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Israel/Palestine

# Israel, Jews and Arabs: the revolutionary perspective of living together

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Michel Warschawski has been politically active in Israel for many years. He retraced his biography in one of his books, *Sur la frontière* (Stock, 2002). After spending his early years in Strasbourg, he decided at the age of sixteen to go to Jerusalem, where he undertook Talmudic studies. In 1968 he joined the Israeli Socialist Organization, which had been founded in 1962 by expelled members of the Israeli Communist Party and older activists influenced by Trotskyism. The group was best known by the name of its newspaper, *Matzpen* ("Compass" in Hebrew). *Matzpen* was a revolutionary organization that regarded Zionism as a colonial project and fought for coexistence between Jews and Arabs on the basis of complete equality. As of June 1967 *Matzpen* called for the full, immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Israel from all the occupied territories and affirmed its support for the Palestinian people's right to fight for its freedom.

Despite a limited membership, the actions and positions of *Matzpen* had an echo that made it an "enemy within" denounced by Zionists of both right and left, whose activists were frequently arrested. Although composed mainly of Jewish activists, *Matzpen* tried both to mobilize Israeli Jewish youth and to develop ties with the Palestinians of Israel, as well as Palestinian left organizations and those of Arab countries.

In the 1970s, a debate began in *Matzpen* on its perspectives. *Matzpen* and activists of the Palestinian Left decided in 1984 to create the Alternative Information Center (AIC), an organization providing information and solidarity, of which Michel Warschawski is the director. *Matzpen* subsequently ceased to exist as an organization, although many of its activists remain active in various movements. In 1989, Michel Warschawski was sentenced to several months in prison for "providing services to illegal organizations" (for printing leaflets). H.W.

**In something you wrote in the summer of 2014, you speak of "fascism" in Israel. What are the roots of this process? Is it just the product of the state of war? Can we say that it is now the far right that governs?**

I am speaking of a long process that dates back to the campaign of hatred and delegitimization that preceded the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. The assassins of the Prime Minister took power and have in fact been in power since then. I include the episode of Ehud Barak (1999-2001) who was admittedly the candidate of the Labour Party, but who defended far-right policies and did everything he could so that Ariel Sharon became Prime Minister, with himself as his Minister Defense.

So we have had twenty years of continuous power of the Right, which has changed the situation, not so much in the field of the colonial policy towards the Palestinians, but in the internal regime of the State of Israel.

Racism has been unleashed, in political discourse, in the streets and in legislation which culminated in the proposal to amend the "Basic Law - Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people." A series of extremely repressive and openly discriminatory laws against the Palestinian minority in Israel have already been adopted; others, even worse, are on the way. The Supreme Court, which was for many years the guarantor of a system that was juggling between "Jewish state" and "democratic state", has for some time been the object of violent attacks by far-right members of parliament. Several bills are aimed at reducing its power.

The government relies on a bloc of three far-right parties, a bloc in which Netanyahu appears as a moderate!

If for a year I have been talking about fascism, it is because on top of everything I have just mentioned we have to add violence against democratic activists and organizations, from small fascist groups or even passers-by. Far-right government + draconian laws + violence aimed at terrorizing any words of criticism = fascism.

**Israel is now one of the countries where social inequalities are greatest (including among Jews), and where neoliberal policies are dismantling social gains. And yet looked at from the exterior, social and political debate among the Jewish section of the Israeli population seems to be completely polarized around two themes: religion and "security." Is that correct? Have social issues disappeared from the landscape?**

Israel is indeed, in the group of industrialized countries, in second place concerning the gap between rich and poor: a very rich bourgeoisie and many very poor people. According to data from the Israeli social security authorities, 32 per cent of Israeli children - Jewish and Arab - live below the poverty line! The dismantling of the welfare state and its achievements has been done with such brutality and speed as would have made Margaret Thatcher green with envy.

However social struggles, particularly trade-union struggles, remain extremely limited. There are three reasons for this: the economic success of Israel, which makes it possible to leave some crumbs for the workers; the fact that the unemployment rate is very low (less than two per cent); the absence of trade-union traditions and organization worthy of the name. Fifty years of absolute power of the Histadrut, which had nothing to do with a trade-union organization, even a class-collaborationist one, has prevented the formation of class consciousness, even of a primitive kind. Although there are struggles, they remain confined to one enterprise (usually over lay-offs) or take place in more privileged and better organized sectors (nurses, teachers).

**Do the popular classes react to austerity policies? What has happened to the movement of the "Indignados" of two years ago? What does the Koach Ovdim ("Workers Strength") union, which seems to be getting stronger to the detriment of the Histadrut, represent?**

The movement of the Indignados was a flash in the pan: a gigantic mobilization that drew in hundreds of thousands of people for a return to the welfare state but only gave birth to a national commission (the Trachtenberg Commission)... almost all of whose recommendations were rejected by the government. Koach Ovdim, which is the first trade union confederation independent of the Histadrut, remains a small organization compared to it, but it has been able to organize strikes and other economic struggles by some of the most neglected sectors, among others maintenance workers in in some major civil service departments and workers in a quarry near Jerusalem.

For the majority of Israeli workers, the positions they adopt, including their identities, are first of all determined by the political and "national" and, far behind, by what social class they belong to. If you ask someone what he or she is, they will answer: Jewish, then Israeli, then of Tunisian or Russian origin. Then they will say "religious" or traditionalist. Very rarely will they say "worker" or "employee".

