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Palestine/Israel

# Reappearance of the Good Old Zionist Consensus

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**The Israeli political arena is perceived by most of the Israeli, Palestinian and world opinion, as sharply divided into two main blocs, headed by the Zionist parties of Labour and Likud. These two blocs are considered to represent the classical division of 'Left' and 'Right' which presumably includes in its Israeli version, opposing positions towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: the 'peace camp' which supports massive territorial concessions and a Palestinian state on the one hand, and the 'national camp' which strives to establish Israel's rule throughout entire historic Palestine on the other.**

Moreover, from the recent election campaign for prime minister, it becomes rather clear that this perception actually also prevails within the Israeli Left itself, including radical parts of the Israeli 'peace camp'. Therefore it is important once again to refute this imaginary perception which misleads many, preventing the growth of a true Left which struggles for social and political transformation of the Jewish-Zionist state, which is an essential condition for a just peace.

## Shared ideology and policy

Both blocs, Left and Right, do not embody any significant difference in economic-social interests, as is classically attributed to 'social democracy' vis-a-vis 'conservative' or 'right wing' in Western Europe. Both politically represent the Ashkenazi (European Jewry) economic, military and political establishment.

Thus, from the 1980s on, they accepted the dictates of the US and the World Bank and began a policy aiming at integrating Israel within the processes of capitalist globalisation. Namely, a free market economy; reducing governmental expenditures on infrastructure and education; privatisation of health and welfare services; and freezing or reducing employee wages which have come under stiff competition from foreign workers (meaning that foreign workers are brought with the aim of reducing wages of local workers). The widening income gap in Israel has thus become one of the largest in the Western world. The top income bracket now lives on an annual income twelve times larger than the bottom, in comparison to 8.6 times ten years ago.

The government of Barak, the general chosen by Labour's leadership and a sworn disciple of Thatcherite economics, followed the Labour Party's long objection to a minimum wage law. Furthermore he opposed raising the present minimum wage; intended to annul the rights of tenants in public housing (most of whom are Mizrahim-Jews); to limit the social benefits of those whose wages are less than the official minimum thus inflicting even more severe damage to the working class, the majority of whom are also Mizrahim.

However, the goals of Zionism, namely, the colonization of the land and its control, are not achievable with the non-intervention of the government in the economy and with wild free-markets, because of the collective national projects confronting it.

Hence the absurd situation which characterizes Israel, according to which precisely some of the prominent leaders of the Right, (headed by Sharon) favour state intervention, naturally not for bringing about a more just redistribution, but to carry out national projects like preserving Jewish control over 'state lands' and 'Judaizing the Galilee and the Negev'.

At long last, the agreement between the camps regarding macro-economic policy is comprehensive, hence their silence concerning these issues during the election campaign.

Both Barak and Sharon were interested in continuing the process of dismantling the welfare state in the service of capitalism, in the exact dose that would ensure the strengthening of Zionist colonization goals.

And indeed, the meeting that took place shortly after the elections between the representatives of the capitalists (who financed the Labour campaign) and Sharon, in his ranch, North of the Negev desert, left them extremely satisfied. Sharon promised to continue with privatisation and with state subsidies to industry; to reduce taxes on capital; to strengthen the economic links with international finance capital; and to transfer more industries to neighbouring Arab countries where the labour force is extremely cheap.

The fact that the two Zionist parties represent similar class interests is reflected in their approach to the solution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But, while their similar attitudes towards the economic policy are expressed openly, (although the argumentation is different), this is not the case with the political process. In regards to 'peace', the agreed deception about 'the most severe rift in Israeli society' has been kept and sustained by both camps.

## A shared Final Solution

And indeed, the only issue that has differentiated Israeli "Left" from "Right" is their claimed contradictory positions regarding the peace process in the framework of the Oslo Agreements.

However, all Israeli governments, both Labour and Likud, exploited the 7-years-plus since Oslo to implement Israeli goals by means of mass settlement and by-pass road building to perpetuate the continuity of Israeli rule over the West Bank and Gaza and prevent the possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

During election broadcasts and interviews, Barak announced that if Arafat insists, as at Camp David, on the 'Right to Return' and on 'sovereignty over the Temple Mount', his (Barak's) government, if elected, would keep the commandment 'We are here and they are there' to which the senior commentator, Akiva Eldar adds: "what he meant was that he will annex to 'here', temporarily, 20-30% of the territories and leave for 'there' the rest of the area." The issues of the final borders, Jerusalem and the refugees were supposed to wait for an 'opportune moment'.

