

# The Lost Decade of the Israeli Peace Camp

By Ksenia Svetlova

Now that Israeli annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank is a commonplace notion, it seems almost impossible that just twelve years ago, Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) were making significant progress in the US-sponsored bilateral peace negotiations. Since then, the stalemate in the talks has become the new normal, under three consecutive governments headed by Benjamin Netanyahu. The Palestinians, led by Mahmoud Abbas and his government, have been cast as “diplomatic terrorists” for asking the international community for help. The Israeli peace camp has been subjected to a vicious smear campaign that has shaken its self-esteem and ruined its chances of winning over the public.

This systematic smearing of Israeli and Palestinian two-staters has paid off. In the April 2019 elections, Israel’s progressive Meretz party teetered on the edge of the electoral barrier while Labor, once the ruling party, gained only six mandates (5% of the votes). The centrist Blue and White, a party led by ex-army chief Benny Gantz, carefully avoided any mention of loaded terms such as “the two-state solution” or “evacuation of settlements”, only calling vaguely to “advance peace” – as part of Israel’s new political vocabulary, which no longer includes “occupation” or even “the West Bank”. Despite offering no clear alternative to the peace option it managed to successfully derail, the Israeli right under Netanyahu has been in power for over a decade in a row, since 2009.

**Israel’s left-wing parties are fighting to survive; the Palestinians are continuing their fruitless efforts to engage the international community;** and the horrid reality of a single state, in which different groups have different political and civil rights, seems just around the corner. How did things deteriorate so fast? This article offers insights into several processes that combined to transform Israel’s political landscape over the past decade.

## To Kill a Mockingbird

Eight years ago, shortly before the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly, Avigdor Lieberman, then Israel’s foreign minister, introduced a new epithet for PA Chair Abbas. In response to a government decision to transfer funds to the PA, Lieberman said of Abbas: “Everything he does is pure diplomatic terror. Between diplomatic terror and conventional terror, diplomatic terror is more serious” (*Haaretz*, September 13, 2012). Although Lieberman was probably not the first to apply this term to Abbas, he was the one who hammered it into the public psyche. Technically, he admitted that Abbas and his PA were not engaged in conventional terror, unlike his predecessor Yasser Arafat and Hamas. Yet he accused Abbas of something worse than rocket attacks, bus bombings and using firearms against Israelis: “diplomatic terror”.

This line was soon adopted by Prime Minister Netanyahu. By the fall of 2014, a few months after the US-sponsored talks between Israel and the PA collapsed, he too compared Abbas to Hamas. “This (attack) is a direct result of the incitement being led by Hamas and Abbas, incitement the international community is irresponsibly ignoring,” Netanyahu declared, referring to the deadly terror attack in a Jerusalem synagogue on November 20, 2014. By lumping Hamas and Abbas together, Netanyahu made it clear that despite the differences between them, he believed neither was a suitable partner for peace. This was at once a domestic and international ploy that sent an indirect message to President Barack Obama, who kept pushing for resuming talks. Yet Netanyahu’s claim was sharply rejected by none other than Yoram Cohen, head of the Shin Bet. “Abbas isn’t interested in terror and isn’t pushing for terror, not even under the table,” Cohen told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

In the following years, many top IDF and Shin Bet officials repeated this idea, while Israeli politicians from

the right and sometimes from the center-left, such as Yair Lapid, lashed out against the PA leadership and specifically against Abbas. By successfully framing the PA as instigators and supporters of terrorism in the Israeli mainstream discourse, Lieberman and Netanyahu destroyed the Israeli peace camp's trump card – the possibility of negotiating a peace treaty with the Palestinians. In 2000, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak had already weakened this card by declaring that “there is no partner” (for peace on the Palestinian side). As of 2009, this phrase was replaced by the axiom that “the Israeli left's Palestinian partner for peace, i.e. PA Chairman Abbas, is a terrorist”, a thesis repeated by every right-wing politician, MK or minister in Knesset debates as well as in the media.

The success of framing the PA as instigators and supporters of terrorism dealt a severe blow to the Peace Camp

The rationale behind the slogan was simple: If Abbas is a diplomatic terrorist who also instigates and supports conventional terrorism, it is impossible to hope for a political solution with him, let alone withdraw from any part of the Occupied Territories. Abbas, whose security apparatus continued to work closely with the IDF and the Shin Bet to counter terrorism, was also accused of being “weak” and “unable to take fateful decisions”.

