

Standing Together: Campaigning against war and racism inside Israel after October 7

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Omdim be'Yachad-Naqef Ma'an, or Standing Together, is a Jewish-Arab social movement active in Israel that has been organising against racism and occupation and for equality and social justice. Uri Weltmann, who is the national field organiser for Standing Together, spoke to LINKS International Journal of Socialist Renewal's Federico Fuentes about how they have responded to Netanyahu's latest war on Gaza and rising anti-Arab racism within Israel, as well as what current events mean in terms of prospects for lasting peace.

After more than two months of war and rising casualties, how is Israel's war on Gaza being viewed in Israeli society? And how have Israelis responded to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's actions since October 7?

October 7 was a terrifying moment for Israeli society. Hamas' brutal attack on towns and villages — murdering civilians, including children and the elderly, in their homes and taking 240 Israelis hostage — shocked our society, spiralling it into grief and anger.

The war has received broad support from within Israeli public opinion. For the most part, Netanyahu's claim that the war is being waged with the aim of "toppling Hamas rule" has gone unchallenged by mainstream commentators and politicians.

However, more than two months into the war, there is growing discontent towards Netanyahu's policies. A recent Israeli Democracy Institute poll [shows two-thirds of Israelis](#) believe the government does not have a clear plan for the day after the war.

There is also a large majority that thinks early elections should be called following the war. Public opinion polls project that, should such an election be held, the [ruling Likud Party would lose a third of its seats](#), and the parties that comprise Netanyahu's far-right coalition would lose their majority in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament).

This discontent is mostly manifested in the streets in the form of a growing protest movement led by the families and friends of Israeli hostages held captive by Hamas in Gaza. They are demanding negotiations towards a ceasefire agreement that would allow the hostages to return home. About 130 hostages remain in Gaza, among them elderly citizens who need medical care and even young children, the youngest being an 11 months old baby.

The families' protests have received support from a broad strata of Israeli society, even as they turn a blaming finger towards the government, condemning it using harsh words. Their protests around the country have brought tens of thousands onto the streets and were seminal in forcing the government to approve the previous ceasefire agreement in November, as well as pressuring it to resume negotiations more recently.

It is worth noting that during the first ten months of 2023, in the lead up to the war, there was a mass protest movement in Israel against Netanyahu's plan for a judicial overhaul, which would have allowed his government to concentrate more power in its hands by appointing judges and curtailing democratic freedoms. While these protests have not continued in the same fashion after October 7, they created an atmosphere of general disapproval towards Netanyahu's government.

Standing Together has been organising Jewish-Arab Solidarity Rallies across Israel. It also initiated an emergency ad-hoc organising effort called the Jewish-Arab Solidarity Guard. What can you tell us about these initiatives and the response Standing Together has received to them?

Each of our Jewish-Arab Solidarity Rallies held in cities throughout Israel has been attended by hundreds of people, despite attempts by extreme right-wing activists to pressure venues we rented to retract their agreement to host us. Those who have gathered at these rallies have heard speeches by Jewish and Arab leaders of Standing Together in support of Israeli-Palestinian peace, ending the occupation, and stopping the racist witch-hunt against Palestinian citizens of Israel who speak out against the injustices of war.

We have centred our message around the issue of full equality — civic and national — for the Palestinian citizens of Israel, as well as opposition to the terrible human toll that the war on Gaza has taken on the lives of innocent civilians. We do so not standing outside of our society, but from within, with deep sympathy for our friends, relatives, co-workers and partners who lost loved ones on October 7 in Hamas' unjustifiable and indefensible terrorist attack on civilians in their homes.

The biggest rally so far was in Haifa, which was attended by 700 people. Extreme right-wing activists pressured an event hall to prevent us from holding our rally there, so we went to the mosque in the Kababir neighbourhood in Haifa. Personally, it was my first time organising a political event inside a mosque... Yet hundreds of Jewish and Arab-Palestinian residents of Haifa came!

After the 300 seats in the hall were filled, more than 200 sat on the floor or stood in the aisles, until eventually there was no longer any room in the main hall. This meant that more than 120 people had to pack a nearby room, where the speeches were screened via video. This was one of the single biggest meetings I helped to organise. [International media](#) found this rally interesting, as the sight of Jews in Israel, packing a mosque amid a war, to hear speeches for peace was indeed an interesting sight.

