

Lefties & Peaceniks: A Detrimental Symbiosis?

By Ravit Hecht

Over the past few decades, the political left in Israel gladly adopted its label as the “Peace Camp”, which served to distinguish it from the nationalistic right-wing. The public discourse in the country was quick to follow suit and the common perception that Israeli left-wing politics equates a dovish policy agenda that is above all committed to the pursuit of peace with Israel’s neighboring countries and the Palestinians has been internalized. This image has been further strengthened by the smear campaigns on the right in recent years, which have delegitimized the Israeli left by riding the equation of the political left with the peace movement, while framing the vision of peace itself as laughable or worse – as treason.

The roots for the fusion of the Israeli left and the peace movement lies with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995, which took place in the context of his efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with the Oslo Accords at the height of the Israeli left’s power in the past few decades; while this chain of events provided both the Israeli left and the right with a formative story, the truth about the relationship between the Israeli peace camp and the Zionist left is more complex.

The relationship between the Israeli peace camp and the Zionist left is not self-evident

Despite this image and its deep roots in the Israeli psyche, seeking peace – not as an empty slogan but as an action with various and controversial prices – was not the driving value of Israel’s historical mainstream political left. After having seized the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip as a consequence of the Six-Day-War in 1967, Israel, under the leadership of the left, has had several opportunities to use these areas as bargaining chips to promote a negotiated peace deal with its Arab neighbors and the Palestinians – yet chose to continue occupying them and forgo the chance of peace. The main difference between the left and the right with respect to the Palestinian Territories was that the consensual left, as opposed to the right, publicly addressed the occupation of these territories as temporary.

The Historical Left

The historical Israeli left’s actions differed from its attributed image not only with regards to matters of foreign and security policy and the fate of the Occupied Territories. Also in terms of domestic policies and “caring for the underprivileged”, a value widely associated with left-wing movements around the world, the Zionist left had only demonstrated a partial commitment towards the underprivileged communities, which consisted mostly of Arabs and Jewish immigrants from Arab countries. The leadership of the Zionist Left treated these groups, as well as Ashkenazi immigrants that migrated to Israel at a later stage with suspicion. All of these were not seen as part of the Zionist elite that has been established, and which controlled state institutions.

Since the Arab Revolt in 1936, and even more after the War of Independence in 1948, both the left and the right in Israel addressed Arabs in terms of a war for survival and existence. This narrative still largely characterizes right-wing politicians, who tout a potential outcome that is absolutely binary: it's either us (the Jews) or them (the Arabs). Thus, despite identifying themselves as left, **the founding fathers of the nation were less interested in spreading leftist values and more in fulfilling the practical goals of Zionism:** absorbing immigrants and settling them, seizing land, establishing communities and defending them with arms.

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After the War of Independence and the Nakba, David Ben-Gurion, the father of the nation, imposed on the Arabs who remained within the limits of Israel a military rule that lasted 18 years, restricting their movement and freedom. This was revoked only by Prime Minister Levi Eshkol (a little less than a year before Israel occupied the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza). All this was led by left-wing governments long before the Israel right came to power for the first time in 1977.

Many Arab citizens with a developed political consciousness who now define themselves through their Palestinian identity (the Balad party is currently the most prominent political representative of this group in Israel), consistently state that they prefer right-wing rule in Israel to the historical left, even though the current government shamelessly encourages popular racism. The historical left, they hold, perpetrated even greater injustices against their forebears.

While there is no need to romanticize the Israeli right, which identified with nationalistic ideas from the outset, this argument is not entirely pointless. Menachem Begin, the almost eternal leader of the opposition who became the first right-wing prime minister in 1977, condemned the military government that was enforced on the Arab citizens of Israel until 1966 and claimed that "limited freedom is no freedom".

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Either way, it is safe to assume that the attitude of the mainstream left – the Mapai, Rafi and Labor Unity parties – towards the Arabs, in the 1948 war and afterwards, was not more gentle or compassionate than the right's would have been, had it established the state. The fact that many leaders of the settlement movement, including extremists, see themselves as the successors of Ben Gurion and the founding generation is neither a total surprise nor an utter distortion of history.

MK Bezalel Smotrich, a known political figure from the clerical right, told me the following in an interview published in *Haaretz* in December 2016: *"Ben-Gurion fought the Arabs more than I do. He's the one who expelled them in 1948, not me, not the right, not the religiously observant and not the settlers. Because there was a healthy feeling, there was patriotism, identification, national pride, you knew that the other side was the other side."*

New Definitions of Left and Right

Until 1967, the left-right debates focused mainly on socio-economic issues such as the reparations from Germany, retaliations for attacks on border communities, and historical debates regarding the responsibility for the fate of the European Jews, driving the British out of Mandatory Palestine and more. A significant part of the discourse was devoted, as in other places around the world at the time, to the tension between socialism and liberalism, and the degree of government involvement in the economy. The Mapai party's rule

allowed individuals to accumulate capital, giving rise to the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois classes, but was still characterized by the relatively heavy involvement of the state in private life, and by dominant apparatuses in the economy such as the Histadrut (the national laborers' union). The right largely defined itself through disgusted objection to these institutions.