**What has become of the "peace camp"? Is it in a position to exert any kind of influence?**

About 3,000 people demonstrated against the war of aggression on Gaza. This is very little and represents especially what in France is called the far left. In this sense, the mass peace movement that we knew in the 1980s and 1990s has not yet recovered from its rout in August 2000. This date should be remembered because it marks a break, a sort of August 1914 of the peace movement: when Ehud Barak came back from the negotiations in Camp David (which he sabotaged with the collaboration of the Clinton administration), he, who had been elected on the basis of an alternative to the policy of occupation of the Right, succeeded in convincing his own camp that Yasser Arafat was using negotiations to lull Israel to sleep, creating lines of fracture with the aim of finally driving the Jews into the sea (sic!). He added: the Right was right, it was us, the pacifists, who were wrong.

The problem is that this mega-lie was received loud and clear by the peace movement... And Sharon was elected with a large majority, to undertake the reconquest of the territories administered by the Palestinian Authority and the few gains resulting from the negotiations between Israel and the PLO. The peace movement has not recovered from

that rout, and we are still far from seeing a rebirth of it as a mass movement capable of influencing the political choices of the government.

**You have explained, I believe, that by its ignorance of social questions, part of the Israeli Left and the peace camp had thrown the Sephardic Jews into the arms of Likud and the far right: is this definitive?**

The popular classes, and especially the poor Jews who came from Arab countries (wrongly called "Sephardic"), have, since the late 1970s, made the choice of the Right, not by identification with its ideology of Greater Israel but because it represented the opposition to the absolute, totalitarian and racist - against non-European Jews – power of the pseudo-left.

The "Left" has no chance of winning back the popular electorate because its reality and its image are bourgeois, and its anti-oriental racism is glued to its identity. The massive immigration of Russians has also reinforced this fault line. To regain a foothold in the popular classes, a new Left has to be built, but this is the task of the next generation.

Having said that, inter-community marriages are becoming more numerous, and I think attachment to ethnicity, in the Jewish-Israeli community, is tending gradually to lose its relevance.

What does the far left represent in Israel? Anarchists against the Wall? Other movements? What we call here the radical left is very modest, defined primarily by its position on political issues (colonial conflict and wars), even though in general the far left also defends an anti-capitalist orientation. It does not have, in the Jewish population, a party within which it could organize, and it is in collectives that we find it, whether on political issues (occupation, racism) or social ones (economic refugees, women's rights, housing ...) When there are elections, it votes by default for one of the "Arab parties", in particular the Communist Party. Besides, this party denies being "an Arab party," even though 85 per cent of its electorate comes from the Palestinian population of Israel.

Anarchists against the Wall, some feminist organizations, various groups fighting against the occupation or social injustice, or again the Alternative Information Center (AIC), are to be found in specific campaigns (against the Wall, against the fascist groups, for undocumented workers, etc.), but there are no permanent structures.

One of the problems we face is what I called years ago the "NGO-ization" of politics, groups of people employed by small organizations, which are often well financed for their activities by European foundations or governments. NGOs certainly do a good job concerning information and awareness, but they can in no circumstances be the basis of a mass movement. Some people might even say that they are, involuntarily, an obstacle.

**How is discrimination against Israeli Arabs evolving? Is the secession between Israeli Jews and Arabs now complete? Or are there common spaces of cooperation and struggle?**

Since 2000 (in October 2000, Ehud Barak ordered a bloody crackdown on the solidarity demonstrations in Arab localities with the Palestinian uprising in the occupied territories), we have witnessed a breakdown of the Jewish-Arab front that characterized the movement of opposition to the occupation and to discrimination against the Palestinian minority in Israel (which is 20 per cent of the population). The Palestinians no longer come to Tel Aviv to protest and have chosen to mobilize in their towns and villages. That explains why the protests in major Jewish cities have decreased from tens of thousands to a few thousand.

Behind this choice there is also expressed a desire for autonomy, because in the "Jewish-Arab front", the Communist Party was pushing towards Jewish hegemony, of which the presence of Israeli flags and the over-representation of

Jewish speakers were the external signs.

The Arab minority is represented in the Knesset by three parties of more or less equal influence: the Communist Party (in the form of the Front for Peace and Equality, Hadash), the National Democratic Assembly (Balad - radical nationalists) and the Unified Arab List (conservative nationalists).

An amendment to the electoral law may push the Arab parties to constitute a joint list in future if they want to be elected, and if this perspective is realized, there could be in the next Knesset an Arab parliamentary group of around fifteen deputies (out of 120 ...) Unless the attempts of the far right to prohibit certain Arab parties from running are successful. On this question, the coming weeks will be crucial [\[1\]](#)

For the Jewish-Arab front to be rebuilt, it is essential that Jewish activists agree to abandon their objective of being hegemonic and become a force in support of a movement that is primarily an Arab national movement.

### **What echo does the AIC have in the present context?**

The specificity of the Alternative Information Center is to be, three decades after being established, still the only joint Israeli-Palestinian organization. The AIC brings together activists, known and recognized, from the Palestinian Left and Israeli anti-Zionists. Although, as its name suggests, it conducts work of information and political and social analysis (especially on its website [alternativenews.org](http://alternativenews.org)), its originality and its importance reside in its choice to be a breach in the wall that separates the two societies, including the activist world, and to promote a perspective of cooperation and partnership between movements on both sides of the "green line".

In a context where separation is seen as an almost absolute value, the perspective of living together is eminently revolutionary, and it leads to the necessity of a common struggle.

*This interview was first published in **Revue L'Anticapitaliste** n°61, January 2015, monthly review of the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) in France.*

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[\[1\]](#) On January 22, 2015, an electoral alliance, called the Joint List, was in fact established to contest the March 17 Israeli legislative elections.