Standing Together has also been setting up local groups throughout the country called Jewish-Arab Solidarity Networks or Jewish-Arab Solidarity Guard, to prepare for the fact that the political leadership within the Israeli state is pushing for a clash between Jewish and Palestinian citizens inside Israel.

Itamar Ben-Gvir — the most extremist, hawkish nationalist minister ever to preside in the Israeli government — is openly talking about preparing for a scenario similar to May 2021.. He has handed out guns and motivated people to form local militias in big mixed cities, such as Yafa, Haifa, Akko and Lyd. This is a very dangerous development.

Rather than sitting on the sidelines and letting the right wing take the initiative to push in this dangerous direction, we in Standing Together, along with other partners, have been working on the ground, setting up these solidarity networks to bring together Jewish and Arab neighbours from different neighbourhoods in the same city or adjacent towns, to do solidarity and mutual aid work and promote equality and anti-racism in the public sphere.

The Jewish-Arab Solidarity Guard has also set up a hotline, operated by volunteers, where people can ask for assistance. We have been combating racism and dehumanisation, and supporting Arab citizens who are being discriminated against or harassed in their workplaces or higher education institutions. We have also been removing racist and violent signs from public spaces and putting up others calling for peace and solidarity.

Some of our groups have faced state repression. Standing Together activists in West Jerusalem, both Jews and Palestinians, were detained by the police. Their crime? Hanging posters that said “Jews and Arabs, we will get through this together.” This shows the extent of the public atmosphere inside Israel right now.

The events of the past few weeks have led many to conclude that the possibility of a two-state solution is over. How does Standing Together view the issue of one state/two states and the implications of this war for achieving such an outcome?

All conversations about the future of this country must start with the most basic premise: there are millions of Jewish-Israelis in this country, and none of them are going anywhere, just as there are millions of Arab-Palestinians in this country, and none of them are going anywhere. This truth should be the cornerstone of any serious discussion about how to end the decades-long violent national conflict.

This is not the view of the Israeli political establishment, which has propped up the conception of “managing the conflict” for the past twenty years. This paradigm, which utterly failed on October 7, claims there is no urgency in resolving the Palestinian question and that Israel can continue to maintain prolonged military rule over millions of Palestinian devoid of citizenship and denied basic human rights in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza.

The Israeli political establishment believes that while occasional eruptions of violence are unfortunate, they will be local and quick, with years of “normality” in between. This was expressed not only by Netanyahu, but by his political opponents within the establishment, such as Naftali Bennet, who before becoming prime minister said the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could not be resolved but must be endured, like a piece of [“shrapnel in the butt”](#).

October 7 demonstrated the bankruptcy of the concept of “managing the conflict”. Any notion of eternal military rule over the millions of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories is doomed to fail and lead to future violence — undermining safety and security for both Palestinians and Israelis.

The Palestinian people will not concede to giving up their right to national self-determination in a state of their own. Therefore, within the current power dynamics, the choice is between the forced transfer of millions of Palestinians, making them refugees once again (an option not excluded from discussion by [some in the Israeli establishment](#)), the physical elimination of an entire people (which some [Ultra-Nationalist Kahanist politicians](#) openly talk about) or recognising the Palestinian right to sovereignty and independence.

The last option — that of creating an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel — is an option very much feared by the Israeli right wing. The Religious Zionism party, headed by Bezalel Smotrich, was quick to buy a huge billboard on Ayalon Highway, in the centre of Tel-Aviv, and place a sign there that read [“The Palestinian Authority = Hamas”](#).

They understand that, after October 7, there are growing voices saying any return to the status quo ante bellum is impossible, and that the option of reengaging in negotiations with the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organisation] towards a diplomatic settlement will again be on the table —

especially if centre-left parties muster a majority in the Knesset, as public opinion polls suggest.

Standing Together stands for the right of both peoples in our country to live in peace, with security, independence and justice, and puts its weight behind the call to re-engage with the PLO towards achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Hamas and Likud both deny that the other people have the right to live in peace and safety. We place ourselves in opposition to them and on the side of the people in this land who deserve a secure future.

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P.S.

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