Delegitimizing lasting ties between the Israeli left and the PA was just one part of a deliberate smear campaign aimed at destroying the peace camp

It became increasingly difficult for the Israeli peace camp to defend political dialogue with the PA. In February 2014, an initiative by Labor Party MK Hilik Bar to bring 300 Israeli students to Ramallah to meet Abbas was received neutrally by the media and politicians. Just two years later, meetings between Israeli politicians and Abbas triggered major verbal assaults in the Knesset and the media. Only a handful of MKs – mostly from Meretz and a few from the Zionist Union (a parliamentary faction formed between Labor and ha-Tnua party) – dared to openly meet with Palestinians to maintain dialogue. Delegitimizing lasting ties between the Israeli left and the PA was just one part of a deliberate smear campaign aimed at destroying the peace camp and the very concept of giving up territories in return for peace.

## **From Bilateralism to Internationalism**

On November 29, 2012, thousands of Palestinians gathered in Ramallah to watch Abbas' address to the UN General Assembly. Palestine was then voted in as a “non-member observer state”, with a clear majority of 138 in favor and 9 against. Many Palestinians dreamed this would be a historic step towards their long-awaited sovereignty. Little did they imagine that eight years later, in 2020, they would be no closer to independence.

In March 2014, shortly before the talks headed by former US Secretary of State John Kerry collapsed, Abbas publicly cautioned that unless the negotiations addressed core issues, he would “hand back the keys” and turn to international institutions. At the time, parting with bilateralism and casting the conflict back into the international arena appeared comforting and reasonable to many Palestinians. By April 1, 2014, Abbas had decided to join a host of international organizations. In 2015, the PA joined the ICC, raising many concerns in Israel. Several pro-Palestinian resolutions regarding the definition and protection of holy places in Jerusalem and Hebron were adopted by UNESCO; in FIFA, Jibril Rajoub waged a campaign against Israel on the football field.

**Internationalizing the conflict was by no means a new strategy for the Palestinians. Since the Palestinian national movement was born, its leaders have repeatedly called for various forms of international support**

– whether Western, Soviet, Arab or Muslim. They have turned to the Arab league, the OIC, the UN, and many other international bodies. The PLO itself was created by the Arab League, while Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser handpicked its chief – lawyer and diplomat Ahmad Shukairi. Then Moscow became the PLO’s premier sponsor and supporter. The Palestinian issue was always championed by Arab, Muslim, African and non-aligned countries in various UN bodies. Back in 1974, the PLO issued a ten-point plan that stressed the need to engage with the broader international community. Dozens of UN Security Council resolutions have called for protecting the individual and collective rights of Palestinians, including Resolutions 194, 242, 3375, 3376 and 3240.

### **Internationalizing the conflict was by no means a new strategy for the Palestinians**

Only after the Oslo Accords were signed did the Palestinians opt for a bilateral approach over engaging with the global community and pressuring Israeli via international bodies and institutions. This strategy lasted throughout the years of negotiations between Tzipi Livni and Abu-Alaa’, when the Palestinians preferred direct talks to internationalism. A few years into Netanyahu’s right-wing government, the PA leadership made a strategic decision: in the absence of a breakthrough in negotiations, they would advance pressure on Israel through international institutions. Abbas explained that this old-new strategy was the only possible step given the continued stalemate in talks. Israel watched these moves carefully and its leaders seemed to be concerned by the PA’s new strategy. As mentioned earlier, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman accused Abbas of waging “diplomatic terrorism”, while others claimed he was avoiding “direct negotiations” in order to force Israel into a solution without making any concessions. In September 2012, shortly before he travelled to New York to address the UN General Assembly, Abbas explained that his goal was not to isolate Israel or delegitimize it: “We want to isolate the legitimization of the occupation. Israel is a recognized state, no one can delegitimize it, and that is also not our goal”. The explanation largely fell on deaf ears in Israel.

