

The New Israeli Left

Saturday 12 March 2011, by [DANA Joseph](#), [SHEIZAF Noam](#) (Date first published: 10 March 2011).

As the controversial 443 highway, which connects Tel Aviv with Jerusalem by passing through the West Bank, begins to curve toward Israel's capital, the eye is inevitably drawn to an imposing gray structure with massive concrete walls, part of the Ofer Military Prison. Commuters are barely aware of what takes place behind those walls, and that's no accident—the Ofer compound, comprising a military court, detention center and prison, is just one of many black holes that enable Israelis to go on with their daily lives, unaware of the everyday realities of the occupation.

Inside, a man in shackles enters the courtroom. He is wearing a brown prison suit, and his exhausted eyes exchange glances with his wife. The two haven't met outside the courtroom in more than a year, and for some reason the prison guards are frantically moving the wife so she doesn't sit too close to her husband, who is officially a "security risk." Soon the military judge, outfitted in a light green Israel Defense Forces (IDF) uniform and an army beret, enters the room and begins the proceedings.

This trial could be any one of the thousands that have taken place at Ofer. Israeli military justice is swift and unflinching: according to the Israeli human rights organization Yesh Din, the conviction rate at Ofer is an astounding 99.7 percent. Hearings are short, and apart from relatives who use the opportunity to see their loved ones, nobody bothers to attend or report on the proceedings. But today is different. The small courtroom is full, with twenty European diplomats—including the British general consul, Sir Vincent Fean—as well as a handful of Israelis who have become close to the prisoner through years of joint action.

The prisoner, Abdallah Abu Rahmah, a 39-year-old schoolteacher and father of three, has already been convicted and has served a sentence for incitement and organizing illegal protests in the West Bank village of Bil'in. But after a prosecutor's appeal, the judge ordered that he be kept in prison. Abu Rahmah would later receive an additional six months of prison time.

It wasn't only friendship that brought the Israelis to Ofer. They see the case against Abu Rahmah as part of a new effort to crush unarmed resistance in the West Bank. For them, Abu Rahmah is not just another Palestinian activist. By leading the mostly nonviolent weekly protests in his village against Israel's separation wall, he has become the face of a new uprising against the occupation and a key player in a kind of activism that has united Jews, Palestinians and people from around the world—one that carries a message of hope, something as unusual and unexpected in this part of the world as the recent uprisings that have toppled Arab tyrannies. It is a hope that can even penetrate the forbidding walls of the Ofer military compound.

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Friday morning in Tel Aviv. Rothschild Boulevard, a main street in the heart of the city, is filled with young couples, children playing and people walking their dogs. Sidewalk tables outside fashionable cafes are packed with patrons browsing through the weekend papers and discussing the latest developments on Dancing With the Stars.

A few blocks away, on a quiet street corner, a small group of Israelis is gathering. Some of them

carry small backpacks and water bottles. Two are going through technical details for the day: How many people are expected? Will they fit in two cars, or should a third be called? The rest of the group anxiously wait for the vehicles to show up; they are about to venture through numerous checkpoints and past the wall into the West Bank.

As the cars head east from Tel Aviv, roadblocks and alternate routes are discussed. One group, headed for the Palestinian village of Nil'in, decides to take a longer way around and avoid the village's main entrance, where an army patrol jeep is known to wait. Gil (some names have been changed to protect the activists from prosecution), on his way to nearby Bil'in, takes his usual route. "If we are stopped," he tells the passengers, "say we are on the way to Cohen's bar mitzvah in the settlement of Nilli. It works every week." Twenty minutes after leaving Tel Aviv, Gil exits the highway at an unmarked turnoff. They are now in the Palestinian territories, a place visited by few Israelis other than settlers and soldiers. A large warning sign in Hebrew reads, "Israeli, attention—if you got this far, you are on the wrong way!"

