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Israeli Social Protests: Talking About a Revolution, But Not the Occupation?

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Israeli social protests reached critical mass on Saturday when hundreds of thousands took to the streets in cities throughout Israel for affordable housing prices, higher wages and better standards of living. But despite their legitimate claims, the protests convey a chaotic message that remains silent on key issues that affect its potential as a movement.

It all started when 25-year old Daphne Leef, inspired by the Arab revolts, formed a Facebook group calling for national demonstrations against rising housing prices. The plan was to camp out on the lush Rothschild Boulevard in central Tel Aviv until demands were met. “[Rothschild] is our personal Tahrir Square [...] only 200 meters from where the independence of the state was declared,” Leef wrote on Facebook.

Leef’s call to action hit a raw nerve. All over Israel, tent-protests spread like wildfire and turned into full-blown camps with free-for-all makeshift kitchens, democratic fora and spontaneous drum circles. Within days, thousands were marching on the streets of Tel Aviv to openly express their disapproval of national housing policies and general standards of living.

For years, Netanyahu portrayed himself as the resolute captain of Israel’s “speedboat”, a booming export-driven, high-tech economy with a competitive, open marketplace. The message was that neo-liberal capitalism with its mass privatization and limitless free markets works, even in a global financial crisis.

The actual figures reveal that Netanyahu’s speedboat left most ordinary Israelis far behind. A quick overview: an average apartment in Tel Aviv is too expensive for 90 percent of the population, housing prices rose between 15 and 25 percent in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv over the last two years alone while an economically conservative Israeli government has continuously obstructed affordable housing projects. Add low wages, high living costs and notoriously terrible public transportation; and the question becomes not why the Israeli people are protesting, but why it took so long for them to take to the streets. [For an in-depth overview of Israel’s housing problems, read this fascinating article by +972’s Noam Sheizaf]

But now the Israelis have finally risen up. The atmosphere is festive, protesters of all ages are surprised to find themselves on the streets – many of them for the first time – and there is a genuine feeling that things are going to change. But despite its legitimate claims, the protests convey a chaotic message that remains silent on key issues that affect its potential as a movement.

At the root of it all, there seems to be a lack of conceptual clarity concerning its message. As Dahlia Scheindlin put it: “The right hopes to annul the message of the protestors by smearing them as left [so] the protestors hope to avoid the smear, by refusing to say anything of substance at all.” As a result, some organizers are trying to convey the ambiguous message that the protests are not ‘political’ in any way: not defined by political parties, nor politically motivated. As one activist, Adi, concluded: “it’s a social movement, not a political movement.”

But the fear of being labeled as leftist has more far-reaching, disempowering consequences. The demonstrations openly call for the just distribution of public resources, an increased welfare state and equal rights for everyone: traditional left-wing demands. Yet, most organizers interviewed by the AIC refused to recognize the essentially socialist political dimensions their protests are taking.

“The ‘Week of Rage’ is not a socialist movement, we’re not trying to raise the communist Red Flag here,” said a student-leader organizing the protest in Tel Aviv. “Instead, our only demand is that the government imposes stricter housing regulations and provides more social benefits to young students.”

The consequence is that without a clear agenda defined by a coherent moral compass, it seems difficult to formulate precise goals. “We just want the government to do something,” says Ilan, a protest organizer who works two jobs on top of his scholarship to pay for his degree in Political Science. “We are not real estate agents, we are not business experts. We are students, teachers, artists, middle class people, homeless people, and we don’t have a solution. There is only our general agenda, which is the voice of people,” he told the AIC.

Since the movement is a true grass-roots movement that relies on open debate and is more often defined by what it is not than what it actually is, it’s understandable that there is no solid theoretical perspective on the housing crisis.

But something else, something fundamental, is lacking. It’s that bright neon-pink elephant in the room: what role does the occupation play in the current housing crisis? What about the settlers who, according to Peace Now, received 15.36% of all public investment in construction for housing in 2009, while the number of settlers was less than 4% of the residents of Israel?

When settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories want to buy or build apartment, they receive – amongst other perks – a comfortable mortgage supplement, 50% funding of development costs of the building project, and a 69% discount on the value of the land. Then add the cost of infrastructure, constant Israeli military presence, and private security companies.

To those Israelis that do not live in the West Bank, the Israeli government is less generous. An Israeli family in Tel Aviv, for example, has to spend approximately 90 full family incomes to pay for a standard apartment in the city. In the whole of Israel, reduced assistance to apartment buyers, privatization of the mortgage market, cutbacks in rental assistance for disadvantaged populations, and the elimination of public housing have defined the domestic housing market for a decade [see the latest Affordable Housing Coalition Report]. This difference is the result of policy, or ‘politics’, not chance.

When faced with these figures and the fact that Israelis pay 75 percent more tax for housing than citizens of other OECD countries, it seems difficult to maintain that the occupation has little to do with rising Israeli housing prices or that the current protests are somehow apolitical. Ultimately, by ignoring that the housing crisis is closely intertwined with the intricate matrix of occupation and the political undercurrents in society, the current protests will retain their superficial character.

On the other hand, the protests constitute a healthy – and rare – act of civil disobedience that should not be patronized. There are several undeniably positive outcomes. Israelis are shelving their apathy, thoughts are shared, debates held, and there are touching elements of true democracy amongst the rallies. At the same time, civil society is making itself heard by actively participating in the events while politicians, hobos and students all wait patiently for their turn to speak at ad-hoc debates.

“We did this not because we thought we could camp here for a week and the government would solve our problem,” Jerusalem resident Adi says. “Instead we are here because we want people to get involved and talk about the problem. Now that people are talking, they might unite. If they do, maybe something will change.”

It still remains to be seen whether that change will only entail reduced housing prices, or if it can actually cause further ripples in the Israeli political landscape. For now, however, the activists are dancing on an iceberg, softly cracking its surface; but they refuse to dive deep into the dark abyss below, where uncomfortable realities await.

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P.S.

* Monday, 08 August 2011 14:55. Mark Weston for the Alternative Information Center (AIC) :
<http://www.alternativenews.org/english/index.php/topics/israeli-society/3731-israeli-social-protests-talking-about-a-revolution-but-not-the-occupation->