

The Crisis of the Zionist Left

By Oz Aruch

Over a period of one and a half years, extending over all of 2019 and half of 2020, the Israeli political system underwent unprecedented turmoil. It took a grand total of three consecutive election campaigns and one global health crisis to bring about the formation of a national government. Electoral trench warfare was waged between the Likud party, led by longstanding Prime Minister Netanyahu, and the “Blue and White” list, headed by former general and political novice Benny Ganz, both of whom had failed to rally the parliamentary majority needed to form a government on their own. Eventually, the Covid-19 epidemic and the ensuing economic crisis offered the necessary boost and cover for the formation of a broad government joining Netanyahu’s right-wing bloc (comprising Likud and the Ultra-Orthodox parties) with the Blue-and-White and Labor parties.

Acceding to collaboration with Netanyahu despite having vowed against it for three consecutive election campaigns, Blue-and-White and Labor justified the concession by depicting the new government as an “emergency unity government,” the merging of two rival political camps in the country, willing to put aside their ideological differences to tackle the spiraling health, economic and political crises ailing the country.

In his statement of intent as he led the Labor Party into the newly formed unity government despite having [publicly shaved his iconic moustache](#) (so that the viewers could “read his lips”) in a dramatic oath never to again join a Netanyahu-led government, Amir Peretz [proclaimed](#):

“We are joining a unity government as equal members; the Labor Party is returning to the national leadership. In a national, health and economic emergency, we have decided again to be on the side that acts to fulfil our social-democratic worldview, to stand again at the center of the political stage, and to restore the Labor Party to an important, significant and influential position of influence on Israeli government policy.”

The Labor Party chair’s reference to the “equal membership” in the new government, might create the impression that it was formed by the two rival ideological camps in Israel, i.e. between the right-wing and left-wing camps, and that the Labor Party, which for decades following the establishment of the state led the Israeli left-wing camp, played a significant role in the process, as was the case in all previous unity governments in Israel. However, this depiction could not be further from the truth. The 18-month long election campaign, as well as the various coalition talks and the establishment of the alleged “unity and emergency” government were not part of a process that took place between the Israeli right-wing and left-wing camps, but between Netanyahu’s right-wing bloc on the one hand, and a mix of parties that consider themselves center-right, and whose leaders made sure to declare at every opportunity that they did not belong to the left-wing and/or represent leftist ideas.

For the first time since the establishment of the State of Israel, the declared parties of the Zionist left, namely Labor and Meretz have been swinging at the electoral threshold, viewing the political goings-on from the sidelines, devoid of political support and influence. These two parties, which in the 1992 elections won 44 seats (Labor) and 12 seats (Meretz), together representing 47% of Israeli voters, during the last round of elections scraped by with a mere six seats, representing roughly 5% of the vote. By leading his small party, represented by just three seats, into the right-center “unity” government (in turn also precipitating a split from the Meretz Party), Labor Party Chairman Amir Peretz might have very well signed the death warrant for the main political platform of the Zionist left.

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The virtual absence of the Zionist leftist parties from one of the most dramatic and polarized political campaigns in the history of the country was not a function of some refreshing ideological breeze offered by Blue-and-White, or a more accurate representation of a conceptual alternative to the decade-long right-wing rule under Netanyahu. Rather, Blue-and-White, which rose to prominence thanks to left-wing voters and alleged to offer the only alternative to Netanyahu and Likud, announced day and night that it was not left-wing and refrained from conveying any messages that could be construed as “leftist” or even as an ideological break from the right-wing agenda of the past years effectively leading to the erasure of the Zionist left’s traditional positions from the public discourse.

Instead of offering a clear alternative to the right-wing, Blue-and-White seemed rather to communicate to their potential voters that they had no significant ideological disagreements with the governing Likud, only that contrary to the latter, their representatives were not tainted with corruption. Thus, on a range of key political issues that have tended to delineate the divide between the right-wing and left-wing camps in the country in recent decades, especially on issues of foreign and security policy and the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it was difficult to identify any significant differences between the agendas of Likud and Blue-and-White. Furthermore, the political platform that purported to represent an alternative to the Israeli right also featured prominent right-wingers who had defected to Blue-and-White from Likud (for various reasons, ideological differences or disillusionment of the right-wing agenda not among them) who supported the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

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Finally, the fact that Blue-and-White and Labor, that for three consecutive election campaigns claimed to present a political alternative to the right, agreed to include a clause in the coalition agreement that sanctioned the annexation of parts of the West Bank to Israel as of July 2020, exemplifies the fundamental change in the composition of the Israeli parliament. For the first time in decades, the Knesset is no longer divided between a left-wing camp that supports the advancement of the peace process and the right, which objects to it. The decision of the Labor Party, once at the helm of the Zionist left and the peace camp, to join this government, even signing a waiver relinquishing the right to object to any legislation relating to the annexation of parts of the West Bank, is tantamount to an admission of guilt and a concession of defeat.

How did the Israeli Zionist left parties, and most notably the Labor Party, which established the state and ruled it unchallenged until 1977, reach the brink of extinction? And how can one account for the fact that the nearly complete departure of the Zionist-left parties from the political stage took place, of all times, at one of the most critical junctures in Israeli history, when the status quo regarding some of the most fundamental tenets defining Israeli public life, including the rule of law, Israel’s character as a Jewish and democratic state, and the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was being called into question?

The Riddle of the Zionist Left

Although it is common to divide the Israeli political map into the “right,” “left” and “center,” the terminology is not accurate for several reasons, including sectoral voting patterns, the fact that the positions of many of the political movements and citizens are not necessarily coherently aligned with any one of the

approaches, and the fact that the content of politically right and left positions in the Israeli context is variable and fluid. We can, however, identify three conceptual arenas that have tended to define the right-to-left divide in Israel in recent decades: the social-economic, religion and state, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, in the last decade of right-wing rule, the independence of the judiciary, the character of Israel as a liberal democracy for all its citizens, and the rule of law itself have become divisive issues between the left and the right.

As far as the social-economic arena is concerned, the Israeli left's positions are similar to those of left-wing movements elsewhere, namely promoting social welfare policies, and government intervention in trade and private equity to reduce economic and social disparities. In the relationship between religion and state the left advocates for the separation of religion and state, a pluralistic approach to different streams of Judaism and the dismantling of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. Finally, in the arena of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the left supports the resolution of the conflict through territorial compromise and the promotion of the two-state paradigm.

The decline of support for the Zionist left parties as reflected in the past elections, is confirmed by various [public opinion polls](#). According to surveys from the past year, [only about 15%](#) of the Jewish public in Israel defines itself as belonging to the political left. However, while the public's identification with the left camp and with its official parties has dropped to unprecedented lows, attitudes on a range of public issues demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of Israelis favors the positions of the Zionist left relative to those of the right, further compounding the riddle of disenchantment with the left.

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With regard to the relationship between religion and state, according to the Hiddush Religion and State Index [published in September 2017](#), support for the separation of religion and state has been rising steadily, climbing from 56% in 2012 to 68% in 2017. Likewise, on the question of LGBT rights, 78% of the adult Jewish population in Israel supports the recognition of same-sex couples (55% support same-sex marriage while 23% support the legal recognition of same-sex unions).