As far as most of the Jewish public in Israel is concerned, these activists took the wrong way a long time ago. It has been almost a decade since a handful of them started taking part in unarmed Palestinian demonstrations against the occupation. Their number has risen steadily, as has hostility from mainstream Israeli society. Their actions are considered a breach of the old ways of the Zionist left, which for the most part preferred rallies in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, attended by a predominantly Jewish crowd and carried out with police approval and protection. Those rallies targeted government policy and right-wing settlers. But the methods of this younger breed of activists, which involve protesting side by side with Palestinians and confronting the IDF—still the most sacred of Israeli institutions—are seen by most Israelis as breaking a taboo, as no less than betrayal.

Unlike traditional Israeli peace rallies, the West Bank demonstrations are led by Palestinians. The Jewish participants arrive at the invitation of local Palestinian committees, and they must accept the political and tactical choices of the local leadership. Although there is coordination, it's the Palestinians who decide on the course of action and the level of confrontation with the army. The Israelis see themselves as guests.

"The joint struggle opens up a way for us to be supportive of the Palestinians without silencing them and appropriating their suffering," says Ayala Shani, a longtime activist who attends the protests regularly. "It means that Palestinians are leading their own struggle for freedom, and Israelis have the opportunity to stand with them in solidarity."

Under Israeli military law, Palestinians are not allowed to protest the occupation without special permits, which are almost never requested—partly as a matter of principle, but also because they are almost never given. The unarmed demonstrations are usually met with heavy-handed measures, including tear gas, rubber-coated bullets and even live ammunition. Since 2005, twenty-one Palestinians have been killed in these demonstrations, including ten under 18, with thousands injured. Israelis and international activists have been injured too, but so far no Israeli Jews have been killed. The Israeli protesters claim that their presence restrains the army and helps draw media attention. Many Palestinians agree, and over the years they have come to see the Israeli activists as partners.

"The participation of Israelis in demonstrations, unfortunately, does make a difference," says Jonathan Pollak, one of the first activists to take part in the demonstrations and now media coordinator of the Popular Struggle Coordination Committee, a Palestinian umbrella organization of local committees [for more on Pollak, see Rebecca Vilkomerson's interview with him]. "It makes a difference because of the racist nature of our situation. Open-fire regulations, for instance, are a lot more stringent, officially, when Israelis are present. It is, however, important to remember that we

are not much more than a side note in the movement, and that it is the Palestinians who are at its center.

“People are often fascinated by the fact that a handful of Israelis cross the lines this way. But currently this is what we really are, a handful, and the real question, in my opinion, is, How come only so few do so? The sad answer is that most Israelis simply don’t care; to most Israelis, Palestinians simply don’t really exist.” (A few days after we interviewed Pollak for this piece, he was convicted of taking part in an unlawful demonstration in Tel Aviv against the Gaza blockade. As soon as he was released from jail, he rejoined solidarity demonstrations in the West Bank.)

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With the checkpoints behind them, the Israelis drive through Palestinian villages on the last part of their journey. “Five years ago, there were occasional stones thrown at Israeli cars here. Even we got hit a few times,” says Gil. Now people wave hello. Gil parks in the center of Bil’in. A few dozen international activists are already there, some of them buying drinks and eating falafel. The Israeli activists, most of them members of a group called Anarchists Against the Wall, exchange greetings with local Palestinians and discuss the latest news. With the territories practically sealed off by Israel, the Israelis carry out all kinds of tasks for their Palestinian partners: buying much-needed prescription medicine, maintaining video cameras used to film the rallies, even carrying boxes of organic zucchinis grown by a local farmer to one of Tel Aviv’s fashionable restaurants. Some of the Israelis have been learning Arabic to better communicate with their partners in the struggle.

After a while, one of the local Palestinians gathers the Israelis and internationals and explains the reasons for the protest, thanking everyone for coming. Then an Israeli activist gives a more technical briefing: how to deal with tear gas, how to avoid injuries, what to say if you get caught by the soldiers. “Don’t be afraid to get arrested,” he tells his listeners, some of them first-timers and clearly nervous. “Make sure someone knows where you are. You will probably be released within a few hours. Only Palestinians are kept in jail for long periods.”

