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A Progressive Pivot

The Israeli left – from seeking peace to defending democracy

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In his inaugural address to parliament in 1992, in the heyday of hope for peace in Israel, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said: "Speaker of the Knesset, members of the Knesset, in this decade, the last of the 20th century, atlases, history and geography books no longer present an updated picture. The walls of hostility have fallen. Borders have been erased, superpowers crumbled, ideologies collapsed, states have been born, states have died. The gates of immigration to Israel are now open. It is our duty, to ourselves and to our children, to see the new world as it is. To assess the dangers, examine the odds, and do everything we can to ensure that Israel is part of this changing world. We no longer have to be 'a nation unto itself'. It is no longer true that the whole world is against us. We must overcome the sense of isolation that has held us in its thrall for almost half a century. We must join the peace train of reconciliation and cooperation that is thundering across the globe, otherwise we will remain alone at the station."

The Israeli Progressive Camp in 2020

Twenty-seven years later, the mainstream mood in Israel is a stark contrast to this sentiment. "There is no shame in wanting peace," declared former chief-of-staff and candidate for prime minister, Benny Gantz, during his election campaign. "There is no shame in seeking peace," he reaffirmed. After stressing that Israel will likely have to keep fighting for the next fifty years, he concluded: "I will not let an entire generation of Israelis live without hope that things can be different."

"Israeli progressives still believe in peace but are too embarrassed to say so, given the entrenched notion that there is no partner on the Palestinian side"

Gantz's words captured the mood of Israeli progressives – a section of society that still believes in peace but is too embarrassed to say so, given the entrenched notion that there is no partner on the Palestinian side. Israel's progressive community wants to dare to hope, but does not believe in its power to make the vision a reality. Having once supported the various organizations and forces that comprised Israel's erstwhile "peace camp", today's progressives no longer remember such a camp existed.

So what happened to that camp, which formed the backbone of the Jewish-Israeli left from the early 1980s to the late 1990s? How is its virtual disappearance related

to developments regarding democracy in Israel? And what can this teach us about supporting liberal democracy? The following discussion attempts to unpack these questions.

"The second intifada shattered the vision of peace, which until then was advanced with almost messianic fervor"

The mass movement commonly known as the Israeli peace camp emerged in the 1980s and flourished throughout the 1990s. The Activist group Peace Now offered an ideological and organizational alternative to the Gush Emunim movement, which championed settlement in the territories Israel occupied in 1967. While the settlers sought a return to the mythical past of the Bible, Peace Now focused on the needs of the present, advocating for supporting underprivileged neighborhoods within Israel rather than settlements beyond its sovereign borders. The settlers wanted Israel to extend its control over the entire "promised land" (stretching far beyond the state's recognized borders); Peace Now opposed this expansionist ideal, offering instead the slogan "land for peace".[1]

Both were impressive movements vying for leadership of Zionist, Jewish Israel. By the early 1990s, Peace Now had the upper hand. It had achieved a show of force with a 400,000-person demonstration against the Sabra and Shatila massacre in 1982 and had overcome various public challenges, including the murder of fellow activist Emil Grunzweig in 1983. The end of the Cold War and Yitzhak Rabin's rise to power in 1992 marked an ideological victory, proving that the dovish left's vision had made it into the Israeli mainstream – into the founding principles of the government itself. Meanwhile, the third sector saw a proliferation of human rights watchdogs devoted to Israel's actions in the Occupied Territories on one hand, and pro-dialogue groups on the other. Dozens of such NGOs sprang up in the second half of the 1990s and the early '00s.

The dream of peace collapses

The failure of negotiations between PA Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak at Camp David, followed by the outbreak of the Second Intifada, threw the peace camp into a fatal crisis; it shattered the vision of peace, which until then was

← Terror attack on a bus in Haifa during the Second Intifada in 2003 *Wikipedia*

advanced with almost messianic fervor. The dream of a new Middle East espoused by Shimon Peres, the politician most identified with the peace camp after Rabin, was now regarded as embarrassing naiveté.

