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Knocked Out

How the Israeli Left lost its
legitimacy within Israeli society
and how it could get it back

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In a matter of ten years, Israeli right-wing politicians, backed by extra-parliamentary organizations, managed to redefine the Israeli left as traitorous, foreign and anti-Israeli. To understand the success of the campaign that drove the leftist political camp to the sidelines of the political game, it is time that we discuss the role that the left itself has played in this process in recent years.

Let us start with what we can all agree on. Over a quarter of a century after the Oslo Accords were signed, Israel's left wing is in a state of paralysis. The fundamental institutions of democracy are facing mounting pressure from right-wing politicians and organizations, and a peace deal with the Palestinians is now seen as a particularly far-fetched sub-genre of science fiction. While there are various reasons for this political failure, beginning with the crisis of the second Intifada, what has solidified the political landscape of recent years has been the ongoing smear campaign against the left and Palestinian citizens of Israel, waged very successfully by the right over the last decade.

The calculated incitement that has drastically altered public discourse in Israel was born out of a historical crisis on the right. In the 1990s, as the peace process took off, a new majority of Israelis accepted the principle of partition as the key to resolving the conflict with the Palestinians. Even during the disengagement from Gaza in

2005, shortly after the collapse of the peace process and the peace camp during the Second Intifada, the general public displayed indifference towards the evacuation of settlements. It was at this time that the campaign against the left was initiated, as central figures in the right-wing leadership understood that while the settlements – the central political project of the Israeli right – have grown into a significant presence in the occupied territories, they were on much shakier grounds in terms of public support than was commonly thought. It became clear that the Greater Israel ideology did not have a broad electoral base in Israel.

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Following the trauma of the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, the pro-settler right formed a wide, well-funded network of organizations working on various fronts in politics and the media. They then began organizing smear campaigns against the Israeli left, accompanied by a new emphasis on ethno-nationalist tribalism and a delegitimization of the Palestinian minority in Israel. This new focus on nationalistic rhetoric provided the Israeli right with a new political discourse that could serve as an alternative to the religious-messianic principles, which failed to take root in the Israeli mainstream.

More importantly, the new campaign sought to delegitimize what was left of the post-Intifada weakened left, in order to bury the Two-State solution for good and ensure that no settlement will ever be dismantled again. These campaigns focused largely on the domain of Israeli public opinion. After all, supporters of the Two-State solution have not been making decisions in Israel for many years.

The terminology used by many to describe the events of recent years reflects both a misunderstanding of the profound changes in the rules of the political game over the past decade, and a passive approach. At times, the political events of recent years are perceived more as a work of nature, a brutal tsunami – and all that remains is to take cover. Politicians from the center and left who give interviews to the media often sound like commentators watching a football match from the sidelines – instead of being players on the field itself. Accordingly, one of the most common explanations as to why the right-wing's delegitimization campaign against the Israeli left has been so successful, focuses solely on the unprecedented intensity and effectiveness of the right-wing's strategies and campaigns. This article seeks to reexamine this explanation and to open up a discussion on the cause of the crisis that is crucial to any effort of recovering from it.

The Israeli right's secret to success

The smear campaign targeted civil society from day one, including organizations that document the injustices of the occupation and offer legal aid to defend the rights of Palestinians and refugees. The incitement started about a decade ago by an organization called Im Tirzu, whose

central figures were closely associated with Prime Minister Netanyahu. Thanks to the organization's efforts, the Israeli media was inundated with a new genre of so-called "investigative research" pieces promising to "tell the whole truth" about left-wing non-profits.

Netanyahu's rise to power in 2009 and the entry of right-wing settler party, the Jewish Home, into the government in 2013 equipped the right's campaigners with generous state budgets, staff, spokespersons and the ability to promote anti-democratic bills that captured headlines and shaped public discourse. In a matter of months, these organizations and their allies in the Knesset managed to divert public attention away from a substantive discussion of the governments' policies, focusing instead on the identity of those who criticize these policies.

Within several years, the right managed to cast aspersions on the integrity and motives of elements associated with the left in the Israel: educational associations, social activists, critical journalists and even celebrities who dared to publicly challenge the government's positions. Leading political actors in the political right sought to spread a heavily paranoid, conspiratorial mindset: "What drives these people to voice criticism? Why now? Is someone paying them?" These disingenuous questions were posed by spokespersons for the right in the media and in the Knesset.