According to the director of the INSS, Gen. (ret.) Amos Yadlin, “this strategy, which focuses on a persistent, systematic effort to blacken Israel in international institutions, undermine its legitimacy, and deny the historic national connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, has scored several notable achievements in recent years”. Zehava Galon, former leader of the progressive Meretz party, asserts that the Palestinians were forced to appeal to international bodies as they were left out in the cold by Netanyahu’s respective governments, with no hope for successful direct negotiations. According to Galon, Netanyahu believes in two things: personal survival and conflict management. Abbas is a partner and we could achieve progress if negotiations took place. As leader of Meretz, I supported Abbas’ decision to turn to international institutions. What else could he do? Also, the one who contributed the most to the internationalization of the conflict was Netanyahu himself.

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Eran Etzion, former Deputy National Security Advisor and the founder of the Yashar party, agrees that Abbas' new strategy was born of despair: There are only two forms of pressure available to the Palestinians: violence and international pressure. **Israel has many means available to it to pressure the other side, while the options available to Palestinians are limited.** Since the very beginning of his reign, Abbas refused to use violence, so he was basically left with only one choice. Yet many left-wing leaders and top negotiators who spent hundreds of hours searching for the holy grail of a resolution to the conflict begged to differ. Tzipi Livni, who was minister of justice under Netanyahu and handled the negotiations with Abbas in 2013-2014, posted at the time on Facebook: "Instead of following the path of negotiations, which would have enabled the creation of a Palestinian state, Abbas decided to spend years on his demand for the UN to set a date for statehood".

Gilead Sher, who served as head of bureau and policy coordinator for PM Barak and as co-chief negotiator in 1999-2001 at the Camp David summit and the Taba talks, believes that Abbas intended to internationalize the conflict from the beginning – in order to try and gain outside what he could not achieve in the negotiation room: "The internationalization of the conflict did not begin in 2011. In fact, the Palestinians always wanted to delegate the mission of negotiating or pressuring Israel to the international community. But since 2011, we are talking about a well-planned policy on four different levels:

1. **Diplomatic network:** Although the Palestinians always sought international support for an independent state, after 2011 they increased the volume and scope of international relations.
2. **Legal battle:** Turning to international institutions to wage lawfare against Israel and its policies.
3. **Public pressure and BDS:** The idea was to limit Israel's freedom of operation abroad.
4. **The medium is the message:** The Palestinians used international media to switch from delegitimizing the occupation to delegitimizing Israel and demonizing the nation."

Sher believes that this strategy was designed to evade negotiations and push Israel into further concessions while giving nothing in return. During the Second Intifada, the Palestinians initiated a violent outbreak in order to create public pressure and push Israel up against the wall, and then they turned to internationalizing the conflict. By doing so, they created basic mistrust and a barrier to understanding in the negotiations, especially as neither government really wanted to get anywhere, says Sher who recently authored the book *The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations, 1999-2001*.

**Palestinian victories in the UN and among other international bodies were, however, mostly symbolic and short-lived**

Palestinian victories in the UN and among other international bodies were, however, mostly symbolic and short-lived. Not much has changed on the ground. Recognition of Palestine as a non-member state did not help remove checkpoints, military camps or settlements. Once Trump took office, the Palestinians found their policy of internationalization meaningless in the face of an unfriendly administration. Ramallah's isolation under the Trump administration has weakened both the PA and two-state supporters in Israel.

## Peace under Pressure

Election campaigns in Israel have never been a meek affair, but a video released by the Likud party in February 2015 hit a new low. A group of militants are seen driving a pickup van with an "Anyone but Netanyahu" bumper sticker. They pull up to another car and one of them asks the driver in Hebrew, with a heavy Arab accent, "How do we get to Jerusalem?" "Turn left," he answers, motioning with his hand. The clip ends with a warning: "The left will succumb to terrorism". The message is clear. The ad targeted leaders of the centre-left list "Zionist Union" Yitzhak Herzog and Tzipi Livni – two Israelis who served their

country for many years in military and public service. This was soon followed by an even more vicious campaign against human rights organizations, left-wing politicians, singers, writers, and actors. Several months after the elections, an extremist right-wing organization called Im Tirzu, notorious for its public attacks on left-wing academics and organizations, launched a campaign against four Israelis working for leading human rights organizations. A video accusing them of being foreign agents spread quickly via conventional and new media. All four received phone and online threats. In early 2016, Im Tirzu launched another smear campaign – this time against well-known Israeli artists, actors, and writers who still dared to express pro-peace, pro-democracy views. Finally, by the end of May 2019, the organization – which reportedly receives state funding – published a list of 80 Israeli university professors who have criticized government policy or called for ending the occupation.