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The first seeds of change in definitions on the left and right were sown in the 1967 war. In the first years after the occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, there was a euphoric consensus over Israel's right to these areas. The leaders of Mapai not only coveted these territories before the war, to expand the narrow 'waist' of the Jewish state, but were also responsible for the establishment of the first settlements – whether in an open initiative, by turning a blind eye to illegal actions or by surrendering to settler whims.

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Tiny radical left-wing cells such as “Matzpen” opposed the occupation from the outset and condemned it morally, but were considered marginal and entirely separate from the Zionist left as much as from the right. **While the heads of the left at the time (Ma'arach – which included the Labor party) did address the territories as temporary in Israeli safekeeping, they adamantly refused to recognize the independent leadership of the Palestinians**, and believed that any solution that involved returning the territories must also include Jordan.

Until the end of the 1980s, people who considered meeting with the exiled leadership of the PLO, which was defined as a terrorist organization, were viewed as persona non grata. Prof. Shlomo Avineri, for instance, who was nominated for the position of director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1975, wrote around that time articles praising the proposal by MKs Aharon Yariv (Ma'arach) and Victor Shem Tov (Mapam) to enter into dialogue with the PLO leadership. Avineri nearly paid for this with the long-awaited appointment – in a leftwing government – and only after a meeting with then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin did he secure the position after all. MK Haim Landau of the Likud went so far as to call Avineri “Lord Haw-Haw” – the nickname of British journalist William Joyce, who collaborated with the Nazis and, after the war, was charged with treason and hanged. This story illustrates just how radical opinions that favored official recognition of the PLO were considered to be.

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Two processes led to the radical idea of recognizing the Palestinians and their right to self-determination slowly infiltrating the mainstream – from the fringes of Matzpen and Peace Now to Netanyahu's famous Bar-Ilan speech in June 2009, shortly after his return to office, in which he committed to the two-state solution. The first process was the decline of the socialist agenda and the de-politicization of the working class – a large part of which merged with the middle class. The collapse of the communist bloc and the exposure of its flaws, the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall and other universal and local milestones such as the stabilization plan and the rise of the petit-bourgeoisie led to disenchantment with socialist ideas, which played a key role in the identity of Mapai and later the Ma'arach and Labor.

In Yitzhak Rabin's successful 1992 election campaign, Labor ran without its famous red logo, replacing it with a fresh blue, which until then was the color of Likud. Already in the 1980s, Labor ministers proved their rejection of socialism and Rabin's second government took this even further: in its very first meeting, a

privatization committee was established, which several months later set out ambitious goals in the area, along with introducing an amendment to the Companies Act.

The Israeli Left in the 1990s: From Socialism to the Pursuit of Peace

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The left needed a new definition that was not connected to class consciousness or socioeconomic issues. It was no coincidence that this definition was provided by Rabin's second government, formed in 1992: **recognizing the Palestinians as a people with a right to self-determination, and advancing towards a peace agreement with them.**

This definition was born not only out of the need for a new identity once socialism waned. The 1973 war, with its many victims and the ensuing crisis (preceded by the war of attrition); the peace treaty with Egypt, signed by the right-wing government headed by PM Begin; the protracted first war with Lebanon and the outbreak of the First Intifada – all these undermined the widespread belief in the victory of power and territory, and created a large group within the Israeli consensus that was willing to compromise, including recognition of demonic enemies such as “PLO terrorists”.

The idea of “land for peace” appealed to many because, unlike the situation that prevailed before 1967, this compromise could not harm them or their property. The price of peace would be paid by the messianic settlers and in return, the Palestinian refugees would agree to take the historic keys to their homes in Israeli cities such as Haifa and Lod off their necks, because they would now have their own state alongside Israel. The dovish-liberal camp, which had already begun its show of force with the “400,000 demonstration” after the 1982 massacre in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, combined political leftism with economic liberalism, thus redefining the Israeli left.

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Another example of this renewed identity was the composition of the Meretz party in 1992, which first ran as a merger of three leftwing parties: the liberal Shinui, the socialist Mapam, and Ratz that focused on civil and human rights and the separation of religion and state. This combination indicated that the peace agenda to some degree had replaced the socio-economic identity of the left.

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The reshaping of the Israeli left's identity, this time as the peace camp, therefore served “the interests of both parties”: **the political left needed redefining as its former “socialist identity” had collapsed**, and the handful of Israelis who supported Palestinian sovereignty, recognizing the PLO and dividing the land, “recognized” a golden opportunity to enter the national consensus. Given the collective fatigue in the Israeli society as a result of the First Intifada, which showed Israelis the consequences of military control over a civilian population, and the chronic refusal of peace with the Palestinians by then right-wing Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, both found a willing audience for the vision of peace.