Today, we can safely say this campaign was a phenomenal success. The Israeli right has managed to narrow the boundaries of legitimate political discourse, delegitimize the Arab parties and drastically revise

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the meaning of Zionism, which now is broadly understood in terms of the values of settlements project and continued military occupation. The Israeli left has been redefined in this manner as treacherous, foreign, radical and anti-Israeli. The word "leftist" has become a pejorative, suggesting hidden motives and shady methods. All this, as stated, serves a political purpose: a regrouping of the right based on nationalistic foundations – as opposed to religious-territorial ones – and undermining the legitimacy of the compromise-based Two-State solution to the conflict that the left championed in the 1990s and which most Israelis still prefer.

The few explanations that have been given in recent years for the success of this delegitimization campaign focus on the massive funding, organizational capacities and political characteristics of the right-wing camp. For instance, striking coordination between the leaders of the right, civil society organizations and journalists associated with them; and a political culture characterized by a lack of inhibition and constant striving to shrink the space for the legitimacy of their ideological opponents.

"The Israeli right has managed to narrow the boundaries of legitimate political discourse"

There is no doubt that these explanations are crucial to understanding the new Israeli right. Yet they only show part of the picture. There is one major factor in the political system that they overlook: the left itself. It is not difficult to understand why. After all, why blame the victim when we already have what seems like a satisfactory explanation that centers on the offender?

Furthermore, the left's evasion of any examination of its role in the success story of the political attack against it is based on the assumption that its ongoing collapse was inevitable in face of the aggressive attack it faced, regardless of its actions. The clearest expression of this approach is the widespread statement that "the Israeli public has veered right" – i.e., that there is nothing the left can do in this different reality and impossible conditions.

Yet Israeli political reality does not align with such declarations. While it is true that more Israelis identify as rightwing than leftwing, surveys from recent years consistently show that the actual positions and views of the center-left camp are more popular and receive stable support from the Israeli public. In fact, the majority of Israelis hold liberal, democratic views on not one but all the key issues on the agenda: separation of religion and state, civil rights, feminism and LGBT rights, socio-economic policy, the conflict with the Palestinians and more. In

light of Israeli public opinion on the main issues shaping the political and social life in Israel, the success of the right's incitement campaign becomes less self-evident.

More importantly, the role of Israel's liberal and democratic political camp in this story becomes an urgent matter to address.

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A crisis of ideas and identity

Two complementary crises contribute to the Israeli left's role in the success of the smear campaign against it:

1. **A crisis of ideas:** Politicians on the center-left became intimidated by rightwing propaganda. Consequently, they steer away from the Two State solution agenda and abandoned their engagement with the security issue that lies at the heart of Israeli politics.
2. **A strategic crisis:** The left has fled from the political arena and adopted the position of a critic sitting on the sidelines.

Let us begin with the crisis of ideas. The propaganda against the Israeli left was met with an insecure and confused response by the center-left Zionist parties that are supposed to provide the major political alternative to the right and are supposed to compete with it for power among the majority Jewish population.

"The propaganda against the Israeli left was met with an insecure and confused response by the center-left Zionist parties."

The smear campaign targeted nonprofits and political parties with two main messages: that the left is treacherous, and that withdrawing from the occupied territories will lead to terror attacks. This effectively undermined the left. Parties on the center-left lost faith in their ability to persuade the Israeli public with their solutions, consequently making their messages become vague and hesitant. The left also did not cope efficiently with rightwing organizations' aggressive propaganda according to which support for

the Two State solution is not a legitimate political opinion in Israel and that dividing the land would be a heavy security risk – an argument that, while legitimate, is wrong. This is especially absurd given the position of most senior defense officials in Israel for the last thirty years, that the settlements in the West Bank are a burden on the IDF and that the two-state solution is the only way to safeguard Israeli security interests in the long run.

Ironically, after the ideological battle was finally resolved – as most Israelis agreed to the principle of partition – leaders of the center-left began to recite the rightwing mantra that we have passed the point of no return for evacuating the settlements and that the peace camp has to re-examine its positions. Instead of understanding that it is the peace process that failed, not the solution on which it is based; instead of recognizing that the rival camp has never offered a realistic plan to end the conflict and ensure Israel's future as a democratic state and the Jewish homeland – the leaders of the left gave up. Daunted by the rightwing bullying, they made every effort to avoid an ideological confrontation with their opponents and began to deny their political identity.

It is no surprise that this tactic failed dismally. Voters were not convinced that these politicians were not really leftists. Instead, this tactic only reinforced the perception that the positions of the left are not legitimate. Even today, a decade or so after the incitement against the Israeli left began, despite repeated evidence that the opposition's attempts to distance itself from leftwing views in the name of short-term opportunism fails in the end result, the

"The success of the campaign against the left-wing was successful also because the leaders of the left chose to pander to their opponents rather than present a worthy political alternative in an attempt to defeat them"

obvious lesson has clearly not been learned.