Public opinion in the social-economic arena illustrates a similar picture: According to a [survey by the Katznelson Foundation](#) from December 2018, 76% of the Israeli public believes that the state should fund free education from birth; 71% favor restoring natural resources to state ownership and 69% define themselves as social democrats. A further [survey by the Israeli Democracy Institute](#) published in September 2019 echoes these findings: An absolute majority of Israelis (93%) believes that the share of the national budget allocation for health expenditure should be increased, while 82% favor an increase in public expenditure on education as well. A large proportion of the Israeli public also supports increasing the welfare budget (72%) and expenditure on transportation (71%).

Interestingly, the Katznelson Foundation survey also shows that of the 69% who consider themselves Social Democrats, 64% define themselves also as right-wingers. This apparent contradiction could support the claim that it is actually the third arena, namely the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, that delineates the line between right and left, and therefore, Israelis who consider themselves social democrats and may even support the separation of religion from state could see themselves as right-wingers. But here too, the [data from various polls and surveys](#) presents a different picture whereby in the third arena of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a majority of the Israeli public has for the past three decades consistently supported the left-wing position regarding the future of the conflict, namely the two-state solution.

Thus, despite the decline of the Zionist left parties, their declared positions are popular among Israelis. It is therefore conceivable that if the electoral system were designed so that Israelis could vote on their political

convictions rather than for a party, the governing policy in a variety of political arenas in Israel would have been guided by what is deemed in Israel as a rather leftist agenda. And yet, Israeli left-wing parties have been stripped entirely of their electoral assets, while the right-wing has completely dominated Israeli politics for over a decade now, even though its official positions seem to have no broad support in society. In the meanwhile, parties that purport to represent an alternative to the right-wing rule are evading the “left” label like the plague. How might this conundrum be explained?

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In order to provide a satisfactory explanation for the withering of the Zionist left and its departure from the public stage, one must first know something about its representatives and their positions, and understand how it is perceived in the public sphere in Israel. To this end, we invited twenty academics, journalists, activists, and former politicians and generals to shed light on some of the key processes in Israeli society that have shaped the development of the Zionist left over the past few decades.

The Zionist Left and the Peace Camp

Posed with the question of what the Israeli left stands for, the ordinary Israeli today might answer, “the belief that peace can be made with the Arabs.” Indeed, during the decades since the signing of the Oslo Accords in the 1990s, a complete terminological fusion between the “Israeli left” and the “Israeli Peace Camp” has taken place. Accordingly, the slogan “land for peace” became the main, if not exclusive hallmark of the Zionist left. This association of willingness to relinquish territory (in return for peace) with the Israeli left-wing has become so deeply ingrained in the public psyche that even elected members of the Likud who have never been members of one of the Zionist left parties, such as Ehud Olmert, Tzipi Livni, and in some cases, even the “father” of the settlements, Ariel Sharon, have been variously identified with the “left” due to their willingness to transfer territories from Israeli to Palestinian control and to advance a political settlement of the conflict based on territorial compromise (in the case of Olmert and Livni).

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The popular conception that conflates the Zionist left with the peace camp obscures the historical truth that these two entities have not always overlapped. In what follows we will examine their respective trajectories and separate histories. Decoupling them will provide the reader with an understanding of the disappearance of the Israeli left in Israeli politics, and prospects for a peace supported by the Israeli public-at-large.

The connection between the Zionist left parties and the Peace Camp is far from obvious

As demonstrated by former Minister and longstanding MP of the Labor Party Uzi Baram in his essay [*“The Labor Party and the Peace Camp,”*](#) the breakdown into rival political camps in Israel in the first decades following the establishment of the state of Israel was very different from the current division, revolving, among other things, around the tensions between the socialist and liberal camps and the country’s positioning vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. This latter issue especially polarized the Zionist left parties, which were known as the “workers’ camp” and which considered as their ideological rivals not the proponents of a “greater Israel,” but much more the General Zionists, who were identified with European liberals and supported private property and capitalism. Other political issues that polarize Israeli politics nowadays, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the status of Arab Israeli citizens (subjected to military rule until 1966)

hardly played a role in Israeli public discourse in the first decades after the founding of the state.

The seeds of change that would bring together the Zionist left and the Peace Camp were sown only after the 1967 War. Still, two decades past the war, the Israeli peace camp, a loose network of movements and civil society organizations, remained light years away from formal party politics and from the Zionist left parties. In fact, during the first years after the capture of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem during the 1967 War, there was a euphoric consensus across the political spectrum regarding Israel's right to these territories. Individual and tiny cells on the radical left, such as "Matzpen" (Compass) opposed the occupation from the beginning, but as the Knesset Deputy Speaker of the Meretz faction and former President of the Israel National Fund, Professor Naomi Chazan demonstrates in her essay, [*"The Rise of the Israeli Peace Camp,"*](#) these groups were as alienated from the Zionist left parties as they were from the right-wing camp:

"With virtually no public support and remarkably little access to the establishment, the fledgling peace camp, which first emerged on Israel's social and political fringes after the 1967 War, had negligible influence over Israeli policy and decision-makers for the first 20 years of its existence."

Indeed, even the leaders of the Zionist left most closely associated with the peace camp, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, were not necessarily the natural candidates to lead it. During his time as Defense Minister in the 1970s, Shimon Peres played a significant role in the founding of the settlement enterprise. According to [Benny Katzover](#), a founding member of Gush Emunim and prominent leader of the settlement movement, Peres "was defense minister during the most critical period in the history of settlement enterprise and the main driver for the approval of the first settlements." Alongside his critical support for the settlement enterprise, Peres also vehemently ruled out any sort of engagement with the PLO.

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Thus, when Yasir Arafat, leader of the PLO was first [welcomed](#) in the summer of 1979 for talks with Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky and former West German Social Democratic Chancellor Willy Brandt, Peres, as head of the opposition under the first right-wing government led by Menachem Begin, joined hands with Likud in a rare display of unity to issue a bi-partisan [condemnation](#) of "the reception given by Chancellor Kreisky to the leader of this organization of murderers." Referring to Arafat's visit to Austria when addressing the Knesset, [Peres stated](#) that "When Arafat says he aspires to establish a secular and democratic state, we know what secular and democratic model is closest to his heart: that of Khomeini, whose sense of democracy begins and ends with a firing squad." Peres further stated that even if the PLO were to one day change its ideological platform, negotiations were out of the question, because they would be nothing more than a pretense.

Rabin, as well, the leading political figure of the peace camp in the 1990s and a [consistent opponent](#) of the settlement enterprise in the heart of Palestinian population, opposed any talks with the PLO led by Arafat on the grounds that it was a "murderous terrorist organization that should not be legitimized through dialogue." At the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987, Rabin found himself in the position of Defense Minister as part of a unity government between Labor and the Likud and was harshly criticized for the use of excessive violence against Palestinian protesters. His tone-setting comment that IDF soldiers should "break the hands and legs of Palestinian stone throwers" as a means of deterrence led to confrontations with the peace camp.