The “Peacelash”

Even as the peace agenda reached its full glory during Rabin’s second term (1992-1995), it remained heavily contested among the Israeli society. At its peak, it represented less than half of Jewish Israelis, while the other half remained skeptical, critical and often agitated.

Rabin’s government was founded on a rather shaky and odd partnership between Meretz, which represented the secular leftist camp, and Shas, the ultra-Orthodox Sephardic party with a conservative rightwing and religious electorate, with Rabin and the Labor party in the middle. The coalition was marked by acute, frequent conflicts between Meretz and Shas, at the height of which Meretz head Shulamit Aloni had to leave the Ministry of Education following an ultimatum by Shas ministers.

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The government could not reach a united front vis-à-vis the Palestinians, either. In September 1993, just before the Oslo Accords were approved in the Knesset, MK Tamar Gozanski of the opposition party Hadash was required to cut a visit to the US short as Shas refused to vote in favor of the accords, although it was part of the governing coalition. Hadash and Mada, the non-Zionist parties that were not members of the coalition, supported the accords from outside the government, thus saving them and the government.

But the political hubbub was secondary to the popular protest against the government, and especially against Prime Minister Rabin. **The right-wing constituency, led by the religious settlers, embarked on the battle of its life even before a single centimeter of land was handed over.** The very fact of dialogue with PLO leaders and allowing them back into the West Bank from Tunis was considered a disaster that the right simply refused to accept.

Those years saw numerous violent, raging demonstrations that challenged the legitimacy of the government, backed by an opposition led by a promising young leader who began accruing his political capital – Benjamin Netanyahu. A memorable event was the March 1994 demonstration near Ra’anana, in which Netanyahu was photographed walking in front of a coffin; another was the October 1995 demonstration in Jerusalem, in which elected right-wing officials, including Netanyahu, stood on a balcony overlooking a huge crowd waving posters of Rabin in a Gestapo uniform and shouting slogans such as: “With blood and fire we will drive Rabin out” and “Rabin the traitor”.

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The government tried to respond to the protests. Signs were put up around the country with the slogan “We want peace” against a background of blue sky with white clouds. The expression “Victims of Peace” – initially coined by former right-wing Prime Minister Menachem Begin in a parliamentary speech calling for the evacuation of the Yamit settlement in the Sinai Peninsula and signing a peace treaty with Egypt – became a catchphrase regarding Israelis killed in Hamas attacks, but was soon appropriated by right-wing propaganda. The rally in which Rabin was assassinated, for example, was supposed to be a demonstration of support for him and a show of force by the peace camp to counter the wave of right-wing protest.

These symbolic measures were not accompanied by more aggressive action by the government. Even before the extreme terrorist attacks and the uproar on the right, after Baruch Goldstein massacred Muslim Palestinian worshipers praying in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in February 1994, Rabin considered

dismantling the Jewish settlement in Hebron – one of the most extreme ideological strongholds of the settlement movement – but ultimately did not pull it through.

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The massacre galvanized the trusted ally of the Israeli right, Hamas (which would emerge years later as a loyal ally in Gaza, too) to carry out suicide bombings of terrifying proportion throughout Israel, which increased skepticism and opposition on the Israeli side. **The end of this period can be marked by the assassination of Rabin, who was murdered before evacuating even a single Jewish settler.** The assassination sent shock waves throughout the country. Just a few months later, it ushered the right into power. The right has ruled all Israeli governments since, apart from a brief break in 1999.

Despite the outcomes and the relatively battered status of the peace camp today – it reached at least two notable achievements when in power, first Rabin’s government and then Ehud Barak’s short-lived one (July 1999-March 2001): The peace treaty with Jordan signed in October 1994 and the withdrawal from Lebanon led by Ehud Barak in 2000.

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It is also impossible to ignore the gradual legitimacy for acknowledging the Palestinians, their leadership and their national aspirations, even if very partially and with great suspicion. In 1996, the hawkish Netanyahu’s campaign slogan was dubbed “making safe peace”: not opposing an agreement but presenting it as the candidate’s prime motivation if elected. During his first term, Netanyahu implemented the Hebron agreement, which divided the city between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, albeit unwillingly. He also continued to negotiate with Arafat – although while doing his best to get out of the agreements. Despite consistently tearing away at the two-state solution – not without Palestinian help – his declared program has been to establish a demilitarized Palestinian authority in areas A and B.

