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Israeli State

# Five questions to Michel Warschawski

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**This interview about the social movement in Israel with journalist and author Michel Warschawski was conducted on August 11.**

**International Viewpoint: For several weeks now a large-scale social movement has been demanding “social justice”. Do you think that this movement is changing the political situation in Israel and in the Middle East?**

**Michel Warschawski:** Let us not exaggerate! That the current social mobilization can lead to political change in Israel is one thing, but to affirm that it marks a major turning-point at the regional level is seriously exaggerated. At the regional level, the major event remains the Arab Intifada which will exert much more influence than what is currently happening in the Israeli street.

Having said that, and even if the link is not made openly, the social movement and its demands pose not only relevant questions about the economic and social options of the present government, and in particular the dismantling of public services, but also those of its political options: to finance a new industrial relations policy, it will be necessary to cut military budgets and the financing of colonization. Is it an accident that the only open criticisms of the popular movement come from the leaders of the settlers, who try to describe it as a Woodstock of spoiled children from the trendy neighbourhoods of the north of Tel-Aviv?

**International Viewpoint: The breadth of the current social movement and its popularity (the opinion polls indicate that it is supported by more than 80 per cent of the population) reflect a taking of distance from the present regime and from the role played by the State - which is no longer a Welfare State. The former minister and former military leader of the occupied territories, Benjamin Ben Eliezer, recently stated that he feared the worst catastrophe since the creation of the State of Israel, because “the people who are in the streets today are the elite of Israel” and there is “a link between this public and the power of the nation”. Could this be a sign of a beginning of loss of legitimacy of the Zionist project within the Jewish population in Israel?**

**Michel Warschawski:** There too let us not exaggerate: Zionism - as a colonial project and as an ideology - is not being called into question, far from it! On the contrary, the spokespersons of the movement insist strongly on “neither right nor left” and on the non-political character of the movement. During the big rallies in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, the question of the Israeli-Arab conflict was voluntarily avoided... except by some artists who, contrary to the spokespersons, have made the link.

What is being called into question, and this is already very important, is the dismantling of the Welfare State and its disastrous impact on education and health.

What Benjamin Ben Eliezer underlined is the fact that it is not a question of a movement coming from the poorest popular layers, but of the middle classes, of couples who work, have a relatively high level of education, do their annual period as reservists in the army and would like to have their share of the fruits of the current economic growth of Israel, which benefits especially a few thousand families for whom the present government is the source of their power. “Israel is us!” they say they in substance and it is this message which Benjamin Ben Eliezer, but especially those whom we call the oligarchs, would like to make Netanyahu hear, because the gigantic profits raked in by these oligarchs over the last decade are linked to the political and social stability of Israel and that stability is well worth some reforms of unbridled neoliberalism in favour of these middle layers.

**International Viewpoint:** In the demonstrations we could see placards saying “Tahrir Square is here”. On Rothschild Boulevard there is a “1948” tent in which there are Jews and Palestinians who are favourable to shared sovereignty in a state for all its citizens. It seems that protest camps of Druses and Palestinians have appeared... Do you think that the July 14 movement will contribute to loosening the vice of nationalism in Palestine and in the Middle East?

**Michel Warschawski:** The Palestinians of Israel have imposed their presence in the movement, including on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel-Aviv, and their demands are both political and social. Having said that, Jewish demonstrators, for example, tore down the Palestinian flag which was on their tent. The present challenge for the anti-colonial Left and for Palestinian militants still remains the same: to make a link between social demands and political demands.

Netanyahu helps us in this, when he calls on young couples in search of housing to go and live... in the settlements, provoking the anger of those who want answers where they live, in Tel-Aviv, Haifa or Beer-Sheba, not in Ariel or Ofra.

**International Viewpoint:** The demands of more than 80 camps of the movement and of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators aim at changing the political and economic orientation of the country. At the same time the principal spokespersons of the movement insist on its non-political character. How do you explain this contradiction?

**Michel Warschawski:** In Israeli jargon, when you say “non-political”, that means without expressing a position on the Israeli-Arab conflict. In this sense the movement is indeed non-political. It is on the other hand eminently political in its unambiguous rejection of the neoliberal project.

**International Viewpoint:** Over the last ten years we have seen in Israel attempts to build new trade unions, combative and democratic, (Koach La-Ovdim, Maan). Do they play a role in the present social movement, and if so what role do they play?

**Michel Warschawski:** All the actors of the social movement are present in the movement, including Koach La-Ovdim. This current represents the first successful attempt to break the monopoly of the Histadrut as sole representative of the working class. It is still a modest structure, but it is no longer marginal in certain sectors, and increasingly it will have to be taken into account.