The Peace Camp's Journey to Mainstream Israeli Politics

The recognition -- in Israeli society and the Zionist left in particular -- of the Palestinians and their right to self-determination, was a gradual process that took place during the 1980s, as demonstrated by *Haaretz*

journalist and publicist Ravit Hecht in her essay: [*“Lefties and Peaceniks: A Detrimental Symbiosis”?*](#) According to Hecht, the evolution of the Israeli public’s stance regarding the Palestinians was enabled by two deep societal processes. The first concerned the overall erosion of the appeal of the socialist agenda, which had once constituted an essential element of the identity of the Zionist left. The collapse of the Communist bloc, the exposure of its failures alongside the consolidation of the Israeli middle-class, rendered the socialist agenda antiquated in the eyes of many Israelis. The second process named by Hecht was the erosion of the paradigm of military dominance and territorial expansion following the devastating and traumatic Yom Kippur War with its many victims and social crises, alongside the signing of the peace treaty with Egypt, under right-wing leadership, which demonstrated that conflicts could be resolved through territorial compromise.



Israeli prisoners of war in Syria (Photo credit: Wiki commons)

According to Hecht, the fatigue resulting from the 1982 Lebanon War, followed by the First Intifada in 1987, also played a role in driving home to the Israeli public the social cost exacted by an ongoing military conflict and control of a foreign civilian population. This public mood gave rise to a growing sector that was increasingly receptive to the idea of diplomatic compromise, and even, of recognizing hitherto demonic enemies such as “PLO terrorists.” The idea of “land for peace,” first promoted and implemented by the right-wing government under Prime Minister Begin, began to look attractive to many, because unlike the situation that prevailed before 1967, such a compromise posed no potential harm to them or their property. Similar to the peace treaty with Egypt, Israel would cede land and receive peace and security in return. The price of peace would be paid by the settlers in the Palestinian territories, and in return, the Palestinian refugees would agree to put aside the historic keys to their homes in Haifa and Lod, because they would now have their own state alongside Israel.

In light of these deep processes the Zionist left’s leaders identified the Israeli public’s receptiveness to the vision of peace and began to establish a network of actors from the Zionist left parties and civil society that came to be known as the Israeli Peace Camp. The reshaping of the Zionist left’s identity, this time as the “Peace Camp,” thus served the interests of both the Zionist left parties, which were in need of a fresh narrative due to the depletion of their socialist messages, and the tiny handful of civil society actors that advocated for the division of the land between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean into two states, and recognized a golden opportunity to enter the Israeli mainstream. The 1992 election victory and establishment of the second Rabin government signified the culmination of this merger: for the first time in Israel’s history,

the prospect of a peace treaty with the Palestinians not only made it to the national political stage, but even became the hallmark of the Zionist left.

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During the 1990s, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the peace process at center stage in Israeli politics, the division between the left and the right was recast. The Israeli left was now widely seen as the Peace Camp, while the Israeli right built its identity as the camp opposing the Oslo Accords and the promotion of the peace process with the PLO. Thus, even though the Israeli right was the first and only political camp to sign a peace treaty with an enemy state that included secession of territories (the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt) and although it was Likud Prime Minister Begin, who in defense of the peace treaty with Egypt declared that “victims of peace are preferable to victims of war,” it was the Zionist left exclusively that came to be synonymous with the Peace Camp and identified with the slogan of “land for peace.”

The fusion of the Zionist left with the Peace Camp during the 1990s took place, then, not thanks to any natural alliance between the two, but rather because the Labor Party’s leadership framed the pursuit of peace as a cornerstone of its newly founded identity. The Zionist left thus situated the pursuit of peace within a broader paradigm, presenting a vision to the Israeli public that territorial compromises with the country’s Arab neighbors, would lead to the normalization of Israel’s relations with its hostile environment and, even further, to a snowball effect that would usher in a new era of regional prosperity. Shimon Peres, who had opposed any dialogue with the PLO some two decades earlier, published a book in 1993 titled “A New Middle East,” in which he outlined this vision where economic and national interests would sustain peace in the hitherto troubled region.

No Partner & Villa in the Jungle

The power of the Zionist left’s “peace paradigm” did not emerge from nowhere, as shown by Oren Nahari in his essay [*“Disillusionment.”*](#) From its inception, the “peace paradigm” was closely intertwined with political dynamics in the international sphere, created and shaped by the euphoria that prevailed in the West following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, and the expectation that the Western political order based on democratization, secularization, and peaceful conflict resolution under the now unchallenged US hegemony would trickle down to other countries beyond Europe’s borders. But just as the rise of the left and the Israeli peace camp in the 1990s was closely linked to the atmosphere in the West, so was its decline.

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The first cracks appeared already in the 1990s as a wave of terrorist attacks against civilian targets shook the Israeli public. Initially, however, buoyed by the overall optimistic mood in the West, the public discourse around the promotion of peace as the main agenda topic in Israeli politics persisted. Even the Netanyahu-led Likud party campaign in the 1996 elections rather than rejecting a peace deal with the Palestinians outright, employed a slogan suggesting that only Netanyahu could bring peace without jeopardizing Israel's national security interests. Netanyahu's Likud defeat in the 1999 elections and the renewed launch of the peace negotiations with the Palestinians under the Labor-led left-wing government raised new hopes among the shattered Israeli left that the straggling process could be reignited by their assassinated leader's successor.

However, the transition to the new millennium, which coincided with the collapse of the peace negotiations in Camp David and five long and traumatic years of the Second Intifada led to a deep crisis of trust in the "peace paradigm" of the Zionist left. Global and regional events such as the 9/11 attacks, the invasion of Iraq, followed by a decade of terrorist attacks against Western targets across the globe further eroded the underlying optimism of the 1990s and the belief that a new better world order based on peace and the expansion of democracy around the globe, including in the Middle East was possible, let alone inevitable.

Ironically, just as the Zionist left has become associated with the achievements and slogans of the right-wing in favor of peace (especially the slogan: "land for peace" and "the victims of peace"), so has the Israeli right become identified with statements made by the last acting prime minister of the Zionist left, Ehud Barak, namely that "Israel is a villa in a jungle," and, following the failure of the peace talks in Camp David in 2000, that "there is no Palestinian partner for peace."



Terror attack on a bus in Haifa during the Second Intifada in 2003 – [Wikipedia](#)

The Israeli right under Netanyahu has wholeheartedly adopted these two narratives. The "no partner for peace" narrative gained further traction among the Israeli public following Hamas' rise to power in the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of Israel's unilateral evacuation of the Gaza Strip in 2005 and the failure of peace talks with the Palestinian Authority in 2008 in Annapolis. On the regional level, the Arab Spring and the devolving of several Arab states into horrific civil wars further confirmed for the Israeli public the pertinence of the narrative of Israel as a villa in the Middle Eastern Jungle and the irrelevance of the left-wing motto "land for peace." The two narratives, coined by Barak, and later appropriated by Netanyahu,

resounded across the Israeli political spectrum. The Zionist left, which had tied its identity and destiny with the peace paradigm, found itself at a loss and with no way forward.

Has Israeli Society Swung to the Right?