Even in the radicalized right, once excluded from legitimate politics and now at the nexus of political power, many have updated their aspirations in light of the policies outlined by the peace camp during its short reign. Talk of annexing territories today centers mostly on Area C, which remained under Israeli control in the Oslo Accords, and not Areas A and B that are controlled by the Palestinian Authority. **The very division of the West Bank into these areas is the result of the Oslo Accords. That is another legacy of the peace camp.**

The Peace Camp and the Zionist Left Today

While the short-lived glory of the Israeli peace camp forged in the left can be dated to the early 1990s, the present is certainly a low point. The electoral gains of the peace camp’s declared parties in the last election are disheartening: Meretz united with Labor (as well as the “Gesher” party) only to reach 7 seats altogether, making a flimsy representation of the Zionist left in the Israeli parliament. This depressing result can be explained by the mass left-wing voting for the nebulous Blue and White party, whose sole purpose was to oust Benjamin Netanyahu. Yet it is hard to ignore the efficient, violent oppression of the **left in its current form as the guardian of peace or, in less sentimental and more precise terms – the steward of the two-state solution.**

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The most significant consequence is not the number of seats in the Knesset, but mostly the internalization of this oppression by the left, which has lost not only the ambition to rule but also the basic faith in its agenda, which took shape in the 1990s. The existence of Blue and White – a party that insisted on not presenting a peace plan with any practical meaning for fear of being labelled leftist while supporting President Trumps “Deal of the Century”, which includes the annexation of parts of the West Bank – demonstrates that the Zionist left – i.e. Mapai voters and their descendants – refuses to see itself as such and needs various disguises to be able to vote. Even they have lost faith in the validity of the political agenda and ideas that have defined them since the 1990s.

Internalized Self-Doubt and Lack of a Vision

This development can be traced through the following key events: the Hamas bus bombings in the 1990s that undermined personal security and the already shaky belief in the good intentions of the Palestinian partners; the assassination of Rabin, the undisputed leader of the camp who has yet to be succeeded; Ehud Barak's short term as prime minister and his famous declaration, “We have no (Palestinian) partner (for peace)”, after the failure of the Camp David summit; the second intifada, which claimed more than 1,000 victims and the rift with the Arab citizens of Israel following the October 2000 riots in which police killed 13 Arab demonstrators; and the disengagement from Gaza in 2005 or, to be precise, its consequences as experienced by Israeli society. The rocket fire on southern communities, and later also on central Israel, demolished what little faith remained in achieving peace or at least quiet through territorial concessions.

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More complicated explanations, such as that an agreement with the Palestinian Authority (PA) may have prevented Hamas from controlling Gaza and embroiled the area in violence, are not convincing in Israeli public opinion. At the end of this timeline lies the failure of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to negotiate with PA head Mahmoud Abbas. Olmert claimed that he was prepared to make far-reaching concessions, more than any other Israeli leader, but received no reply from his Palestinian counterpart. The Palestinians, however, argued that in the advanced stages of negotiation, Olmert was already embroiled in investigations and it was unclear whether he would remain in office – a fear that was realized. Either way, the Israeli public registered another Palestinian refusal of generous offers by an Israeli leader.

This trajectory, always under the pressure of aggressive right-wing campaigns, led many on the left to reconsider their views. The right, led by the settlers, managed to exploit the anxieties of a public that dared to dream of peace and received terrorist attacks and missiles in return. The divine promise of Greater Israel appeared to be rationally validated by security concerns.

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The best proof of this internalization of self-doubt lies in the political platforms of parties on the left. Apart from the small left-wing Meretz party, all these platforms have shed the terms “peace” and “Palestinian state”. In the first election campaign in 2019, Labor addressed various ways to separate from the Palestinians

without mentioning, heaven forbid, the concept of a “Palestinian state”; in the second election campaign in 2019, which ensued a few months later following the failure to form a government, Labor’s campaign focused heavily on social issues.

A further noteworthy example presents itself in the case of the Kadima party, which was founded by the father of the settlements, Ariel Sharon, in response to unrest in the Likud following the decision to withdraw from Gaza. The party’s 2006 platform (led by Olmert) and 2009 platform (led by Tzipi Livni) opened with the need to establish a Palestinian state in order to maintain a Jewish majority in Israel, and with the conditions and principles required. In 2013, when the disengagement from Gaza was already labeled a failure, then-Kadima chairman Shaul Mofaz chose to push the party’s stance on the Palestinian issue far down to the end of the platform, after subjects such as equal military service, environmental protection and workers’ rights.

The idea of peace, which had a rather brief moment of glory, began to recede back into the margins of the political discourse. In recent years, we have witnessed not only the shrinking of the peace camp but also its ejection from the Zionist left itself, which continues to exist in a state of denial and ambiguity under the auspices of various centrist parties. With the decline of the Israeli left’s major political tenets i.e. socialism and peace and with no other organized ideological issues to unite the camp, it is no wonder that the personal question, namely the aversion to Netanyahu has become its leading shared motivation.