After the briefing, the Palestinians lead the Israelis and international activists to the edge of the village, with more protesters joining them along the way. Half a mile down the road lies the security barrier, where some twenty soldiers can be seen on the other side. As the protesters approach, the soldiers rush through a gate in the fence, blocking their path, while the protesters chant “Viva Palestine!” and “Free Palestine!” They carry signs in Hebrew, Arabic and English demanding an end to the occupation. Finally, both sides halt, with only a few yards separating them. Itzik, an Israeli activist who has been coming to the demos for five years, carries a Palestinian flag. Like some of the other veteran protesters in Bil’in, he is wearing goggles to protect his eyes from tear gas. Another Israeli activist calls out to the soldiers in Hebrew, “You don’t belong here! Get off the village’s land!”

“You are violating a closed military zone order,” an army officer retorts. “If you don’t leave, you and your friends will be arrested.”

“I was invited here by the people of this village,” comes the answer. “It’s you who are invading it!”

After half an hour of standing and shouting, someone throws a stone. As if they were waiting for this moment, the soldiers respond immediately. Tear gas and stun grenades are thrown at the protesters, with more fired from afar. A disorganized, rushed retreat begins. Back at the village’s edge, the protesters regroup and try to march again toward the fence. This time the soldiers fire tear gas before the activists can get close. On the sides of the road, between the olive trees, Palestinian teens—the shabab, as they are known in Arabic—continue to hurl stones, and IDF snipers respond with rubber-coated bullets, which can be deadly. Gradually, the confrontation begins to assume the

nature of a ritual, with both sides testing the other's patience and resilience. But it's a deadly game: this past December, Jawaher Abu-Rahma collapsed during a protest after inhaling massive amounts of tear gas. She was rushed to a Ramallah hospital, where she died the following morning. This was a year and a half after her brother, Bassam, was killed when a soldier fired a tear gas canister at his chest, also during an unarmed protest.

At the same time as the Bil'in protest, dozens of Palestinians and a few Israelis march toward the separation wall in Nil'in. Weekly protests also take place in Nabi Saleh, al Mas'ara, Beit Umar, Hebron, Iraq Burin, various villages in the South Hebron Hills and in Walaja, just south of the Jerusalem municipal border. Walaja is about to be completely surrounded by the wall, leaving only a narrow gate in what will become an open-air prison for its 2,000 residents. Dozens of Israelis and Palestinians have been arrested while attempting to disrupt the wall's construction there.

Many of these communities have not seen extended, large-scale demonstrations against the occupation since the first intifada, which ended in the early 1990s. (The second intifada began in October 2000 with unarmed protests at Israeli checkpoints, but after dozens of Palestinians were killed by massive Israeli firepower, it gradually took the form of an armed struggle carried out by small cells of militants and aimed at Israeli soldiers, settlers and civilians. Israel, using all its military power, eventually crushed it, and the violence left thousands of casualties in both societies, deepening hostility between Israelis and Palestinians and handing the Israeli left a near-fatal blow.)

"In fact, the Israeli left never recovered from Rabin's assassination" in 1995, says former Knesset Speaker Avraham Burg. "Later, Ehud Barak came and presented his personal failure in Camp David [in 2000] as the failure of the entire way. When the head of the peace camp declared that there was no partner on the other side, it opened the door for unilateralism." Burg, the son of one of Israel's legendary religious leaders, was a prominent voice in the Israeli left during the 1980s and '90s, a member of Peace Now and one of the leaders of the Labor Party; since his retirement from the Knesset in 2003, his criticism of liberal Zionism and its exclusively Jewish nature has deepened. Recently he called for Israeli Jews to explore alternative historical narratives and political models. "There was something unilateral in Zionism from the start, but it became the only way after Camp David," says Burg. "We built the fence unilaterally, and we left Gaza unilaterally. Barak brought us back to the days of Golda Meir, who denied there is such a thing as a Palestinian people." At the same time, the closures on the West Bank—introduced by Israel in the early 1990s and vastly tightened with the second intifada and construction of the separation wall a decade later—ended the daily direct contact, much of it commercial, that was common between Israeli and Palestinian civilians. Today most Israelis don't travel to the West Bank except as part of their military service or on settler-only bypass roads, while a new generation of Palestinians knows Israelis only as soldiers in uniform or as settlers.