About a decade has passed since the Annapolis Conference – the last significant attempt to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process – and the outbreak of the Arab Spring. It was a decade marked by the Israeli right-wing rule under Netanyahu, who in the meantime has broken the record of David Ben-Gurion as the longest standing prime minister in the history of the State of Israel. For the younger generation of Israelis that exercised its right to vote for the first time in the 2020 elections, it is probably hard to remember that there ever has been another prime minister in Israel.

Under Netanyahu's rule, the Israeli right increasingly defined its foreign and security policy paradigm *ex-negativo* vis-à-vis the perceived failure of the peace paradigm

In her essay, "*The Lost Decade of the Israeli Peace Camp*," Former Knesset Member of the Zionist Union, Dr. Ksenia Svetlova demonstrates how actors from the right wing sought to consolidate their power by ridiculing and demonizing the peace paradigm of the Zionist left. Under Netanyahu's rule, the Israeli right increasingly defined its foreign and security policy paradigm *ex negativo* vis-à-vis the peace paradigm, replaced by Netanyahu's doctrine that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be solved and should instead be managed. In the regional arena, and in line with the "villa in the Jungle" narrative, the Zionist left's approach of normalization with the Arab world via dialogue, eye-level diplomacy, and willingness to compromise, was replaced with a drive to bolster Israel's superior economic, technological and military position in the region, grooming it for the role of a leader that interacts with its regional neighbors from a position of power.

Netanyahu's framing of his foreign and security policy agenda in diametric opposition to that of the Zionist left was demonstrated during his speech at a ceremony marking the naming of a nuclear research facility after Shimon Peres:

"Shimon (Peres) aspired toward peace, but he knew that true peace can be achieved only if our hands strongly grasp defensive weaponry. In the Middle East, and in many parts of the world, there is a simple truth: There is no place for the weak. The weak crumble, are slaughtered and are erased from history while the strong, for good or for ill, survive. The strong are respected, and alliances are made with the strong, and in the end peace is made with the strong." | [Source: Israel National News >>](#)



PM of Israel @IsraeliPM · Aug 29, 2018

Replying to @IsraeliPM

PM Netanyahu: Shimon aspired toward peace but he knew that true peace can be achieved only if our hands strongly grasp defensive weaponry. In the Middle East, and in many parts of the world, there is a simple truth: There is no place for the weak.



Netanyahu's speech at a ceremony marking the naming of a nuclear research facility after Shimon Peres | [Twitter](#)

The consolidation of the right-wing's leadership under Netanyahu since 2009 alongside the gradual erasure of the Zionist left from the political map has led many to speculate as to whether Israelis have simply bought into the right-wing's message and swung to the right. In his essay ["Just Wars?"](#) Ami Ayalon, former Member of the Parliament for the Labor party, Head of the Shin Bet, Israel's secret service, and commander-in-chief of the Navy, makes a strong case that the success of the right-wing campaign to paralyze and dismantle the Zionist left was not the result of the migration of left-wing voters to the right. Rather, Ayalon attributes this success to effective intimidation tactics that fed on the ongoing war trauma of Israeli society. Ayalon further attributes the shift to the failure of the Israeli mainstream to distinguish between the two types of wars that Israel leads, just wars and unjust wars. Ayalon writes in his essay:

"Israel's history reveals that we have been fighting two separate wars. The first was fought for the establishment and defense of a Jewish and democratic state within the pre-1967 borders. The second was aimed at expanding Israel's eastern border to the Jordan River by means of settlements facilitated by military occupation. Yet look through the Israeli lens, and you will see only one war: the ongoing fight for the existence of the Jewish people in their homeland, against enemies who deny their right to self-determination."

Indeed, as demonstrated by Dr. Ori Goldberg in his essay ["In the Military We Trust,"](#) the unique narrative that accompanied the establishment of the State of Israel as a safe haven for Jews from around the world uniquely shaped the Jewish Israelis' interpretation of the "quest for peace", as well as the choice of public representatives deemed suitable to its pursuit. The concept of peace in Israeli culture, maintains Goldberg, does not stand for a lack of hostility between former enemies, but rather for the aspiration to eliminate any physical threat to the Jewish collective, which can only be ensured by Jewish military prowess. Goldberg writes:

“The Israeli understanding of peace is therefore significantly shaped by the military, both as an institution and as a dominant facet of the collective Israeli identity. What is clear is that the military will need to evaluate and approve a peace plan if and when the possibility to achieve it presents itself”

The framing of the quest for peace as a promise of security is corroborated by the fact that the two Zionist left leaders who led the peace camp in the 1990s were also two of the most decorated generals in the history of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak. Indeed, since the early 1970s the vast majority of senior security officials have chosen to join the left-wing parties after retiring from service, such that to this day, the positions of the Zionist left are backed almost unequivocally by the security apparatus. What, then, accounts for the dizzying success of the right-wing delegitimization of the left as anti-patriotic and a threat to national security?

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In her essay [*“Knocked Out,”*](#) in which she reviews the left-wing camp’s responsibility for its disappearance from the political arena, the director of the progressive think tank Molad, Liat Schlesinger, argues that the rise of the right derived not from a crisis on the left, but from its own strategic pivot and revised messaging strategy once it was clear that it had lost the battle over Israeli public opinion regarding the future of settlements and the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. Schlesinger writes:

“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, [...and] even during the disengagement from Gaza in 2005 [...] the Israeli 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 – had grown significantly, they were on much shakier ground 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”

Indeed, as stated, while many more Israelis are prepared to identify themselves with the right than with the left, political positions affiliated with the Zionist left enjoy far greater support than those of the right, including the issue of the preferred solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the two-state outline.

Since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, there has been a dramatic surge in the degree of support among the Israeli public of the option for the two-state solution

In her essay: [*“A Swing to the Right?”*](#) public opinion researcher Dr. Zipi Israeli of the Institute for National Security Studies shows that while the Israeli public was not at all open to the possibility of establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza prior to the Oslo Accords, since the signing of the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians in 1993, there has been a dramatic surge in the degree of support among the Israeli public of the two-state solution. This support has been stable over the years and even today, after more than a decade under right-wing rule, it retains a stable majority in Israeli society. Israeli notes:

In 1987-1990, only 21%-27% of Jewish-Israelis supported the idea of a Palestinian state. The years 1991 to 1996 saw an increase to a support rate of 32%-45%. From 1997 to 2017 support for a Palestinian state was high, sometimes even exceeding 60%. The timeline shows support for the two-state solution both in times of crisis and during calm periods, with no relation to the identity of the government. This is significant given the diplomatic stalemate, various domestic tensions within Israel, the rule of right-wing governments since 2009, and the growing conviction in the last decade that it is impossible to reach a permanent agreement with the Palestinians.