The seemingly innocent 'separation' slogan is misleading, because the map of the settlements indicates that it was designed precisely to prevent separation, and so, enable the continuation of Israel's control over 'there'.

But the separation goal valued widely by the Left, is also dangerous: the rationale on which it is based can easily lead to the conclusion of transfer, as M. K. Rehavam Ze'evi, head of the Transfer party, says, when responding to some of the Left who opposed joining a government with him: "Barak also adopted the slogan, 'we are here and they are there'. All the difference between us is where the 'there' will be. On the whole it is only a matter of moving the border a few kilometres to the East" (Israeli Radio, Channel 2, 25th February).

However, the mere mentioning by Barak of the conditions for the final agreement, (stated above) being fully aware that they were unacceptable to the Palestinians, as well as his announcement of the end of Oslo, justly raises doubts if Barak was at all interested in an agreement at Camp David in the first place.

The editorial of Ha'aretz (18th February) also joins this mistrust: "Barak, as yet, has not delivered any soothing answer to those who believe that the burial of the Oslo Agreements is actually in line with his own world view."

And, indeed, only three days after his resignation speech from Chair of the Labour party following his defeat in the elections, in which he still boasted of his compromises offered at Camp David, he had already written to the US president that Sharon's new government is not committed to the ideas and agreements that were achieved at Camp David and Taba, and that in fact, they do not exist any more. He thereby cleared the way for Sharon to take up even stiffer positions.

Recently we have been hearing explicit declarations from senior Labour leaders like Shimon Peres, now the Foreign Minister in Sharon's government, who support an interim agreement or a partial agreement of the kind Barak spoke of in his "here and there" speech.

This is also Sharon's attitude towards the agreement with the Palestinians, which is the official stance of the Bush administration as well. Following is the explanation of this new manoeuvre against the Palestinians as presented by Shimon Shifer in the Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot (2nd February):

"A long term interim agreement, unlimited in time, promising a territorial continuum to the Palestinian Authority by building bridges, digging tunnels and handing over areas that, in any case, will be given to them as part of any agreement in the future, namely, turning Areas B into Area A, over which the Palestinians have full control [sic] while Israel continues to keep the strategic assets, whose fate will be decided only in the framework of the final agreements, at the end of the conflict."

Thus doves and hawks are now getting together to support a solution which will enable the establishment of a Bantustan state on 50% of the 1967 Occupied Territories, whereas the remaining areas will be annexed de facto to Israel, where additional 'facts' will be established that will finalise Israel's control over them.

And so, the Oslo process, one of the greatest deceptions in modern history, is dead and buried. The supporters of it themselves, in a roundabout way, admit that "it is the concept of Oslo that has collapsed", namely "the idea to bring here people from Tunis, give them a territory, and impose on them to keep order and security for us - and believe it will work." (Shlomo Ben Ami, Foreign Minister in Barak's government)

The progressive commentator, Haim Baram, adds to this: "Beilin's boys have sold to the public the illusion that it is possible to achieve peace at the lowest price, with a united and expanded Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty and with 81 settlements within the Palestinian area. Beilin himself tried to sell Abu Dis to Arafat as a capital, claiming that this neighbourhood is Jerusalem. Since the missionaries in Black Africa had bought stretches of land, each of them the size of entire Europe, in return for some glass beads - never has there been such a transparent attempt to buy peace and general Arab acknowledgment at such a cheap price."

## A unified government

And indeed the "disappointment" from the process that was built on deception and the affinity in positions with the Likud explains the crawling of the Labour party to participate in the Unified National Government headed by Sharon, the worst war criminal of the entire Israeli leaderships, alongside Rehav'am Ze'evi, head of the Transfer party.

Tom Segev (Ha'aretz 23rd February) reminds his readers of the explanation that then MK Benny Begin (Likud, son of

former Prime Minister Menachem Begin) gave in 1991 when the Transfer party was established, regarding its platform:

"What do we mean when we use the word 'transfer'? Even if we add the words 'wilful' or 'consensual', as Ze'evi is doing, the plan is to starve, to thirst, to burden and to frighten the Arabs of West Eretz Israel [between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean] till they leave willingly".

