility of Palestinian people or symbols in the struggle for democracy is, perhaps, somehow relevant. The pragmatic pretext (“You weaken the protest, you drive away potential supporters”) was seen to be false. As it often happens, the radical left has to turn its efforts from calling for justice and equality to fighting for the legitimacy of expressing such calls in the public arena.

Some activists report that their spontaneous encounters with liberal demonstrators on the street, their solidarity against the police (whose violence does not distinguish radicals from liberals), do make the liberals rethink Zionist dogmas, understand what state violence looks like, and gradually broaden their concept of democracy to include non-Jews. That may be true, but it’s hard to tell what the long-term consequences will be. In point of fact, Israeli Arabs are almost entirely absent from these protests; being second-class citizens in their own country, they recognize well enough that this protest does not challenge the inherent ethnocratic nature of the Jewish state, but is rather an internal conflict between Jewish elites over the distribution of power amongst themselves.

By that I don’t mean to underestimate the dramatic and even historic significance

of such an unprecedented mass protest against a ruling government in Israel. I just want to point out that the occupation and the rights of Palestinians hardly make it to the front line in these developments. So even if the protest succeeds in toppling down Netanyahu's coalition, the emerging political order in the aftermath is not likely to address these fundamental issues.

One argument that the left has not been able to communicate vividly enough, I'm afraid, is that the legal reform has two prongs: One is to undermine the independence of the judicial branch; but no less important is the creeping annexation of area C in the occupied territories, as evidenced by the appointment of Smotrich — a far right extremist who openly advocates the dispossession and transfer of Palestinians — to be in charge of the COGAT, the administrative agency regulating the lives of all Palestinians under Israeli control. Smotrich plans, and has already started, to execute far-reaching changes in area C, which were previously hindered by appeals to the Supreme Court and by intricate legal proceedings, sometimes lasting years.

A politically biased supreme court, controlled by a right-wing coalition and incapable of overriding parliamentary bills in violation of international law, will no longer impede these very grave crimes (it never really *prevented* them, but the Israeli fascists are both greedy and impatient). To my mind, the reform is just as much about insulating prospective war crimes from internal judicial inspection as it is about saving Netanyahu's political career. The big challenge of the left is to make the greater Israeli public see and understand these links (and others) in this unfolding regime change.

Is it possible to see what the future holds for Israel?

It is hard to make out details in the darkness, you know.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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