However, as Israeli further demonstrates, parallel to supporting the two-state solution in theory, most members of the public feel that this attitude is not applicable in reality:

“Israelis have been also asked whether they believe a peace agreement can be reached with the Palestinians in the near future. The data here show that the public has been pessimistic for years – 60%-70% believe that a peace agreement cannot be reached”

Indeed, data from various surveys from recent years consistently show that most of the Israeli public feels that change is not possible. And if Bismarck is right, that “politics is the art of the possible,” then Israeli public opinion on the viability of peace is crucial. As Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis writes in his essay [*“Skeptic Doves,”*](#) most of the controversy surrounding the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict concerns not the nature of the desired solution, but its attainability. The belief in the feasibility of the two-state solution and the degree of Israel’s agency in making this solution work, claims Ben-Sasson-Gordis, lies at the heart of the differences between the various parties regarding the conflict. The Israeli public’s skepticism, he claims, has led to the decline of the Zionist left, the rise of the centrist parties, and the consolidation of the right-wing grip on power. *“Over time,” he writes, “there is a real mental cost to believing in a solution that one is convinced can never be achieved.”*

“Peace Out”

Indeed, skepticism across Israeli society regarding the possibility of advancing a peace agreement with the Palestinians has also trickled down into the Israeli leftist parties, especially Labor. In the 2009 elections, which were the first shot fired to mark the beginning of the Netanyahu era, which has continued for 11 years and counting, the party dwindled in size to become the fourth largest party in the Knesset, and for the first time in its history was not one of the two largest factions in parliament. After the Labor Party’s defeat in the elections, its leader Barak chose to join Netanyahu’s government, only to split the party down the middle two years later in order to stay with Netanyahu, bringing the party and the image of the Zionist left to unprecedented lows.

The historic nationwide social protest that erupted in the summer of 2011, sending hundreds of thousands of Israelis to the streets to demonstrate against the high cost of living in Israel and the growth of economic gaps, was seen by the Labor party leadership as an opportunity to abandon the sinking “peace ship” and return to the its former socialist identity that had been cast aside in the early 1990s. The election of a former journalist for social, labor and economic affairs, Shelly Yachimovich, as party leader, led to an abandonment of the foreign and security policy agenda and a greater focus on social issues such as housing prices and economic gaps in Israeli society.



Israel Housing Protests in Tel Aviv on August 27, 2011: Tens of thousands of Israelis took to the streets on Saturday night to participate in demonstrations protesting the high cost of living in Israel | [Source](#)

The Labor party's attempt to evade and blur any clear position on foreign and security policy issues, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, gradually led to the disappearance of the public debate regarding the future of the conflict as the main divisive issue between the big parties in Israeli politics. Due to the internalization of the belief that the Peace Camp's agenda was no longer relevant and in light of the fact that Israeli left-wing voters, mostly belonging to the upper-middle class, did not flock to the new-old Labor party's social-democratic branding under Yachimovich's leadership, the party base continued to shrink while its former supporters sought a new political home.

The Labor party's attempt to evade and blur any clear position on foreign and security policy issues gradually led to the disappearance of the public debate regarding the future of the conflict as the main divisive issue between the big parties in Israeli politics

In her essay *[“In Search of the Center,”](#)* public opinion expert Dr. Dahlia Scheindlin traces the phenomenon of centrist politics in Israel including the identity of the parties and their constituents. According to Dr. Scheindlin, there have been two key types of centrist politics in Israel in the past few decades. The first has focused on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while promoting a pragmatic and hawkish attitude that was still open to territorial concessions; the second type of centrist parties has sought to ignore the conflict, or play it down on their political agenda, focusing instead on other political themes such as the cost of living. The common denominator for most of the centrist voters, however, is that they have migrated over from the left-wing camp after having given up on their former parties:

“Most of the increase in self-identified centrists in the 2000s came from people who once identified as left wing. Surveys repeatedly show that they share many basic views with the left but abandoned that label in anger, fear or simply despair”

Election videos that had Israeli voters try to imagine Netanyahu’s political rivals answering the “red phone” in the middle of the night were aimed at the soft belly of the general-free center-left camp

The break of the Zionist left into a number of “center-left” parties alongside the gradual disappearance of the generals from those parties, which since 2009 have predominantly focused on social and economic issues, while intentionally keeping a “safe distance” from foreign affairs, security policy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, alongside the restoration of personal security under Netanyahu’s leadership, paved the way for the establishment of the Israeli right, and of Netanyahu in particular, as the sole authority on handling foreign and security matters. Election videos that had Israeli voters try to imagine Netanyahu’s political rivals answering the “red phone” in the middle of the night were aimed at the soft belly of the general-free center-left camp.



Screenshot from the Likud [campaign video](#) in 2015, depicting Livni and Herzog of the Zionist Union as scared of answering the Red Phone (secured line reserved for matters of foreign and security policy)

At the same time, the Israeli right, with help by some of the centrist parties that sought to differentiate themselves from the left, continued to advance the delegitimizing and derisively dismissive campaign of the “Left,” casting it as unpatriotic by identifying it with the peace paradigm (now a non-issue among the Israeli public), and associating it with human rights organizations, portrayed as placing Palestinian lives ahead of Jewish ones. Over the ten years of Netanyahu’s rule, the term “leftist” might be likened to a punching bag tethered to the side of any politician who dares challenge the right, while such politicians themselves struggle to break free of the label, cornered into explaining why they are *not* left-wing and defending their patriotism.

Civil society organizations, which comprised the heart of the peace camp in the 90s, became the scapegoat of Israeli politics, bringing to an informal close the chapter of collaboration between the Peace Camp and the Zionist left-wing parties. The notion of advancing a diplomatic agreement with the Palestinians fell from Israeli political agenda, and the Peace Camp retreated to the heart of civil society, from where it had originated in the late 80s.

From Peace to Separation

“We are not seeking a happy marriage with the Palestinians, but a fair divorce – And this is what the Two-States solution is about”

Amos Oz on [*J-Street Convention*](#) in 2012

Amos Oz speaks on the opening night of J Street 2012: Making History [Conference]

The Israeli Peace Camp was never homogeneous; rather, it was an ecosystem of countless organizations and initiatives that focused on different issues and forms of action, bound by their shared ambition to promote a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians including the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. With the Peace Camp's retreat from politics back to the realm of civil society, the controversies and divisions between the various actors resurfaced, making it difficult for them to speak in a united voice and collaborate effectively. In his essay [*“Give Separation A Chance,”*](#) Dr. Shaul Arieli describes how the dissolution of the peace paradigm of the 1990s led to the disintegration of the peace camp into groups that pull in different, and at times, contradictory directions. According to Arieli, there is, however, one thread uniting most of the different actors, namely a shift in their objective from promoting peace to advocating for physical separation from the Palestinians in the West Bank. Arieli writes:

“Mutual distrust, the stalled negotiations, Europe’s weakness in the face of a growing right wing, civil wars in the Arab world and Trump’s leadership have combined to drive an ideological shift in the Israeli “peace camp”: from seeking a peace agreement, to bilateral or unilateral separation from the Palestinians in the West Bank”

Thus, despite the ostensible continuity in the declared objectives of the civil society organizations that have worked to advocate for the two-states solution over the past decades, a profound shift has occurred. While in the 1990s the promotion of the two-state solution was framed as part of a utopian, or at least positive vision that included transforming a negative situation of ongoing violent conflict into a positive situation of peace, today, the main messages are mainly negative in nature and draw on the necessity of preventing a dystopian scenario, e.g. potential escalation of the conflict, the undermining of Israeli democracy, losing the Jewish majority in the country as a result of annexing territories, or international pressure (in the pre-Trump era). Psychologically, the difference between the two framings is huge, if to follow Amos Oz's metaphor, comparable to the difference between reaching into one's pockets when getting married versus spending money on a divorce lawyer. It is understandably less complex to rally support for the former than for the latter.