It is difficult to find any significant difference between this plan and the aims of Labor headed by Barak. Nobody among those who now express some superficial opposition to participating in the unified government such as prominent Labor leaders as Haim Ramon, Shlomo Ben Ami, and Yossi Beilin should be "surprised" by the decision lead by Peres and Barak to join Sharon's government, because they knew about the talks of a unified government that were being held by Barak and Sharon simultaneously with the election campaign.

Furthermore, they should not be surprised because their policy regarding both the negotiations and the suppression of the Intifada is proof of the fact that their 'peace camp' is empty of any unique content which could prevent a unified government with Likud.

Indeed, the most significant common denominator uniting Labour and Likud is their commitment to Zionism; to the Jewishness of the state; and to the continuation of the existence of the agencies that fulfil the goals of encouraging and subsidizing the immigration of Jews to Israel and the preference of Jews within the state, as stated in the first draft of the 'Guidelines of the unified government' (Ha'aretz 26th February):

"Article 6.1: The government of Israel will place the Zionist national agenda at its top priorities.

Article 6.2: The government will act, together with the Jewish Agency and the World Zionist Federation, to encourage immigration to the country, to intensify the Jewish-Zionist education of the young generation in the diaspora ... to fortify the unity of the Jewish nation around Israel, and to ensure the Jewish, Zionist and democratic nature of Israel".

Moreover, the aim of the unified government is not only the continuation of the functioning of the 'national' institutes, which even amongst Labour leaders including those like Beilin who thought that achieving a forced peace over the Palestinian people would make these blatant apartheid institutes obsolete. The unified government even explicitly declares the need to strengthen these bodies by intensifying the cooperation of the state with them. It seems indeed, that the new era in which "there is no partner for peace" will postpone the implementation of privatisation of the Zionist institutions.

## Ashkenazi 'Left', Mizrahi 'Right'

The aims of Zionism regarding the nature of the Jewish state are accepted by the majority of the extra-parliamentary Israeli Left. The 'Peace movement' has traditionally committed itself to supporting the rule of the Labour party and to preventing the ascent to power of the "Nationalistic Camp" headed by Likud. However the blurring of boundaries between Left and Right regarding the economy and the conflict with the Palestinians, is accompanied with what seems to be the "unnatural" constituencies of these two blocks.

The Mizrahim, who as previously mentioned comprise the majority of the working class in Israel (together with the Palestinian citizens), have been committed to vote for the Right over the past three decades, while the Ashkenazi big business and middle classes support the Left.

Thus, in the recent elections, for example, while in upper middle class communities such as Kfar Shmaryahu and Ramat Hasharon, Barak received 75% and 62% of the votes respectively, in the "developing towns" such as Sderot and Ashdod, he received 13% and 9% respectively.

These differences in voting patterns reflect the Israeli situation in which belonging to the Left/Peace camp (and voting Labour) entails indeed, not so much different political positions than those who voted for the Right, but a shared Ashkenazi "cultural identity" which the Mizrahi vote is a reaction against.

This cultural identity consists of Orientalist, racist positions wrapped in a self-perceived image of enlightenment, rationalism, secularism, and democracy versus the 'backwardness', 'traditionalism', and 'primitiveness' attributed to the orthodox supporters of the Right (see interview with Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin in *Between The Lines*, February 2001).

The examination of these self-perceptions however, reveals that the main object of Askenazi hatred is not the secular Right nor the National Religious Party (Mafdal, who lead the settlement movement) but the Shas party which embodies in their understanding a potential threat to the Askenazi hegemony inherent in self-organisation of Mizrahim.

Neither the Likud nor the National Religious Party was disqualified to join the unified government that Barak tried to set up after the victory of the Labour party in the 1999 elections. The racist slogan "Just not Shas" (demanding that Shas will not be allowed to join the government) was heard from the Zionist Left and Big Business, that financed huge advertisements in many Israeli daily newspapers.