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The joint struggle presents a new path for Israelis and Palestinians. While most Palestinians welcome any kind of support for their cause, not many Israelis choose to take this road; but for those who do, it changes their life. "The simple action of being there, behind walls and checkpoints, is subversive on its own," says Adar Grayevsky, 28, an Israeli activist from Tel Aviv. "The whole idea of Israel is built on separation, and the notion that we can break that separation between us and the West Bank is powerful and new."

"Without our partners we could not have had achievements like the international recognition of Bil'in as a place of Palestinian nonviolence, or the Supreme Court ruling that ordered the return of some of the village's land," says Dr. Rateb Abu Rahmah, brother of the imprisoned Abdallah Abu Rahmah. "The Israeli activists and international activists have been with us from the first day. There

have been many Israeli activists who have been arrested and injured. We have seen that these are real partners with us against the wall and the settlements. We have Israelis who even stay with us in our houses because of the IDF night raids. Our struggle is a triangle with the Palestinians, the Israeli activists and the international activists. Without these support pillars, we would not succeed.”

“It takes a lot to go to these protests,” says Burg. “I see a real dedication, even sanctity, in those young people. In Bil’in you might actually get hurt, even killed. Back in the days of Peace Now, none of us thought we would end up in jail.”

The protests usually start over the issue of land confiscation—in most cases, farmland being taken for the construction of the wall, which cuts deep into Palestinian territory, passing through private land, villages and even neighborhoods. In some cases, the trigger is house demolition orders or the seizure of land for nearby settlements.

According to the organizers, the protests are about the human and civil rights of Palestinians living under occupation. They do not address the on-and-off political negotiations between the PA and Israel but focus on the livelihoods of ordinary people. When local leaders want to involve Israelis in the protest, they usually turn to Anarchists Against the Wall. The term “anarchist” is somewhat misleading; though some in AATW follow anarchist ideology, in practice the group focuses on the occupation and violations of Palestinian human rights. AATW, which has a few dozen activists and a somewhat larger support circle of nonmembers who occasionally take part in protests, does not have a political platform. They see themselves as a collective who believe their privileged status as Israeli Jews should be used to assist unarmed Palestinian resistance movements. While it seems that most members of AATW support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (BDS) and a one-state solution to the conflict, the group has never taken a position on such issues, nor does it take a stance on Israeli electoral politics.

“I don’t keep myself busy thinking about one or two states,” explains Ronnie Barkan, who has been attending protests since 2003. “I deal with human rights. I have no interest in nationalism or patriotism—not even Palestinian nationalism. I am learning to be led and not to try to lead.”

AATW was formed as the first parts of the wall were being built, at the height of the second intifada, when violence and tensions were high. The activists were repeatedly arrested and injured. It also took some time for them to gain the trust of Palestinians. “Some worried, and for a good reason, that we were Shin Bet [Israel’s internal security agency],” recalls Pollak. “I remember one demo in which I was taken aside and searched by the shabab. With time, when they saw us standing shoulder to shoulder with them, and especially when they saw how the Israeli army treated us, more trust was gained.” Israeli protesters have been injured and arrested, and a few have been sentenced to short jail terms. Lately, some have been summoned by the Shin Bet to receive warning lectures. Yet there is no way to compare this to the far harsher treatment routinely meted out to Palestinians. The anarchists often refer to their privileged status, which seems to increase their urge to act.

Palestinians still debate the usefulness of cooperating with Israelis (some claim that even if the Israelis mean well, working with them ultimately legitimizes Israel), but in the villages where joint protests take place, the spirit of cooperation is evident. It is common to see Palestinians hiding Israeli activists from soldiers during demonstrations. Palestinians host Israeli and international activists in their homes.

