

The fall of the Israeli peace movement and why leftists continue to fight

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‘Peacenik’ is widely used as a slur in Israel. Here four campaigners explain their demise and why they hold on

It’s a sad-looking protest. A few dozen members of Israel’s beleaguered peace movement mill around on a road in east Jerusalem, holding signs in Arabic, English and Hebrew declaring: “Stop the occupation.” Older, well-dressed intellectual leftwingers with grey hair and round spectacles mingle with a scruffier younger crowd.

One man with a cigarette dangling in his mouth rings a cowbell. A few Israeli police look on with bored expressions. Traffic meanders by as normal. Everyone seems to know each other. Another person sitting on the side of the road gestures to a journalist. “Do I have shit on my head?” he asks, looking up for birds on power lines overhead.

This is part of what remains of the Israeli peace camp, crippled by a political system that has lurched wildly to the right. “Leftist” and “peacenik” are widely used as dismissive slurs against an ever-embattled section of society who are increasingly on the fringe and slammed as traitors.

In an upcoming election, the issue of the Palestinians – once the central focus of Israeli politics – is often sidestepped. A December poll found while more than half of Jewish Israelis want peace negotiations, almost 75% believed they would fail. The group that ran the survey, the Israel Democracy Institute, said the peace issue has “disappeared almost completely from the Israeli public discourse”.

Four members of Israel’s beleaguered leftwing explain how this happened and why they are holding on:

The protester

One demonstrator at the rally, Pepe Goldman, an Argentinian Jew who emigrated to Israel in 1976, has protested ever since. “There is a process of burning out,” he says on the sidelines. “Unfortunately, we are a small minority. Israelis are very, very ...” he says, before restarting the sentence: “I would say they don’t give a shit about what is going on.”

After years of failed attempts, many Israelis are asking themselves whether peace, not to mention a Palestinian state, is necessary when Gaza is entirely blocked off, the West Bank occupation is tightly managed, and the economy is booming.

The 67-year-old no longer protests to convince his fellow citizens. He comes for more limited but concrete reasons – as an Israeli, with the extra rights under the law that entails, he can stand as a human shield for Palestinians who are facing forced evictions or attacks from settlers.

Despite beatings by settlers and dwindling numbers, he continues his activism every Friday. "We only live once. I could not forgive myself if I let all this happen."

The repentant soldier

Yehuda Shaul is 37, but his whitened beard, broad shoulders and weatherbeaten face paint a picture of a much older man. On many days, the Israeli ex-combat soldier is at the front of a bus, touring the West Bank to show Israelis and foreign visitors what the occupation looks like. The organisation he founded, Breaking the Silence, is made up of veterans who want to expose the reality of Israel's grip over Palestinian life.

Shaul's knowledge is encyclopaedic. He appears to know the date of every settlement – and there are more than 140 with approximately 600,000 residents – was established and how each one affects the Palestinians living around it.

When Breaking the Silence first started after the violent second intifada, Shaul says his group was "mainstream" – critical voices, but one that came from the respected institution of the armed forces. "We had earned the right to speak out."

But after Benjamin Netanyahu made deals with hard-line religious nationalists in 2015 to form the most rightwing coalition government in the country's history, pro-settler forces grew in power.

That is when the attacks on Breaking the Silence ramped up. Shaul reels off some from memory: an arson attempt on their offices; people working undercover to infiltrate the organisation; a law that was dubbed the "Breaking the Silence" bill to ban them from speaking in schools; and a bloody nose last summer when a settler punched him during a tour. Netanyahu even cancelled a meeting with the German foreign minister after he said he would speak to the former troops.

One particularly bitter episode occurred after phone numbers of his colleague's family members were posted online by a troll. Someone called her grandparents at 3am pretending to be a hospital worker to say she had died in a car crash. Shaul was shocked but unsurprised. "When the defence minister calls you a spy, and the prime minister says you crossed a red line, and the tourism minister says you're a traitor. People answer the call," he says. "Remember McCarthy? He's alive and kicking and here in Israel."

The columnist

Amira Hass drinks a small whiskey in a bar in Ramallah to fend off a cold. Behind her the famed 1936 "Visit Palestine" poster hangs on the wall. Since 1993, she has lived in the territories, first in Gaza and now in the West Bank. As an Israeli writer, she says you should reside in the place you write about. But she cannot think of a single other Jewish Israeli journalist who lives here.

Ending 51-years of Israeli military rule is not an issue in this election, she says, because a new generation has come "to regard this reality as normal".

There used to be an "unease" in society, "because there was still an understanding that there was a contradiction between our self-image as enlightened, progressive, liberal, democratic, and the occupation. You had had a generation who knew what life was like before [the occupation began in] 1967."

As the settler movement has succeeded in becoming a significant sector of society, the idea of annexing the huge swaths of land they have taken is rapidly becoming a mainstream idea, she says. "They are high middle class, they are savvy, they are in the military, they are in hi-tech."

There is no longer pro- or anti-peace camps in Israel, Hass adds, just "the winning camp".

The politician

Yossi Beilin, the only one of the four to have held a position in government, is also the most optimistic. Much of his three decades of political life was in the pro two-state Labour party but also in Meretz, which is firmly anti-occupation. Both parties are now in decline. In the 1990s, he was part of secret talks in Norway that led to the Oslo accords, a framework to make a peace deal that ultimately stalled.

“There is a general feeling that there is nothing to do,” he says.

Few doves like him remain in the Israeli parliament. The former Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni, one of the country’s most prominent peace advocates, left politics this month after polls indicated her tiny party would not make it into parliament again. In her leaving speech, Livni said peace had become a “dirty word”.

Beilin, now 70, says he promised to leave politics at 60 to allow a younger crowd to bring new ideas. But would he have retired if his pro-peace ideology had been more successful? “It’s a good question. Maybe not.”

Still, he denies peace is off the agenda. It is a primary part of the Israeli psyche, he argues. “Sometimes it is the elephant in the room (but) this is the real story of Israel.”

Asked to explain his steadfast optimism, he replies: “Because we need it badly.”

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