Two main factors pulled out the carpet out from under the feet of Israelis who had seen peace around the corner: violent clashes between the IDF and Palestinian demonstrators, including PA policemen, who used firearms provided to them under the Oslo Accords; and Ehud Barak's mantra that there was "no partner" for negotiations. The ensuing years of deadly attacks against Israeli civilians, peaking with the horrific 2002 Passover hotel massacre, hammered nail after nail into the peace camp's coffin.

"The Israeli state paved the way even more for the ethnic-nationalism that has come to characterize the Israeli polity"

The downfall of their vision left supporters of peace speechless, and their collective voice gradually disappeared from public discourse in Israel.[3] A decade later, the Arab Spring failed to fulfill initial hopes for a new Middle East, completing the blow. Even those who found hope in the Saudi peace initiative (2002) watched as the strongest countries in the region collapsed, confirming the view of Israel as "a villa in the jungle" that must stay closed off and armed to the teeth in order to survive.

From Territory to Ethnos: Reorganization of the Israeli Right

The political developments in Israel and the Middle East over the past quarter of century led to a political reorganization on the Israeli right. Having failed to win over the Israeli mainstream in the 1980s and 1990s, the national-religious right began a process of ideological and institutional renewal while Rabin was in power (1992-1995). This process was reinforced by the disengagement from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank in 2005, which was perceived by the settlement supporters as a betrayal by the government and the Supreme Court, permitted by an indifferent public opinion. They decided to change track and, as political strategist Moshe Klughaft put it,[4] abandon the territorial argument in favor of an ethnic discourse. Instead of appealing to Israelis to safeguard places in the West Bank and Gaza which most had never visited, the Right began to cultivate an ethnic dialogue that touches on the very heart of Jewish-Israeli identity.

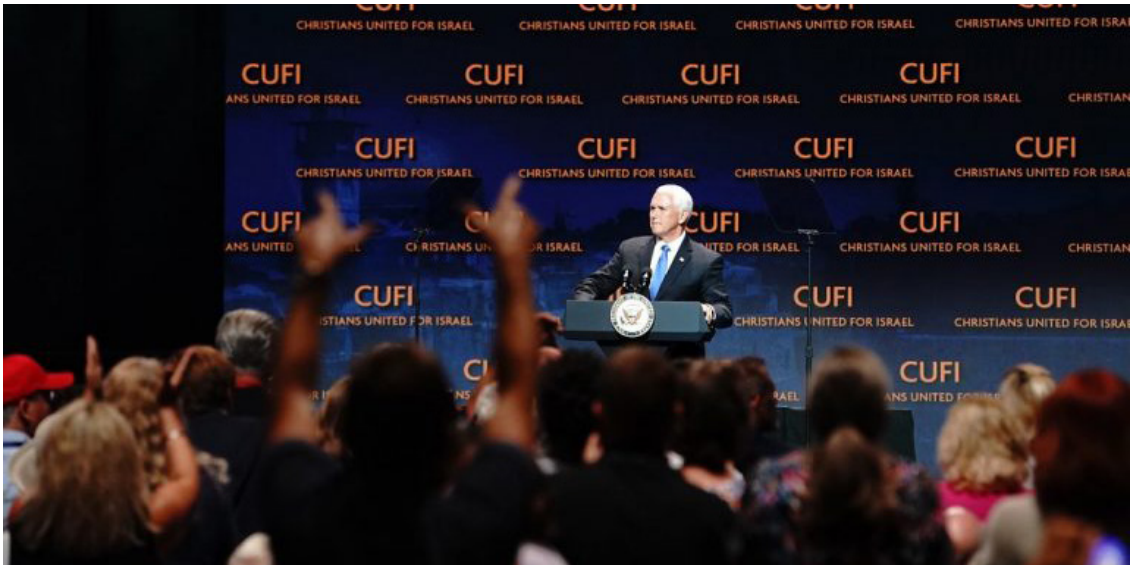
"Having failed to win over the Israeli mainstream, the settlement supporters changed their strategy"

