

Israel's Current Government Cannot Envisage Peace. An Interview With C.J. Polychroniou



C.J. Polychroniou

A dangerous new phase in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is currently under way. Following Hamas's vicious October 7 attacks inside Israeli territory, the Netanyahu government vowed to destroy the militant group and ordered a "complete siege" of Gaza. More than 9,000 Palestinians have already been killed and the death toll will surely rise much higher as Israeli troops have now encircled Gaza City. How do we explain Hamas's devastating attack on October 7? How should the Left have reacted to the Hamas's attacks? What is Israel's plan for Gaza? Is Israel guilty of war crimes? What is the mission of peace movements and activist groups inside Israel? Political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist C. J. Polychroniou addresses these questions in an interview with French-Greek journalist Alexandra Boutri.

Alexandra Boutri: It's been 27 or so days since Hamas unleashed a massacre in Israel, killing more than 1400 people and capturing more than 200 hostages. Since then, Israel has been hammering Gaza with airstrikes and artillery as retribution for the surprise attack by Hamas and Israeli ground forces have also moved inside the besieged region, though without a clearly stated objective other than to destroy Hamas. So far more than 9,000 Palestinians have been killed, with the majority of them being women and children, and Gaza's infrastructure has been totally destroyed. But let me start by asking you what you make of certain

left-wing defenses of Hamas.

C. J. Polychroniou: First, let me say that, for me, it has become more difficult over time to keep using the term Left in order to describe a certain political worldview. Identity politics has divided the Left, various segments of the so-called radical Left have developed an insufferable tolerance problem, and universalism has become passé. In this sense, I miss the old communist/anarchist left. Having said that, it was wild watching “leftists” appearing to celebrate Hamas’s atrocities, or finding excuses for the killing of innocent civilians, including children, women, and elderly. It’s one thing to say that we need to understand the context of a conflict, and yet another thing to applaud the massacre of innocent civilians.

In today’s world, perhaps more than ever before, we need a humanist left and a left that is socialist and universalist. We know that the Israeli regime is brutal towards Palestinians and that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory is unlawful. But what does Hamas represent? Sure, it is not driven by religious fanaticism like ISIS, which wants to establish some sort of a global caliphate, but the organization remains committed to the idea of “the full and complete liberation of Palestine, from the river to the sea” through a jihad. In this context, Israel has the right to self-defense but not too indiscriminate attacks that kill innocent civilians. I just don’t get how support for Palestinians should translate into support for Hamas.

Alexandra Boutri: *Isn’t it surprising though that Hamas was able to break through Israel’s border defenses on October 7 and storm into Israeli towns? How could Israeli intelligence miss Hamas’s preparations for the attack?*

C. J. Polychroniou: I am not in a position to answer the question about Israel’s intelligence disaster. Of course, the attack itself was surprising in terms of its audacity and scale, but perhaps it was also foreseeable, as Israel’s former ambassador to France Elie Barnavi argued in a recent op-ed in [Le Monde](#). Israel helped create Hamas and then believed that it was containing them with economic incentives, which included allowing Qatar to give cash subsidies to Gaza. As an Israeli general said a few years ago, Netanyahu’s strategy was to prevent the two-state solution from moving forward so he turned [Hamas into a covert ally](#). In any case, one can only hope that the day will come when Israelis hold Netanyahu accountable for the border breach that killed 1,400 and that he will be investigated for war crimes by the International Criminal Court. Israel’s attacks on the Jabalia refugee camp could amount to war crimes, according to UN

human rights officials. And it's quite conceivable that the worst may be yet to come.

Alexandra Boutri: What do you think Israel plans to do once it destroys Hamas and leaves most of Gaza in ruins?

*C. J. Polychroniou:*As many analysts have already indicated, and this is also a concern shared by Washington and officials in major capitals throughout Europe, Netanyahu's government didn't seem to have a plan for what comes next when he declared war on Hamas and started the bombardment of Gaza Strip, but perhaps the hope was that the Israelis could somehow succeed in transferring Gaza's Palestinians to Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. It could also be the case, now that Israeli ground forces are inside Gaza, that they want to force all of Gaza's Palestinians to move to the southern part of the besieged region. But I don't think that Israel has any interest in governing Gaza.

The assault on Gaza is driven by rage. But I also believe that Netanyahu is mostly interested in quelling the public anger against him and is hoping that he can do so with a war against Hamas, which he called "[a battle of civilization against barbarians](#)." And in the process of doing so, he doesn't care how many "Palestinian animals" are killed. Apparently, this is what leaders of civilized nations do, according to Benjamin Netanyahu! Nor does he care about the hostages. Unfortunately, however, he may have the majority of Israeli citizens on his side. Netanyahu's government is more than extreme, but "[Jewish Israeli citizens have moved significantly rightward over the years](#)." And hate speech against Palestinians seems to have become today something of a national sport for many Israelis.