Furthermore, the secularism that the Zionist Left claim has nothing to do with a world view which is based on democratic values, centred on freedom of conscience and religion. On the contrary, the collective goals of Zionism were perceived and are still largely perceived today, as justifying the subordination of individual rights to the needs of 'the nation and the state'.

A real commitment to humane and universal values is inevitably weakened when faced with the Zionist affinity to religious sources, symbols, and the identification of nationalism with religious belonging, which all lead to religious legislation in central areas of individual and social life.

Characterizing Shas solely on the basis of its orthodoxy, as is done by the Zionist left, intentionally ignores the fact that the majority of its supporters are not orthodox and that their support stems from their protest against the cultural, political and economic marginalisation of Mizrahim by the political and cultural establishment of the Left, headed by the Zionist Labour movement. This identity aims at presenting the struggle against this movement as 'the battle between the forces of enlightenment versus those of darkness', and thus delegitimising Mizrahi attempts at protest and organization.

## The Betrayal of the Israeli Left

Over the seven years since Oslo, the extra-parliamentary Israeli Left has supported the Labour dictates in the negotiations with the Palestinians, while being almost silent about the massive increase in settlement building. Moreover, even the more radical parts of the Left, largely the followers of Hadash (the front headed by the Communist Party, and whose members are largely 1948 Palestinians) and Meretz, (the Civil Rights party considered to be left of Labour), by not declaring that the peace process in its present form is occupation and oppression in

disguise, helped to preserve the misleading conception of it as such. In effect, this led the Left to rest assured that what was going on was indeed a peace process aiming to fulfil the national rights of the Palestinian people.

Thus, when the time came, the entire spectrum of the extra-parliamentary Israeli Left was ripe to accept Barak's version regarding the failure of the Camp David talks (as well as those in Taba), adopting his claim that "there is no partner to peace". Furthermore, when the Intifada broke out, most of them accepted - either explicitly or through their silence - the brutal means in attempting to suppress it.

Despite the mass killing of more than 400 Palestinians including 13 Israeli citizens, the Left called for 'voting Barak' in the recent election while depicting him as the man 'who can ensure the implementation of the peace process'.

The traditional commitment to the Zionist Labour movement was shared by even more radical circles of the Left. Intellectuals and academicians, known for their genuine adherence to the mission of a 'just solution', were revealed to have actually accepted the virtual division between "Left" and "Right" as representing positions of "peace" versus "war".

They had accepted the assumption that despite the appalling and oppressive means used by Barak (and disregarding his Thatcherite economic policies) he 'went further than any politician before him in presenting compromise suggestions to the Palestinians'.

For example, Prof. Ze'ev Sternhell, who revealed in his book *Nation Building or a New Society* the quasi-fascist nature of the 'National Socialism' adopted by the Zionist Labour movement, called for people to vote for Barak because his proposals to the Palestinians were "a great step forward" and because "Barak had freed himself as had Rabin and Peres from the myths to which he was captive", such as "the myth determining that Israel has the ability, due to its technologic and military power, to force the Arab world to accept its terms" (*Ha'aretz* 26th January).

Hadash, which accepted the Clinton-Barak proposals at Camp David, delayed its call upon its constituency to cast a blank ballot, till 3 days before the elections, as they waited to see Barak's success in achieving any agreement at Taba. And even then, they did not listen to the pressure that came from the Palestinian street in Israel and did not join most of the leaders who called to boycott the elections.

The connection to the Labour party, which is still rather strong amongst the Hadash leadership, is reflected in an interview given by M. K Muhammed Barkeh two days after the elections, in which he almost apologized for calling to cast a blank ballot: 'We continued speaking to Barak's ministers until the last minute, but they left us no alternative [and we were forced] to accept the blank ballot which is the worst option that a person can reach' (*Ma'ariv* 9th February).

Thus, Hadash actually has not actively participated in the historic turning point in the political behaviour of the Palestinians in Israel.

## A Few True Left Israelis

Contrary to Hadash, a very small group of Israeli Jews have adopted unequivocally the position of avoiding voting (mainly through casting a blank ballot) however with its full political implications. They based their position upon their strong objection to the Oslo process and its recent Camp David version as well as on their deep commitment to the national rights of the Palestinian people. This position indicates the turning of their backs to the Zionist Left including

its traditional disregard of the Palestinian citizens of Israel or alternatively their patronizing attitude towards them.