With the common public perception that the right has largely delivered on its promise for personal security while sidelining the peace negotiations and receiving backing from a new American administration disinterested in agreements and catering to its every whim, the idea of working towards a peace agreement became not only unfeasible but even seemingly irrelevant. The vision of peace has lost popular support in Israel and the left does not offer voters a narrative they can put their faith in, such as a coherent policy or a clear vision for the way forward. The attendant shrinking of electoral power is reflected in a near erasure of the peace process from the public discourse.

For Jews, Israel is a celebration of self-determination and most consider it a Jewish state without pausing over the implications. The narrative of right versus left, was replaced with an equation in which "Jews" (the good guys) are on one side and everyone else on the other – Arabs, other countries, Jewish liberals. By employing this ethnic discourse, the radical right wing gradually made its way into the mainstream, gaining legitimacy for the idea that the majority rule must be Jewish and that democracy is not only far from fundamental to the regime, but in fact a possible threat to Jewish sovereignty.

This ideological and institutional shift was amplified by the emergence of conservative forces such as the Shalem Center, a think tank established in 1994 with the declared intention of halting the "ideological disintegration" in Israel and "winning the battle of ideas".[5] A series of likeminded organizations sprang up such as the Institute for Zionist Strategies, the Kohelet Policy Forum alongside anti-liberal NGOs such as Im Tirzu later on, and more recently Ad Kan. [6] Every organization employed its own tactics to advance a defined set of messages and goals. The first was to reinforce the link between Israeli citizenship and Jewish nationalism, excluding non-Jewish citizens. The second was to challenge the Supreme Court's involvement in political issues, to prevent it from placing obstacles before measures of annexation, exclusion and dispossession. The third was to personally attack Supreme Court justices and liberal NGOs, framing them as a progressive junta, and labelling them a fifth column and traitors.

In what is apparently no coincidence, this growing network was further boosted by an alliance with the American evangelical right. The last decade has seen the new Israeli right move away from liberal US Jewry, which it sees as a vanishing group of assimilationists. An effective substitute for their support was found in the form of evangelicals, as the founder of the lobby for promoting international ties with Christian communities, MK Rabbi Benny Elon, explained: "We must leverage the long-term relationship with the evangelicals. In a year or two, they will have 100-200 Congress members who can support the annexation of Judea and Samaria." Today, evangelical involvement in Israeli politics runs so deep that it includes fundraising for Likud and Jewish Home candidates and participating in the inauguration of the US



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Vice President Pence at Christians United for Israel Washington Summit- *Source: Flickr/ The White House*

Embassy in Jerusalem.

This three-pronged approach, which combined the leadership of the national-religious right, conservative thought and evangelical funding, has yielded an Israeli anti-liberal camp that is structurally similar to the US Republican camp. Various players are in charge of different tactical moves: running a hate campaign against the Supreme Court, liberal NGOs and the New Israel Fund; formulating and enacting the Nation-State Law; opposing commemoration of the Nakba and European funding of liberal NGOs; promoting annexation plans; and training the next generation of the camp's elite, who are deeply enmeshed in the radicalizing religious right.

"The explicit engagement with democracy is fundamentally an extension, not a desertion, of the principles espoused by the peace camp"

Maintaining Israeli control over the Occupied Territories is an explicit part of this strategy. Yet these organizations are also seeking to radically transform the regime itself, with the goal of instating in all areas under Israeli control a democracy that is based on the tyranny of the majority, with one law for Jews and another for Arab citizens. Facing this formidable network, with its declared intention to hijack the national debate and insert its own people into civil service and state bureaucracy, the left had to reorganize.