The Zionist-left parties soon turned against their own base. Former Labor leader Yitzhak Herzog, declared: "We are not left-wing". His predecessor, Shelly Yachimovich, claimed that "calling the Labor party left-wing is a historic injustice". The outgoing party chairman, Avi Gabbay, said a few months after assuming office that "the left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish", echoing Netanyahu's notorious aspersion. Nachman Shai, a former Labor MK, called the left "a stain", and his fellow faction member Eitan Cabel published a plan for "sobering up" from the camp's political ideas. Yair Lapid, who co-headed the Blue White centrist party whose main electoral profile is very similar to Labor voters, stated that "we are the Likud of the past" and in his early political career never missed an opportunity to attack human rights organizations or to mock the political representatives of Israeli Arabs.

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At the end of the day, the success of the smear campaign against the left was not only due to the right-wing's strategy and massive funding, but also because the leaders of the camp under attack saw fit to confirm the harsh accusations leveled against them and their voters. They chose to pander to their opponents rather than present a worthy political alternative in an attempt to defeat them.

The strategic crisis

The crisis of ideas is deeply connected to another crisis in the Israeli left: its strategic crisis. The left has abandoned in too many ways its strategic goal of power-building as a political camp.

"Ultimately, the peace camp did not reach internal agreement over the wisdom and viability of its basic assumptions"

To begin with, a certain part of the Israeli left has begun denying their political affiliation to the left. One major example of this trend is the established research institutes of the liberal camp, that have distanced themselves from any political identification, stating that they are "neither right nor left", and have limited their own freedom of action in the political domain. It is also not uncommon to hear slogans such as "there is no opposition and coalition" or "it's not a matter of right and left" – even in huge demonstrations organized by civil society organizations on clearly political issues such as the Nation-State Law, the cost of living, governmental corruption and LGBT rights. In this manner, issues and campaigns that could have contributed to power-building as a political camp have been squandered.

The outward depoliticization of the discourse in the left stems not only from fear of the right, but also from the material needs of the camp. Many of the struggles in Israel's civil society are supported by international or private entities that agree to finance activity only if it is not "related to politics". This, naturally, affects not only the rhetoric – but the whole theory of change: central forms of political action are not only redefined as "non-political" but are actually blocked –

most importantly, shaping a popular political message and narrative, building a mass political constituency and cultivating a political leadership.

“The left-wing section of civil society is fragmented into dozens of separate struggles, rather than forming strong institutions”

After Labor removed itself from the left of the political spectrum, civil society organizations found themselves at the head of a political camp they cannot and do not aspire to lead. The leftwing section of civil society is fragmented into dozens of separate “struggles”, rather than forming strong institutions that can mobilize political change through research, outreach and by laying long-term foundations for a generation of new leaders, educators, activists, writers and opinion shapers.

Specific struggles against the wrongs of the occupation deserve full praise. But a political camp vying for power cannot rely solely on such

groups, for one simple reason: they do not play on the political field, in the sense that they do not seek to build organizational and institutional power and strengthen a political constituency. That is simply not their goal. Civil society organizations such as human rights organizations by definition do not engage in these forms of political work. Their focus on humanitarian intervention, legal aid, documentation and monitoring is crucial for the mitigation of ongoing crises created by the occupation but is useless in the sphere of political power building. In this sense, they are not suited to provide the needed response to the social and political forces fueling the occupation. They can only fight the symptoms, not the cause. In recent years,

even left-wing MKs have begun to function more like nonprofit lobbyists – each with his or her narrow specialty – rather than politicians fighting for power.

An effective political camp is what we now see on the right. Its activity in recent years has been characterized by a division of labor between representatives in parliament, think tanks and research institutes, media and public outreach projects, field organizations, leadership programs, educational institutions, rabbis and youth movements. As noted earlier, many of these organizations are less than a decade old and share the same source of income – mainly Jewish American right-wing foundations, and Israeli state funds. They collaborate regularly on campaigns, promote a similar worldview and repeat the same daily political messages and narratives. These organizations see each other as strategic partners working together to take over as many positions of power as possible.

“An effective political camp is what we now see on the right”

The new rightwing organizational system, which operates primarily as a propaganda machine and focuses on the media arena, is dominated by the settler lobby and serves its interests. As the settler population makes up less than 5% of the Israeli public, its success lies in the settler leadership's ability to present themselves as representatives of the public majority by adopting a new supposedly secularized nationalistic and “conservative” discourse.

The political network of the pro-settler right has, in recent years, trained a new leadership that formulated policy, promoted legislation and led all the right-wing parties in the direction desired by the settler's lobby. Now, this leadership dictates a political agenda

that includes issues once of concern only to fringe groups, such as Jewish access to prayer on the Temple Mount and objection to women serving in combat positions in the IDF. It has also imported positions, especially from the US, that have no major presence in Israel – such as economic libertarianism and hostility to democratic institutions including the media and the courts.