While in the 1990s the promotion of the two-state solution was framed as part of a Utopian vision, today, the key messages are negative and draw on the necessity of preventing a dystopian scenario

In his essay [*“Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?”*](#) Meron Rapoport argues that the promotion of the alarmist discourse in which the Palestinians are often depicted as a “monolithic threat” that needs to be put

behind a fence, has only served to further undermine the Israeli left and to consolidate the right-wing narrative. Rapoport writes:

“A fundamental tenet of the separation philosophy is that Israel cannot trust the Palestinians and must rely on itself. Therefore, the argument goes, Israel must strive to separate from the Palestinians as soon as possible, before they become a majority. [...] Peddling this urgency has reinforced the belief among Jewish-Israelis that, as the Palestinians cannot be trusted, there is no partner for an agreement. If indeed there is no partner for an agreement, maintaining the status quo appears to be the best alternative”

The negative discourse that portrays the Palestinians as a threat that must be disposed of not only harmed the cause of the two-state advocates, according to Rapoport, but also fueled the right-wing demonization campaign against the Palestinian population within Israel. The Zionist left’s doomsday scenario, according to Rapoport, in which equal rights might be granted to Palestinians who are branded as the ultimate “other” plays to the hands of the right and their intimidation-based discourse, while also dividing the Israeli center-left camp around the question of the very legitimacy of cooperating with the Arab Joint List (and effectively impeding the option of forming a center-left government).

Controversial ‘Divorce the Palestinians’ Israeli Media Campaign Explained

The subsiding of the public debate around the conflict over the past decade has made room for the issue of Jewish-Arab relations within Israel to emerge as the new dividing line between left and right. This issue figured prominently in the series of election campaigns held during the past year. The rise of the Joint Arab List as a prominent political actor has transformed the Israeli Palestinians into a significant player in the parliamentary arena whereby it is practically impossible to establish an alternative government to that of Netanyahu without it. The right-wing slogan: “Bibi or Tibi” (referring to Arab-Muslim MK Ahmad Tibi) aimed precisely at the “Achilles’ heel” of the center parties, which were inundated with challenges from the press questioning the authenticity and viability of their pledge to pose an alternative to Netanyahu without collaborating with the Joint Arab List.

The leadership of the Israeli-Palestinian public is currently at a crossroads between investing in Jewish-Arab partnership, or the independent promotion of sectoral interests

The reluctance to support a partnership between the Arab parties and the Zionist center-left parties is, however, not only the legacy of the latter. As Ravit Hecht points out in her essay, many Palestinian Israelis who now choose to define themselves through their Palestinian identity, prefer right-wing rule in Israel over the Zionist left, which they believe wronged their ancestors more severely than the Israeli right.

In his essay [*“\(Im\)possible Alliance,”*](#) the poet Marzouk Alhalabi reviews the key developments in the relationship between the Zionist left and the Palestinian public in Israel and concludes that the latter, which was subjected to intensive de-legitimization in the two decades since the events of October 2000 will not be waiting for the Zionist left parties’ stamp of approval, especially given their waning influence in Israeli politics. According to Alhalabi, the leadership of the Israeli-Palestinian public is currently at a crossroads between investing in Jewish-Arab partnership, or the independent promotion of sectoral interests, after the fashion of other parties in the Israeli parliament, while renouncing their automatic affiliation with the Zionist left.

The Tribal Left

The gradual demise of the Zionist left parties was, however, not only a result of the decline of the “peace paradigm” on the conceptual level. On the demographic level, too, Israel has changed substantially since the 1990s. The emigration from the former Soviet Union of a whopping one million new citizens (in a country with a population of roughly 4.5 million in 1990) along with the rapid population growth in the ultra-

Orthodox and Arab sectors has led to a significant change in the distribution of power in the Israeli parliament and the rise of sectoral identity politics.

In her essay ["Could There be an Israeli Martin Luther King?"](#) Professor Eva Illouz writes that while the ideational axis dividing left from right has changed in recent decades, there has always existed yet another axis of separation between the Israeli political camps, based on identity politics. According to Illouz, the State of Israel was established not only as a Jewish state, but as a fundamentally separatist project, which systematically marginalized all population groups other than Ashkenazi Jews, including Jews of Arab descent and Arab Palestinians. This ethnic dichotomy laid the foundations for the resulting political power struggles in Israel in subsequent decades that have increasingly assumed the form of arm-wrestling between different "tribes" and interest groups rather than ideological debates about how to best design a common Israeli public space. Illouz demonstrates in her essay the detrimental effect of identity politics on the Israeli public sphere in the absence of a universal secular platform:

"In the same way the state was thickly Jewish, it was also thickly Ashkenazi – in control over most or all centers of power. The Israeli left never fought for a universal conception of citizenship (even though Ben-Gurion extended citizenship to Arabs) because it was shaped by leftist ideas inspired by Russian socialism in its organization of production rather than by leftist ideas in the spirit of liberalism, which bestowed rights and freedoms"

The right-wing, which spent the first thirty years following the establishment of the state in the opposition, capitalized on the "tribal" alienation of the marginalized groups, and above all the Jews from Arab background, effectively rallying them around their resentment of the Ashkenazi elite, which had excluded them from positions of influence. Thus, while ideological battles were raging between Socialists and Communists, from the perspective of some Mizrahi Jews, it was the Ashkenazi elite arguing over ideology while finding a common language to keep them away from the centers of power.

While the ideational axis dividing left from right has changed in recent decades, there has always existed yet another axis of separation between the Israeli political camps, based on identity politics

This came to a head in the national election campaigns of 1981, widely viewed as the most tense and violent in the history of Israeli politics, in which Shimon Peres of Labor ran against Menachem Begin on behalf of the Likud. More than in any prior election year, these elections were characterized by a strong correlation between ethnic origin and the respective voting pattern. From the Mizrahi perspective, Shimon Peres, who transitioned from hawk to dove, was seen all along as part of the elitist Ashkenazi establishment that systematically marginalized the Mizrahim from positions of influence and from the public space regardless of his political position on dialogue with the PLO. Most Ashkenazim rallied behind Peres and the Alignment ("Maarakh," an earlier incarnation of the Labor party), while the Mizrahim rallied behind Begin and Likud.