A significant part of this violent campaign focused on Breaking the Silence – a small NGO founded by former IDF soldiers who served in the Occupied Territories and were exposed to the injustices wrought by the occupation. Right-wing politicians have dedicated hundreds of hours to these whistle-blowers, denouncing them for “trashing Israel’s image abroad”. In addition, then-minister of education, Naftali Bennett banned Breaking the Silence from entering schools and then-Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon instructed the IDF to investigate whether members of the movement had disclosed classified information. According to numerous studies conducted by the Peace Now movement and the progressive think tank Molad, Im Tirzu and other ultra-right groups have received funding directly from the Israeli government. Additional funds come from far-right evangelical groups in the US and private donors. Meanwhile, in July 2016, the Knesset passed a bill requiring human rights organizations that receive over 50% of their funding from foreign governments to state this fact on all publications, letters and adverts. The bill does not apply to right-wing NGOs such as Im Tirzu.

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**Members of the Israeli peace camp – both the opposition in Knesset and civil society groups – found it hard to fight back.** First, there was no unanimous view of organizations such as Breaking the Silence or B’Tselem. Internal ruptures overshadowed the importance of fighting the right-wing campaign waged against the centre-left. Instead of concentrating on Netanyahu’s strategy of destroying the peace camp and silencing its supporters, the parties were caught up in endless internal debates while the prime minister set the terms of reference and the tone of the debate. Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid slammed Breaking the Silence for being unpatriotic, while the Zionist Union became embroiled in a bitter internal debate on the issue and failed to decide on a unified stand. According to Eran Etzion, the objection to Breaking the Silence and the feebleness of the opposition both stem from the fact that Israelis are brought up to believe in patriotism and in defending their country: The norm is that you don’t criticize Israel abroad and everybody was raised with that norm, so not only Yair Lapid but also Tzipi Livni and Yitzhak Herzog were sticking to it. As for human rights organizations – there was never much love for them in Israel. In fact, it was the champion of the Israeli peace camp, PM Yitzhak Rabin who coined the famous term “without the Supreme Court and without B’Tselem” (referring to freedom to use violence against Palestinians) in 1993.

According to Gilead Sher, the Israeli peace camp was trapped, unable to defend its positions given the stalemate in peace talks, while subjected to a delegitimization campaign by PM Netanyahu: The peace camp lost support since the organizations were seen as going abroad before trying to speak up inside Israel. At the same time, Netanyahu systematically delegitimized the peace camp while weakening and destroying all the democratic institutions – the legal system, the police, the judiciary. The result was disastrous. Zehava Galon believes that Netanyahu uses incitement against the left for political survival. “It’s not about what Abbas or Breaking the Silence do. It’s all about Netanyahu and staying in power”, she summarizes.

## Conclusions

Prime Minister Netanyahu's policy of conflict management to date has been based on cooperation with the PA, while inciting against it and the left wing at the same time. The nature of a possible annexation, should it come to pass, is still unknown, but meanwhile, so much annexation-chatter has had an immediate impact in both terminating the security cooperation between Israel and Palestinian security apparatus and causing an overall deterioration in the relations with the PA. At the same time, Netanyahu fears the possible decline and fall of the PA and has quietly reversed the freeze of PA tax revenues declared last year in order to offset terrorists' salaries.

With no hope of resuming negotiations in the near future, the PA is likely to continue its current foreign policy of joining growing numbers of international institutions and expanding activities abroad. At the same time, it will weaken incrementally, until it collapses as a result of its internal flaws or due to external pressures.

The Israeli peace camp, for its part, seems to have lost its appeal in the Israeli discourse, and Netanyahu's sole contenders in the March 2020 elections echoed this public sentiment, offering no alternative to his policy with respect to the conflict. As of today, there is no ideological opposition in the Knesset, to the extent that even among the opposition, support for some form of annexation is widespread. Even more influential than the Israeli opposition and peace camp for shaping the fate of Israeli politics and security in near future, however, is the American president and his agenda. Most likely, new movements and political parties will be established during 2020 and 2021, offering some hope of rebuilding the Israeli left. However, winning back public support after a decade-long smear campaign against the left and the Palestinians will be extremely hard, if not impossible.