The Rise of the Democratic Camp

Indeed, supporters of liberal democracy in Israel have begun to organize in recent years. Out of 68 Israeli NGOs with democracy in their names or listed among their top priorities, about a quarter were founded in the 1980s and 1990s. The others (52 organizations, or 72.5%) were established after 2000, 39 of them in the last decade alone.

Whether this explicit engagement with democracy is a response to the rise of the anti-liberal right or an internal ideological shift, it is fundamentally an extension, not a desertion, of the principles espoused by the peace camp. Ending the occupation and resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are a cornerstone of this emerging political agenda, but not its sole focus. Just as the new right's war on democracy is aimed at promoting annexation and majority Jewish support for continued oppression of the Palestinians, defending liberal democracy in Israel is crucial to ending the occupation. In such a democracy, no subjects are denied rights or political power and everyone enjoys equal civil status.

Three fundamental, intertwined goals make up the agenda of Israel's democratic camp:

- A liberal-democratic constitution that will guarantee broad protection of individual rights and governmental checks and balances, so that power cannot be abusively used against particular citizens or minority groups
- Permanent borders for Israel, to end the massive exertion of state power over areas and populations denied the ability to vote and influence the government
- Broad civil equality for all persons living within these borders (except tourists, refugees and migrants). These fundamentals naturally encompass, but are not limited to, an end to the occupation the right of Palestinians to self-determination.

Importantly, contrary to the common notion that the left has "forgotten what it means to be Jewish", Israeli liberal democracy draws deeply upon Jewish tradition. It is informed by a powerful Jewish humanism that has its origins in the biblical prophets and the most prominent of Mishnah and Talmud sages, among them Shimon Ben Shatach, Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi and Rabbi Abaye; that lived on in the Middle Ages through Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri in France and Maimonides in Spain and Cairo; and remained at the foreground in the 20th century thanks to thinkers such as Hermann Cohen or Emmanuel Levinas and Rabbis Herzog and Soloveitchik.

"The democratic camp seeks partition to two states alongside integration within Israel"

Naturally, this shift is tied to the changing composition of the camp. While the peace camp was led by the liberal left, which grew out of various parts of the labor movement, the democratic camp comes from the same breeding ground but aspires to include non-Zionist Palestinian citizens of Israel, the non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox, religious liberals and right-wing liberal supporters of the state. For the peace camp, partition (national and territorial) was synonymous with separation (sectarian, ethnic, national and religious). The democratic camp, however, seeks partition (national and territorial) alongside integration within Israel (sectarian, ethnic and religious). Some seek to erase separation by working towards confederative models. Yet even the majority of liberal-democrats who support the traditional two-state solution understand that the future of Israel and Palestine, their economies and the peoples living within them, are inextricably intertwined.

That is why the democratic camp supports full cross-sector partnership, spearheaded by Jewish and Arab cooperation. Palestinian citizens are no longer seen as a suspicious minority or a danger to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. Rather, they are a potential key to Israeli-Palestinian and even regional reconciliation. As citizens of Israel versed in its language and culture, and as members of the Palestinian people, this population can serve as a political bridge between the countries rather than another obstacle to a homogeneous Jewish state. Just as shifting the focus from peace to democracy is based on recognizing the problems that will remain in Israel even without controlling the Occupied Territories, it is increasingly understood that resolving the Jewish-Arab divide within Israel will certainly help end the occupation, and even the entire conflict.

True, the commitment of more conservative forces in the democratic camp (such as the Telem party) to liberal democracy in Israel is a way to avoid dealing with the contradiction between military occupation and an egalitarian democratic state. Unsurprisingly, these actors do not see Palestinians in Israel as a legitimate partner in the first place, but only as a last resort. These parts of the liberal right in Israel will have to decide soon whether their commitment to liberal democracy is strong enough to contain civil equality, or whether fear of blurring national identity will lead them back to the nationalist right. Nonetheless, most Israeli liberal-democrats view the reinvigorated campaign to safeguard and enhance Israeli democracy as an expansion and realization of the peace program.