The key turning point occurred when protests erupted in 2003 in Budrus, west of Ramallah. The proposed route of the wall would have resulted in the loss of nearly forty acres of the village’s farmland, crucial to its survival. As Israeli bulldozers started destroying the ancient olive trees, Budrus residents held a series of nonviolent demonstrations, drawing on a long Palestinian tradition

of civil disobedience and popular protest. This led to the formation of a committee of village leaders, who decided to invite activists from AATW. From 2003 to '05, dozens of Israelis and internationals joined the demonstrations in Budrus and surrounding villages. Despite a fierce response by the IDF, including the use of live ammunition, nightly raids on the villages and curfews, the protests grew stronger. Eventually, the Israeli military decided to request a different route for the separation barrier, one that would not annex any Budrus farmland. The joint popular struggle had its first victory.

The Budrus model spread to other West Bank villages. The most notable of these, Bil'in, which lost most of its land to construction of the wall and a huge nearby settlement, has become a worldwide symbol of popular resistance. More than 300 demonstrations have been held there so far—one every Friday for six years. Thousands of Israelis, Palestinians and international supporters, including former US President Jimmy Carter, Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Desmond Tutu and Nation columnist Naomi Klein, have attended the demonstrations. The European Union has officially recognized Abdallah Abu Rahmah, the imprisoned Palestinian leader, as a "human rights defender" for his part in organizing the protests, has sent representatives to all his trials and has pressured the Israeli government to release him.

Over the years, the joint struggle has become more than the choice of a few. It could even be said that the Budrus-Bil'in model is beginning to have an effect on politics in both societies. If Israeli policy in the past decade has searched for ways to contain and isolate the Palestinians, the unarmed struggle and the popular support it receives—mostly through a network of grassroots organizations—creates a countereffect. The popular struggle has refocused attention on the troubles of Palestinians living under occupation. Dealing with the confiscation of land, or exposing the brutality and injustice of the military court system, focuses attention on fundamental issues: the lack of political rights for millions of Palestinians, the absence of freedom, the routine violations of human rights.

The Palestinian Authority has slowly realized the movement's potential. Recently it has made what can seem like attempts to co-opt it or adopt some of its methods. PA officials are present at demonstrations now; Prime Minister Salam Fayyad even attended the one in Bil'in the day Jawaher Abu-Rahma died. The PA's recent attempt to internationalize the conflict by turning to the United Nations echoes the grassroots efforts to gather support for their struggle through cooperation with Israeli and international activists. In both cases, the local leadership reached the conclusion that it can't confront Israel on its own. Now the PA, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (a leftist PLO faction) and Hamas send representatives and give lectures at Bil'in's annual conference on nonviolence. Recently Aziz Dweik, a leading Hamas lawmaker in the West Bank, said, "When we use violence, we help Israel win international support.... The Gaza flotilla has done more for Gaza than 10,000 rockets." Yet at its core, the unarmed struggle remains an independent grassroots operation, and in off-the-record conversations its leading activists are suspicious of the Palestinian senior officials and politicians. Recent demonstrations in support of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia were carefully controlled—and sometimes shut down—by the PA out of fear that mass unarmed resistance in the West Bank could turn on the PA leadership itself. While urban Palestinian activists in Ramallah and Hebron see themselves in solidarity with villages like Bil'in and Nabi Saleh, the model of unarmed resistance has not spread across the cities of the West Bank partly because of PA fears of losing control.

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The grassroots protests have also had a subtle yet unmistakable effect on the Israeli scene, both in offering a new model of mobilization for a new generation of activists and in bringing attention to the suffering of Palestinians. In recent weeks, notable figures from the Israeli center have called for

the security barrier near Bil'in to be moved, and right-wing pundit Ben-Dror Yemini referred to it as "a disgrace" in his weekly column in the daily Ma'ariv. More than 200 Israelis attended the protest in Bil'in in the week after Jawaher Abu-Rahma's death, including representatives from the liberal Zionist party Meretz and from grassroots peace movements such as Combatants for Peace.