Meanwhile, the opposite process has been taking place on the left. Instead of developing new ideas and organizing smartly, the camp is scattered among issues and affiliations. The right has spent these years building up powerful central institutions aimed at providing their political movement with new ideas and mobilizing their camp around a single goal – creating a stable ruling elite while removing liberal obstacles from positions of influence in Israeli society. The left has focused on dozens of topical issues concerning different social problems. Its main ambition has gone from leading the country to minimizing damage.

Political Fatalism

If the inherent political weakness of civil society organizations is not enough, the aggressive attacks on human rights organizations has deepened the alienation from Israeli society that many activists already experience, given their prolonged exposure to the continuing injustices of the occupation. In recent years, many have become the victims of a violent attack themselves. The incitement campaigns, intimidation tactics employed by the state, and the silent cooperation of MKs from the center and from the left with this new political culture – all these have created a fatalistic mood among civil society organizations and large parts of the progressive media.

Newspapers and social networks are full of bitter statements that the battle is lost, Israeli democracy has reached its end, Israeli society has become wholly racist and right-wing – so the only thing left is to point out the wrongs of government, so that “the world will know” and our beliefs be recorded for posterity. These views aren’t necessarily shared by most activists, but they are clearly a common discourse in large circles.

Small wonder that the future leadership of the left seems scant. An entire generation of talented, committed young people are constantly hearing that they have nothing to do in the political system and that Israeli society is a lost cause. Some choose a legal career – in human rights organizations, for example – because this course of action does not involve persuading hundreds of thousands of Israelis, but rather persuading judges. This mode of action has only reinforced – albeit unjustly – the rightwing message that the left is not part of the general public, but is trying to bypass it in order to assert its agenda.

At the height of the smear campaign, the left’s response amounted to formalistic calls for free speech (“You will not silence us!”). That kind of messaging did not – and will not succeed – in mobilizing a large public following. The public will only support a coherent, clear worldview with a substantive identity and a broad, clear vision – including, a way to resolve the security threats facing Israel and the existential anxieties they entail.

Of course, it is not the job of human rights organizations to provide solutions to terrorist threats or to the issue of a nuclear Iran. It is not the job of anti-corruption demonstrators to explain why Israeli security pays a price for settlements. This requires institutional work of a different sort, but it is the only way to bring about political change.

“Progressive newspapers and social networks are full of bitter statements that the left has lost”

Stepping onto the field

The two explanations described above – the crisis in ideas and the strategic crisis, which are causing operational dysfunction – are both the result of fear from the right's incitement campaign, manifested in the form of deep despair from growing circles. Is this despair justified? There are cases in which it is true that a political camp is fundamentally inferior – but that is not the case with the center-left in Israel. This is not wishful thinking, but a clear analysis of the facts: as we have seen, despite this poor strategy, Israelis still support its basic views and are thirsty for change.

“The left did not fail because the public does not support its fundamental positions, but because it is using the wrong strategy”

The debate in Israel used to be between supporters of a Greater Israel and advocates of partitioning the land. However, the left settled this question and won the argument: the only solution for the existential challenges to Israel's future is two states. Annexation would force Israelis to relinquish a democratic regime and lead to catastrophe. And as long as most Israelis do not want to build the Third Temple, engage in bloody religious wars and live in isolated settlement – society may stagnate in a violent status quo but the right will be unable to realize its vision. The simple fact is that although the right has been in power for years without interruption, it has no effective solutions for any of the problems facing Israel, and does not offer citizens a better future in any sphere of life.

The despair paralyzing liberal forces in Israel is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Political despair causes masses of citizens to disengage from public life, young people to renounce their collective power, and new and old leaders to give up in advance. It brings organizations to make do with damage control and focusing on demonstrations and petitions. It leads donors to invest in short-term solutions, and feeds general panic that drives gut responses instead of long-term research-based strategies.

The left did not fail because the public does not support its fundamental positions, but because it is using the wrong strategy. For the vast Israeli public yearning for change, the formative experience over the last decade has been that it lacks the necessary tools and cannot cope with the enormous challenges it faces. In the current situation, no lament or protest marches will help.

The left needs to step up and build a new ideological and organizational infrastructure. Instead of counting down to the end, Israeli progressives must look ten years ahead and build up long-lasting institutions that will generate ideas, messaging and a political leadership that can bring about the change Israel needs. To end the delegitimization campaign and finally respond appropriately to the right-wing attacks, the various left-wing actors must profoundly change the structure and behavior of civil society in Israel – instead of wasting energy and resources on failed attempts to slow down the victory of the right. To win the game, you have to first step onto the field.

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