This is also why democratic institutions, including state authorities and the Supreme Court, are treated by the democratic camp in a pragmatic manner. Every veteran peace activist can reel off a litany of how the

Court has directly helped normalize the settlements and control over the Occupied Territories. While the Court may occasionally uphold the individual rights of a particular Palestinian, it consistently refrains from criticizing Israel's overall policy in the Occupied Territories, including violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention and legal discrimination. The peace activist's dilemma is therefore whether to appeal to the Court or to the authorities for redress in individual cases, knowing full well that the same institution legitimizes the overall policy of occupation.

"Most Israeli liberal-democrats view the reinvigorated campaign to safeguard and enhance Israeli democracy as an expansion and realization of the peace program"

The democratic camp faces no such dilemma. A strong Supreme Court will strengthen liberal democracy. The independence of the judiciary, regardless of its human composition, is a prerequisite for a stable democracy in Israel. With all its faults, the Supreme Court is the first, and sometimes last, bastion of defense against the tyranny of the majority and of elected officials. Defending it is not a question.

Conclusion

The global crisis of liberal democracy is taking different forms around the world. In Hungary and Poland, it is reflected in the rise of populist leaders and far-reaching constitutional reforms. In Western European countries such as France, Austria and Germany, extreme fascist right-wing parties are coming to the fore. In the UK and the US, the major manifestation is political and economic withdrawal, along with a severe dearth of leadership. Supporters of liberal democracy in Israel are increasingly acknowledging that their problem is part of a global trend. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict can no longer be construed as the cause and result, the chicken and the egg, of all of Israel's problems. The unique aspects of the Israeli situation notwithstanding, we are a small ripple facing an anti-liberal wave. Therefore, our camp must lead the fight for renewing liberal democracy in Israel and throughout the region.

The narrative of the liberal-democratic camp in Israel can be summarized quite simply: Israel is Jewish for all its citizens; it is time to be democratic for all of them, too.[6]

Endnotes

[1] Michael Feige, One Space, Two Places: Gush Emunim, Peace Now and the Construction of Israeli Space. Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 2002, 237-246 [Hebrew].

[2] A small majority of Israelis still supports the two-state solution, but for many years a growing majority has deeply doubted its feasibility.

[3] "You want to keep the Land of Israel? Wipe it off your map! If it's important, shut up and don't talk about it" (Moshe Klughaft, senior advisor to Naftali Bennett, in an interview with Arutz Sheva, 13 Nov. 2008). See: https://www.inn.co.il/Besheva/Article.aspx/7847 (accessed 14 July 2019).

[4] One of the center's founders commented when it was established that "Israel was in the midst of an 'ideological degeneration' that had to be stopped." (Ofri Ilany, Haaretz, 18 May 2009). See: https://www.haaretz.com/1.5053889 (accessed 14 July 2019).

[5] Some are supported by the Tikvah Fund, the financial engine behind the Shalem Center.

[6] The writer thanks Avishay Ben Sasson Gordis, Avi Widerman, Noam Vidan and Oz Aruch for excellent comments that helped formulate this article.

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Hillel, married + 3 was born in Jerusalem where he lives to this day. Hillel is the founder and director of IDEA – The Center for Liberal Democracy. In the past, and following a period of grass-root activism in East Jerusalem, Hillel joined the founding team of Molad: The Center for the Renewal of Israeli Democracy, where he served as Director of Programs.

Since 2015, Hillel also serves as an advisor and speechwriter for the President of the State of Israel, Reuven Rivlin. Hillel received his PhD in Jewish theology from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2013. He published public and scholarly essays on classical Jewish theology as well as on Israeli politics and political theology. Since receiving his PhD, Hillel served as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Israel Studies at JTS, New York and headed the civic education honors program at the Oranim Academic College of Education in Israel.