The activism has certainly re-energized elements of the Israeli left. Since 2009 the joint struggle model has been used with great success in Jerusalem, after the city's police started enforcing evacuation orders on Palestinian families in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, north of the Old City. As religious settlers, financed by a radical right-wing organization with deep US connections, took over Palestinian homes, a few left-wing Israelis joined protests. Some of them even kept watch around the clock and slept with the Palestinian families so they could report harassment by settlers and be present in the event of further evictions. Eventually a series of Friday demonstrations, in the tradition of the West Bank protests, was established.

Throughout the winter of 2009-10, anarchists and other activists were arrested in large numbers in Sheikh Jarrah. That, and the central location of the protest, drew media attention. Soon hundreds of Israelis were protesting each week, many coming by bus from Tel Aviv, Haifa and Beersheva.

As the Sheikh Jarrah protest grew, representatives of the old Zionist left started showing up, among them Meretz Knesset members, leaders of Peace Now and public figures like author David Grossman and former Attorney General Michael Ben-Yair. Sheikh Jarrah reopened the Israeli debate on the future of Jerusalem and presented a challenge both to the city's pro-settler mayor and the Israeli government. For the first time in years, Israelis had to discuss—in very concrete terms—the principle of dividing Jerusalem. A group of attorneys called for the government to confiscate settler real estate in Sheikh Jarrah and hand it back to the Palestinians (unfortunately, the municipality has different ideas: recently it began preparations for constructing a Jewish housing project on the site of the old Shepherd Hotel).

The demonstrations led to the creation of a Jewish group called Solidarity Sheikh Jarrah, which in recent months has joined protests in other Jerusalem neighborhoods where settlers have seized Palestinian property. Solidarity has also attended rallies in Israel proper, including support for an unrecognized Palestinian village not far from Tel Aviv, and against the repeated destruction and evacuation of the unrecognized Bedouin village El-Araqib, in the southern Negev Desert near Beersheva. (There are dozens of "unrecognized" villages in Israel—Palestinian communities whose inhabitants were not expelled in the 1948 war but that the Israeli government has refused to accept as legitimate municipalities, thus depriving them of routine public services like water, sewage, electricity, transportation links, etc.)

"We are going to places where the occupation and expulsion actually take place, and we do it together with the local community," says Avner Inbar, an activist with Solidarity Sheikh Jarrah. "We are not that interested in large rallies in Tel Aviv, where Jews stand on their own and declare that the occupation is wrong. We want to confront racism and discrimination where they happen. This joint effort, together with the local Palestinian communities, is something new for everyone involved in it, and for many people it becomes a transformative experience."

"The meaning of Zionism in Israel today is to be Jewish and not Arab," says former Speaker Burg, who attends the protest in Sheikh Jarrah regularly. "In that context, the left cannot go on calling itself Zionist. We should ask ourselves whether Zionist humanism isn't a contradiction in terms these days. We should go beyond ethnic democracy and toward a real joint society, in which Jews and Arabs are really equal." Inspired by the demonstrations and convinced of the need for a new form of leftist politics in Israel, Burg is trying to form an Arab-Jewish party, though he doesn't intend to run for the Knesset himself. "I'm done with short-term politics," he says. "What's important for me is to

help create a new perspective, to fill the void.”

While Solidarity is becoming an Israeli movement, operating in towns, neighborhoods and villages inside the Green Line, the anarchists remain focused on the West Bank. In our last visit to a demonstration in the village of Nabi Saleh, the Israeli activists, still red-eyed from tear gas, join their Palestinian hosts for a Friday evening dinner. For many of them, these relationships, formed over years of demonstrations, seem to be the real reward for their efforts. That’s what keeps them coming every week to the West Bank. “We are not demonstrating because we believe change is around the corner,” says Ronnie Barkan. “It’s because this is the minimum we could do. It’s as simple as that.”

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P.S.

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