The fact that at that time the Zionist left was not affiliated with the Peace Camp in any way did not appear to have mattered to any of the sides, certainly not for the Mizrahim, who were guided foremost by identity-based alienation from the Zionist left. Later, however, this led to an exceptional situation where support for peace became a social status marker. Professor Illouz writes:

"Peace became the cultural marker and coat of arms of a specific social group, Ashkenazim, who – curiously enough – never considered that recruiting Mizrahim to their cause was important for both moral and political reasons. Israel must be one of the few countries in the world in which the ideal of peace functioned as a status symbol and social marker, as a mark of distinction. Because peace and human rights have been, historically, promoted by a social group that has retained its class, cultural and ethnic privileges, the Peace Camp became marked as the camp of a specific ethnic, educational, and social group"



Yemenites go to Aden | [Wikipedia](#)

Rebuilding an Alternative

Given the failure to mobilize the voters of the Zionist left of the 1990s around either peace with the Palestinians or the social-economic banner, and in the absence of any other political message, the center-left parties began to focus their efforts on forging technical connections between the different parties that accommodated the 1990s voters of the Zionist Left, under the lowest common denominator of ending Netanyahu's rule.

The tactic of stitching together different center-left parties during the last three rounds of elections, allowed Blue-and-White to unite all Israelis who sought to bring an end to the Netanyahu era. The strategy succeeded by maximizing the list's number of seats in the Knesset, effectively preventing Netanyahu from forming a government during three successive elections. However, since the alliance members neither shared a common ideological outlook nor bothered to coordinate an orderly partnership of interests with other actors outside Netanyahu's "right-wing bloc," they could not form an alternative government. The result was that in the third round of elections held in March 2020, when the parties that pledged not to join yet another Netanyahu-led government won a slim majority of 51.6 percent of the votes, Netanyahu's rival, Benny Gantz, was some combination of unable and unwilling to create a coalition with the other parties, especially with the Joint Arab list. He therefore preferred to dismantle the Blue-and-White platform he had championed for three consecutive election rounds under the promise of bringing an end to Netanyahu's rule, and instead joined Netanyahu's fifth government (with a promise of rotation for the premiership after a year and a half).

The center-left parties began to focus their efforts on forging technical connections under the lowest common denominator of ending Netanyahu's rule

Gantz's defection did not come as a surprise to all. In his article [*"Progressive Pivot,"*](#) founder of the Center

for Liberal Democracy, Dr. Hillel Ben Sasson writes about the urgent need to rebuild the Israeli left around a common vision, this time not as the Peace Camp, but rather, as the democratic camp. This does not mean abandoning the principles of the Israeli Peace Camp, Ben Sasson emphasizes. The pursuit of ending the occupation and resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ought to be a substantial pillar of the new Israeli left, but it cannot be its only issue.

Addressing the role of identity politics in the right-left divide in Israel, Ben Sasson states that the democratic camp will emphasize an inclusive approach, open to all members of Israeli society who identify with the values of liberal democracy:

“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)”

The demise of the left has led many civil society organizations to rethink how to advance the vision of peace in the current state of paralysis. In her article [*“Democracy Now,”*](#) Shaqued Morag, Executive Director of the veteran Peace Now organization describes how the organization is adapting to changes in Israeli society that have affected it over the past three decades:

“The loyal core of activists from the 1990s has not cultivated a strong group of successors. For Israeli young adults who grew up under right-wing rule, the idea of peace seems distant and even preposterous, and they often dismiss any reference to the subject. Exposing future leaders to the ideology and activities of Peace Now is a formidable challenge. What can engage young Israelis? How do we battle stereotypes and entrenched ways of thinking, after years of incitement against the peace camp? How can the dominant narrative of “managing the conflict” be changed?”

It was precisely the understanding that the label “Left” is linked to identity politics that erect unnecessary walls between potential partners from different demographics within Israeli society, that prompted the women’s grassroots movement “Women Wage Peace” to decouple the pursuit of a negotiated peace agreement from its association with the left. The organization consequently presents itself as a grassroots movement with tens of thousands of members from the right, center and left of the political spectrum, Jews and Arabs, religious and secular, united in the demand for a mutually binding non-violent accord between Israelis and Palestinians. One of the founders of the movement, journalist and publicist Anat Saragusti, writes in her essay [*“Women Waging Peace”*](#):

“None of our goals is innovative or revolutionary. Yet something about this movement, with its certain degree of naivete, is refreshing. After years of watching the Israeli peace camp slowly shrink and collapse into musty paradigms – “right or left,” “for or against a Palestinian state,” “for or against two states,” “for or against withdrawing from the territories” – a new young player has entered the field, determined to tear down entrenched notions. A grassroots movement that does not accept equating support for an agreement with the left and opposition necessarily with the right”

The [*Anahnu Movement \(Together Movement\)*](#), as well, promotes an innovative approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that focuses on both changing the dynamics between the parties, as well as engaging the various parts of the Israeli society. The movement believes that formal negotiations are not enough, and that the Israeli public needs to be engaged as part of any peace process that would necessarily have far-reaching effects on the future of the country and its people. *Anahnu* thus employs a double strategy: working top-down, by holding high-level advocacy meetings, but also bottom-up, conducting unique political education projects that promote nuanced understanding of the different narratives of the various segments within Israeli society.

In addition to the peace organizations operating in Israel, there are also initiatives that operate in the international sphere. J Street, founded in 2008, is a pro-Israel and pro-peace advocacy organization, targeting various stakeholders in the US with the aim of making sure that American policy towards Israel also focuses on the promotion of the two-state solution alongside the continuation of its ongoing support of the State of Israel and its security interests. In their essay [*"A Large Tent or a Divided Community,"*](#) Director of the Israeli J Street branch, Yael Patir and Researcher Alissa Symon, describe the interplay between the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and Israeli-US relations over the past decades as well as their reciprocal influences in shaping one another.

Concluding Remarks

The gradual demise of the Zionist-left parties, perceived by their constituents as no longer relevant, is the result of the conflation of the Zionist left with the Peace Camp, and the consolidation of the narratives, according to which Israel is a villa in the Middle Eastern jungle and there is no Palestinian partner for peace. Labor's attempt to shake off its association with the Peace Camp following its historical defeat in 2009 by returning to its original social-democratic foundations and distancing itself from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while occasionally joining the political bashing of "the Left," were seen by the public as an admission of guilt. This led to a further devaluation of the public debate around the conflict, casting the mere discussion of resolving it as "leftist," i.e. detached, messianic, or even traitorous. The decision to re-assume the old-new socialist branding also alienated many of the Left's traditional voters, who belonged to the upper-middle class.

The Zionist left continued to shrink, as its former base found a new political home among the centrist parties. These parties did not belong to the right wing, but were also not associated with the perceived failures of the peace and socialist agendas of the left. Furthermore, the tangible improvement in the level of personal security under Netanyahu's rule over the past decade alongside the simultaneous disappearance of the generals from the leadership of the center and left parties, who chose to avoid challenging his foreign and security policy agenda, paved the way for the branding of the Israeli right, and Netanyahu in particular, as the exclusive competent authority for handling matters of foreign and security policy and as an emblem of stability, and even prosperity.

The Israeli right, for its part (with the help of some of the center parties) continued to advance the smear campaign against the dwindling Leftist camp, presenting it as anti-patriotic and a danger to national security. Civil society organizations that formed the core of the Peace Camp in the 1990s became the main scapegoat of Israeli politics, while the left-wing brand became synonymous with those seeking to "undermine the state." The delegitimization campaign against the left proved to be a particularly effective means of strengthening right-wing rule. The label "left" has become a derogatory term, which is now pinned on any political actor marked as potentially in opposition to Netanyahu, whether the contender is ideological or political. The delegitimization campaign relies on the dual meaning of the term "Left" in popular Israeli discourse: On the conceptual level, the term "Left" stands for the "peace paradigm," or in short, willingness to jeopardize Israeli security interests in the name of "noble causes," while at the level of identity, the term "Left" stands for the Ashkenazi elite that systematically excluded the Mizrahim from the avenues of influence.

