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Palestine

Did the Israeli left disappear?

- IV Online magazine - 2001 - IV327 - January 2001 -

Publication date: Friday 5 January 2001

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The silence of the Israeli peace camp during the last month has been widely reported in the international media, as well as the return of many of its main spokespersons to the bosom of National Unity and uncritical support to the criminal acts of the Israeli army and the Labour government.

The Palestinians too have been aware of this trend, and many political activists and intellectuals have expressed their disappointment and even anger. Yesterday's friends have become again enemies, offering their peace medals to try to legitimise the propaganda machine of war criminals.

The Palestinians have the right to be angered by the behaviour of these hypocrites and to denounce their total lack of moral backbone. They even have the duty to re-evaluate their co-operation with the so-called Israeli peace camp, and to put new and more drastic conditions for its eventual renewal.

Together with the anger expressed by the Palestinians, one can also identify a huge disappointment, as if such a behaviour on behalf of the great majority of the Israeli peace camp was not predictable. This disappointment, however, is a result of a confusion which has developed during the last decade among numerous Palestinians and activists.

This confusion started already, in 1982, when many Palestinians have been fascinated by the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who demonstrated against the massacres in Sabra and Shatilla. "In no Arab capital were such big demonstrations against the Israeli aggression in Lebanon" used to state Palestinian activists, expressing simultaneously their disappointment from the lack of solidarity in the Arab countries, and their positive surprise towards the newly emerging Israeli peace camp. No doubt that such a mass phenomenon couldn't be ignored by the Palestinian National Movement, and had to be integrated in their political strategy. But without illusions and idealisation.

There were however both idealisation and illusions, especially at the beginning of the Oslo process. Every Israeli who supported the so-called peace process was perceived by many Palestinians as a friend and an ally. The more these Israelis were close to the centre of the political map, the more they were considered valuable. Little attention was put on the motivations of most of the Israeli supporters to the peace process, of the partners of "people to people" programs, and the price they were ready (or not ready) to pay for peace. The gap was huge between the Palestinian demand for freedom and self-determination, and the Israeli dream of separation; between the demand for rights, and the Israeli conception of percentages; the demand for respect and reciprocity, and the Israeli patronising and dictating behaviour. But some Palestinian intellectuals and activists have been blinded by these new "Friends of the Palestinians", which became for them THE Israeli peace forces and their privileged allies. Now they are asking, "where are the Israeli peace forces, where is the left?"

Let me tell you, the left didn't wait one day to strongly denounce the crimes of the Israeli army and to blame in a clear voice the full responsibility of Barak and his government. In fact this part of the peace movement never stopped its activities against the continuing occupation, even for one single day. Already in September 1993, the Peace Bloc demonstrated for the immediate dismantling of the settlements, the release of all the political prisoners; throughout the last seven years Bat Shalom and the Peace Bloc launched systematic campaigns for Palestinian sovereignty in East Jerusalem; since two years the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions and Rabbis for Human Rights have been active against the ethnic cleansing policy in C Areas. While Peace Now and Meretz supported the closure under the false argument that closure=separation=peace all the real peace organisations denounced it as a huge

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violation of Human Rights as well as a violation of the Oslo agreement. To these peace organisations, one should add the systematic campaigns of B'tselem, Physicians for Human Rights, the Public Committee Against Tortures and several other Israeli Human Rights organisations for the defence of the individual and collective rights of the Palestinians. They didn't stop their mission, under the pretext that a peace process is on the way, and though many among them invested many hopes in the Oslo process, at least at its beginning, they never stopped to relate to the reality, the reality of occupation and oppression.

For all these organisations, and the few thousands of activists behind them, the Palestinian uprising was not a surprise, and who is to blame was not difficult to find. And they reacted, as strongly as they could: dozens of demonstrations, sometimes with a dozen, sometimes with few hundreds; they wrote courageous articles in the mainstream media (Tanya Reinhart, Uri Avneri, Haim Hanegbi, Yitshak Laor, and others); they organise petitions and solidarity visits to the families of the victims. For more than a month, they are mobilised, days and nights, to denounce Israeli violence, to express solidarity with the Palestinian people and to defend its legitimate rights.

Solidarity and unconditional defence of what is right, is what has motivated the real Israeli peace forces, the moral as well as political rejection of any form of oppression and occupation has been their struggle for decades. For them peace is the complete end of occupation, not peace parties financed by the USAID or the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, while the closure is dismantling the Palestinian society and the liberation fighters are still behind bars. This is why they were on the streets from the very first day of the Israeli offensive.

While we were continuing our struggle against occupation, the rest of the Israeli peace camp, however, was busy in normalisation. Prisoners, settlements, house demolitions and closure didn't bother it. The basic motivation of the great majority of the Israeli peace activists has never been either solidarity with the Arabs or values like the right of people to resist foreign aggression, but keeping the interests of Israel, the way they understand it: not to be involved in a war with no chance to win, keeping a good international image and good relations with the US, keeping the Jewish and democratic nature of Israel etc.

Only when these objectives are in danger, will the mainstream Israeli peace movement mobilise itself. Otherwise, it will rather prefer to keep on-line with the national consensus, and support the policy of the government. This is why, at the beginning of a crisis, one will never see an immediate mobilisation of the mainstream Israeli peace camp: neither in 1982, nor in 1987, nor after the massacre on Haram el Sharif in 1990. A Palestinian activist from Kafr Kar'a, Jamal Zahalka, once called this reaction "the First Day Syndrome": the first reaction is a reaction of support to the official policy; only later, when the price to be paid for such policy is becoming more and more clear, starts a process of disconnection and dissidence.

During the last weeks, we have been witnessing the same pattern, and we can predict that the continuation of the crisis, international pressures, more casualties on the Israeli side, will gradually push more and more Israelis to return to a more critical stand.

The decision taken by the Palestinian NGOs co-ordination to put an end to the peace parties" with Israeli partners, and other "people to people" initiatives, reflects a new awareness about the reality of the Israeli peace camp and its limitations, precisely because it differentiates between the organisations and movements which are only motivated by their will to impose normalisation on the Palestinian people, and those who are motivated by the defence of the rights of the Palestinians and the struggle for justice.

Peace is not a party, but the end of a struggle, a long and difficult struggle for liberation and freedom. In this struggle the Palestinian people do have allies in Israel, not too many, but dedicated, and motivated by moral integrity and the drive for justice. They don't look for peace celebrations and awards, and they don't ask anything in exchange for what they are doing. They only want to be able to look in the eyes of their children and grand children without shame, and

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to be able to tell them: injustice was committed in our name, and we did our best to stop it.

News from Within, vol. XVI, number 8, November 2000

Obtainable from Alternative Information Centre / News from Within, PO Box 31417, Jerusalem (annual subscription rate \$US60).