This is a sad state of affairs. Israel had signs of a thriving social democracy during the first decades of the country's founding but has now become something of an "[open racist authoritarian state](#)." To some extent, of course, there is a general trend towards authoritarianism across the globe. Hard-right policies are growing in Europe, Asia, and Latin America while Trumpism is alive and kicking in the United States. Democracies are indeed on the decline, as revealed in [the Global State of Democracy 2023](#) report by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Alexandra Boutri: Do you think there is any hope for a two-state solution?

C. J. Polychroniou: It's hard to imagine under the current circumstances that a two-state solution is feasible. And don't be fooled by the fact that Biden has just said that he wants to see a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. First, peace needs to be achieved. And the current Israeli government cannot envisage peace. After all, Netanyahu has even told Arabs inside Israel, who are Israeli citizens, that Israel is not a state of all its citizens. Now, Israel and Palestine as two independent states, coexisting side by side, means reaching an agreement about borders, Jerusalem, and on the issue of the return of exiled Palestinians. You have a huge power imbalance between Israel and the Palestinian people, and when such situations exist, the stronger party will always try to impose its will on the weaker party.

If anything, what has been happening on the ground for a long time now is a push towards a "Greater Israel." That is the reality, and it has nothing to do with Hamas or any form of Palestinian resistance. Of course, it might help if organizations like Hamas gave up on the idea of the complete elimination of Israel. It boggles the mind that one has to make the obvious point, which is that Israel is a reality and was accepted as a member of the United Nations a year after its independence. But Palestinians also deserve a state.

Of course, the United States, if it chooses to do so, can use the enormous leverage that it has over Israel to compel any Israeli government to make concessions. Is that likely to happen? I doubt it very much. And not because the United States supports Israel because it is a Jewish state but because it serves a key strategic role for the empire. In any case, any practical plan on the Israeli-Palestinian front must involve the active participation of the Israeli people. In this sense, what happens inside Israel is of paramount importance for the future of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Alexandra Boutri: *Israeli peace activists must be facing extremely difficult challenges these days. It couldn't be very safe for them to protest against the war. But, in general, what's their mission?*

C. J. Polychroniou: There are various peace movements and organizations in Israel and many individuals who refuse to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Israeli peace movements and activist organizations have different missions. You have "Looking Occupation in the Eye" (Mistaclim LaKibush Ba'Aynayim), a group of brave Israeli women and men whose mission is to draw attention to the

military domination of Palestinians and the colonization of the occupied territories. Their activism revolves around defending Palestinians in the occupied territories and supporting them. For instance, activists in their movement try to protect Palestinian shepherd communities from harassment and violence by “violent extreme settler-colonists.” Mistaclim was founded in 2021 and its activists do their best to stop the transfer in West Bank, but they are outnumbered by the settler militias. Today, they are also voicing calls for a ceasefire, but the war drums are drowning out all other sounds.

There is of course Gush Shalom, which was founded by the late Uri Avnery and others in 1993. Gush Shalom activists have been sending out warnings for a long time that the perpetuation of the status quo towards Palestinians is inherently unsound and that it would eventually backfire. They have been trying to inform the Israeli public that Palestinians will not accept to live under occupation and oppression forever and that the possibility of another Palestinian uprising is a distinct possibility. They continue to do so today, even in a climate of isolation.

And then there is Standing Together, a grassroots movement of Jewish and Palestinian activists working together to build “a shared home for all those who refuse hatred and choose empathy.” The movement, which became active in 2015, is driven by the vision of creating a society that thrives on peace and justice and where Israelis and Palestinians enjoy real security and a decent standard of living. [Alon-Lee Green](#), one of the two National Co-Directors of Standing Together, said recently that it is too dangerous for his movement to protest the war. That should give us some idea of the prevailing climate inside Israel towards the government’s massive retaliation against Gazans for the October 7 Hamas’s attack. Indeed, there is even “a rise in racism and violence toward Palestinian citizens of Israel,” according to the latest update from the spokespersons of Standing Together. So, the work that a movement like Standing Together does in building resilience through solidarity between Jews and Palestinians is of inestimable value.

The movement has grown significantly over the years, and it now operates in eight different chapters. It is also involved in a wide range of issues, techniques, and strategies. It organizes protests demanding economic equality, climate justice, and an end to the occupation. The movement also has some 300 volunteers who, among other things, assist people experiencing racism or violence. Undoubtedly, embracing their shared humanity is a key step for peaceful coexistence between Jews and Palestinians.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His latest books are *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (A collection of interviews with Noam Chomsky; Haymarket Books, 2021), and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (Verso, 2021).

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