On the conceptual level, the accusatory labeling of any political opponent as belonging to the "left" has trapped Netanyahu's political rivals in a situation where they were forced to either defend the last known declared positions of the Zionist left from the 1990s i.e. the concept of "land for peace" while confronting skeptical public opinion; or to try and shake off the "leftist" label pinned on to them, thus enhancing the legitimacy of the right-wing ideology and Netanyahu's brand in particular as its sole representative. Accordingly, it has become rather likely to hear the term "left" voiced rather by actors from the right-wing, who employ it to chastise their political rivals as a danger to national security, while the elements labeled as

leftists are forced to take up a defensive position, often trying to deny the political association attributed to them in an attempt to gain legitimacy to be able to voice their opinion.

On the identity level, the use of the term “leftist” has helped Netanyahu rally Likud’s Mizrahi voters for whom the “left” functions as a red flag, symbolizing the Ashkenazi elite and the representation of the utter “other.” The significance of the identity dimension can explain the fact that since Netanyahu’s rise to power in 2009, the Likud party has no longer seen the need to publish a political platform ahead of the elections. Instead, Likud’s campaigns during the Netanyahu era so far have focused on a few polarizing messages, e.g. “Us or Them,” “Strong Right or Weak Left” and in the last round of elections “Bibi or Tibi.” These election slogans have framed any political actors outside Netanyahu’s right-wing bloc as member of the secular and Ashkenazi elite that might jeopardize Israeli national security interests. The message between the lines for potential right-wing voters reads clear: If Netanyahu and the Right fail to win the elections, the Ashkenazi elites of the founding days will return to positions of power, sending the Mizrahim yet again to the back seat, while surrendering national security assets to the “Arabs.”

The double catch of the center-left parties, with their identification with the outdated peace paradigm, and their designation as representatives of the Ashkenazi elite, sheds light on the conduct of the Blue-and-White and Labor parties during the past three election campaigns. For Blue-and-White, opposing Netanyahu meant being automatically framed as belonging to the “Left” camp, regardless of their political agenda, i.e. the ones who are willing to jeopardize Israel security by “surrendering territories to the Arabs”. To circumvent this branding, Blue-and-White attempted to shake off any characteristics that might resemble “leftist” traits, selecting a jingle for Benny Gantz’s original platform stating that they were neither right nor left, while introducing a party leadership that included three former IDF chiefs of staff and expressing support for the annexation of large portions of the West Bank (despite allegedly [opposing such moves](#) behind closed doors). Designating a line-up of generals to be the party’s presenters while subscribing to the idea that literally means the opposite of the Zionist left’s formula of “land for peace,” Blue-and-White hoped to circumvent the accusation of being closeted lefties.

At the same time, Labor chairman Amir Peretz, strongly opposed joining the only other Zionist left party, Meretz, even though his party hovered in the polls just barely above the electoral threshold (Meretz, itself, was also flirting with the threshold). In such a dramatic elections campaign, where the failure of even one leftist party to receive the minimum required for entering the Knesset could mean the establishment of yet another narrow right-wing government, many were dismayed by the willingness of Labor chairman Peretz to take this gamble. Nevertheless, Peretz, like Blue-and-White, did not want to associate the Labor party with the one party that above all else symbolized the Ashkenazi elite and the Peace Camp, and instead chose to merge with Orly Levy-Abekasis, a Mizrahi politician from the periphery (like himself) and the daughter of former senior Likud member David Levy, who is widely perceived as a symbol of the discrimination against Mizrahi figures in Israeli politics, since he was looked down on by the establishment and was even the butt of a genre known as “David Levy jokes.”

Peretz’s strategy in trying to break the Labor Party’s association with the Ashkenazi elite and its identification with peace, and attempting to appeal to the Mizrahi Likud voters in the Israeli periphery was based on the assumption that Mizrahi right-wing voters in the Israeli social and geographical periphery, though they shunned association with the Ashkenazi peace camp, were in fact well aligned with the positions of the left with respect to social and economic policies, at least, certainly much more than with Netanyahu’s neo-liberal party.

And yet, the attempt by Blue-and-White and the Labor Party to tow a narrow line within the discursive framework set by Netanyahu, failed miserably. They did not convince Mizrahi voters that the Labor party under a leadership of “their own” was a worthy alternative to the Likud, while Blue-and-White, comprising a patchwork of political actors with no unifying ideological thread, had created a paralyzed political entity that could not express any clear-cut position on significant political issues for fear of falling apart, which eventually did in fact happen.

The alliance between the Zionist left and the peace camp, which paved the way for both to a position of national leadership in the 1990s, was effectively framed by the right in a way that ushered in their collapse. On the conceptual level, the Zionist left parties have tied themselves to the peace paradigm that has lost its relevance among the Israeli public, while on the identity level, the peace camp has linked its fate with the Israeli Ashkenazi elite, ironically leading to the marking of the pursuit of peace as divisive topic that is associated with ethnic tensions within Israeli society.

The consequent attempts by the center-left parties to break up the alliance with the peace camp over the past decade while retaining the masses of supporters who gave their votes in the 1992 elections to the Zionist left parties under the promise of peace only helped to consolidate the right-wing rule. In the absence of a compelling alternative narrative to the peace paradigm, the question around the leader's identity started to take center stage: Who could possibly replace Netanyahu? "There is simply no candidate of his stature who could compete with him", the pundits declared. And so, instead of trying to build an inclusive and conceptual alternative to Netanyahu's narrative, center and left representatives focused on finding a candidate with the right credentials to rally their supporters, who were still awaiting the magical arrival of a successor to Rabin and who could restore the leftist camp to its days of glory in the 1990s. The center-left's surrender to the right-wing's framing of its positions as irrelevant while foregoing the attempt to challenge the right-wing's ideology and politics were exemplified by Gantz's signature silence in the months following his announcement that he would be joining the political race; he was celebrated as heir to the throne before even uttering a single word.

The bitter disappointment of the many left-wing voters who repeatedly gave their vote to the new "Rabin" only to be betrayed to his joining Netanyahu's government is understandable, but the writing was on the wall. With Netanyahu's power and popularity rising to new heights despite a series of indictments, perhaps the realization that in the absence of ideological alternatives, Netanyahu and the right will continue to prevail, could be getting closer. And yet, despite the helplessness and paralysis crippling the political representatives outside Netanyahu's bloc, support for the positions of the left still enjoys an absolute majority of the Israeli public in all the key issues as can be seen from numerous public opinion polls. The Israeli public has also showed in a series of election campaigns that the right-wing camp does not have the backing of the majority of Israeli society. The Zionist left parties may have stepped out of the spotlights for now, but their positions still enjoy broad support among the Israeli public; it is now time to dare and offer these Israelis a new and compelling vision.