Contrary to the majority of the Israeli Left, this group supports unequivocally the Palestinian Right of Return (ROR), which is the ultimate test of adopting a position of a just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Supporting without reservation the ROR indicates a recognition of the real roots of the conflict, namely, the Zionist project which aimed from its inception to establish an exclusive Jewish state in entire historic Palestine, and which led to the expulsion of the Palestinian people from their homeland in 1948.

This recognition implies the necessity of a fundamental transformation of the Jewish apartheid state to a state of all its citizens. In contrast, adherence to a Jewish state inevitably entails the rejection of the ROR, which, according to the prevailing perception, 'threatens the Jewish state' with its preferential status to Jews.

The prospects that a radical Left will emerge among Israeli Jews that will genuinely fight for the national rights of the Palestinian people is indeed dependent not only upon disconnecting from the hegemony of Zionist Left, but also upon challenging of the nature of the Ashkenazi Zionist state in which the oppression of Mizrahim as well as Palestinians is structurally inherent.

At this stage however, the way which leads to translating the Mizrahim protest, (which has been historically against the Left by voting Shas and Likud), into a struggle against their oppression by the entire Ashkenazi establishment, not withstanding against that of Palestinians, is blocked.

## Strengthened national consciousness

It was amazing to see the massive response of the Palestinians in Israel to the call to boycott the elections. 82% of them did not vote at all, and out of the 18% that did vote, only a few percent responded to Hadash to cast a blank ballot.

This massive boycott indicates their refusal to continue their participation in the game orchestrated by the Zionist Left and their liberation from their traditional loyalty to the Israeli "peace camp".

It may turn out to be a step forward in strengthening the national identity of the Palestinians in Israel, which implies both solidarity with their brethren in the '67 Occupied Territories and in the diaspora and their readiness to struggle for their collective rights as a national minority in Israel.

Adopting the slogan of collective rights raised by the National Democratic Alliance (Tajamu) by a widening strata of Palestinian citizens of Israel, is a large step beyond the goal of "cultural autonomy" (which recently some Jewish liberals are willing to adopt) because it entails the necessity of a major transformation of the Jewish nature of the state.

It seems that on the Israeli scene today, precisely the national crystallization of the Palestinians within it, both in terms of consciousness and of political organisation, is exactly what most severely threatens the Zionist Apartheid regime, because it directly targets the foundations of the Zionist state. This is why they can and should be the driving force in building a real Palestinian-Israeli Left.

The disconnection of these Palestinians from the Zionist Left, constitutes the removal of a central source of



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legitimation which 1948 Palestinians used to give to the commitment of the Jewish Left itself to the Labor (and Meretz) positions. Stripped of this fig leaf, they may help convince wider circles in the Israeli traditional Left to adopt a genuine, just, position on the conflict.

However, a necessary condition for the Israeli Left to grow into a sweeping anti-occupation and anti-apartheid movement, is divesting itself of the Orientalist and racist views towards the Mizrahim masses whose oppression makes them the most promising potential to challenge the foundations of the state of Israel within Israeli Jewish society.

Only then may the way be open to a joint struggle of those dispossessed and marginalised by the Jewish Zionist state, both Palestinian and Israeli.

The need for a joint struggle for radical democratisation has become conspicuous in the light of the establishment of the Unified National Government and the new era opened in its wake.

Now, that the mirage of the Left has disappeared, it may well be that we are back to the days in which most Zionist streams were united around a warrior policy presented as serving the "security" of Israel.

Sharon has never hidden his identification with the Right Wing of the Zionist Labour movement. Together with Shimon Peres, the winner of the Noble Prize for Peace, he is an admirer of Ben Gurion's "security" policy on which he was raised, and which in its implementation, he participated as a young officer.

With no real opposition and with the legitimation of Labour ministers of 'defence' and of foreign affairs, anything seems acceptable beneath the pretext of 'national emergency'.

Also, with no real voice for the hardships of Mizrahim workers and the unemployed, this pretext can serve well to silence them for some time more. That is why it becomes so urgent for the structurally weak Israeli Left to ally with the emerging militant forces of the Palestinians in Israel in struggling for their common goals of national and social justice and equality.

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