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The anti-war left makes inroads in Israel: An interview with Standing Together's Uri Weltmann

Monday 3 June 2024, by [FUENTES Federico](#), [WELTMANN Uri](#) (Date first published: 15 May 2024).

Omdim be'Yachad-Naqef Ma'an, or Standing Together, is a Jewish-Arab social movement in Israel that organises against racism and occupation, and for equality and social justice. Federico Fuentes interviewed Standing Together's national field organiser Uri Weltmann to discuss the growing peace movement inside Israel, how activists are confronting far-right extremists seeking to disrupt humanitarian aid going to the Gaza Strip, and the left's recent electoral breakthroughs.



Standing Together protest

Federico Fuentes - How has the peace movement inside Israel developed since October 7? Is the movement succeeding in shifting broader public opinion and undermining Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war efforts? And what role is Standing Together playing within the movement?

Uri Weltmann - After October 7, Israeli police limited people's right to protest and exercise their civil liberties. It was nearly impossible to get a permit to demonstrate. That is why, throughout October and November, most of the actions taken by the peace movement — including Standing Together — were not necessarily marches, pickets and rallies. Instead, we hung posters in the streets saying "Only Peace Will Bring Security" and organised emergency Jewish-Arab conferences in two dozen towns and cities across Israel, where we raised the demand for an alternative path to the government's.

Only in December did openings arise to organise larger protests. Standing Together brought hundreds to a rally in Haifa on December 16, and then a further thousand people to a rally in Tel Aviv on December 28. In January, we had our first march against the war. A coalition of more than 30 peace movements and organisations mobilised thousands of people.

The latest, and biggest, demonstrations to date occurred in early May, involving Palestinian and Jewish speakers and thousands marching in Tel-Aviv under the banner "Stop the War, Bring Back the Hostages". One of the speakers was Shachar Mor (Zahiru), whose nephew is being held captive in Gaza by Hamas. He strongly criticised the cynicism of Netanyahu and his allies, and called for an

end to the war in order to bring back the hostages. Avivit John — a survivor of the massacre in Kibbutz Beeri, where many innocent civilians were murdered on October 7 — told the crowd that while she lost friends and family in the Hamas attack, she did not want us as a society to lose our humanity as well. She called for an end to the war, recognition of the shared humanity of Israelis and Palestinians alike, and to bring back the hostages.

Alongside these protests, there has also been a broader movement calling for the return of the hostages, which over time has developed along explicit anti-war lines. In the first months after October 7, families and friends of the hostages organised demonstrations to raise awareness of their plight, with a strategy of lobbying the government. However, two months ago this movement shifted to the left when it linked up with anti-Netanyahu organisations. They publicly announced that they had concluded that Netanyahu and his government were an obstacle to a ceasefire agreement that could return the hostages alive. Instead, they said, what is needed is mass protest to bring down his government and force early elections.

A few weeks ago, when negotiations between Israel and Hamas seemed on the brink of an agreement, this protest movement openly declared that they supported ending the war in exchange for returning the hostages. They held one of their mass Saturday protests in Tel Aviv — attended by tens of thousands — under the slogan “Hostages, not Rafah”, and popularised the chant “Kulam Tmurat Kulam” (in Hebrew: “[Release] all of them, in exchange for all of them”), which is a call to release the thousands of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jail in exchange for the Israeli hostages taken by Hamas.

This broad protest movement has shifted the political climate in Israel: the right-wing parties that comprise Netanyahu’s coalition are losing ground. While they won 64 out of 120 seats in the Knesset (Israel’s parliament) in the November 2022 elections, according to recent polls they would only win between 45-52 seats if new elections were held. This spells trouble for Netanyahu, as it not only means he would be ousted from office, but that his trial over corruption would resume and he could possibly end up in jail. So he has both a political and personal interest in a prolonged and protracted war on Gaza, as demanded by his far-right coalition partners. He knows that a hostage deal will most likely mean an end to the war. And an end to the war would mean the unravelling of his coalition government and early elections — and with that political defeat and possibly loss of personal freedom. This assessment is what brought the broad protest movement calling for the return of the hostages to realise that Netanyahu is an obstacle that must be removed, rather than a mere stakeholder that requires convincing.

Standing Together members have intervened in these mass protests — in Tel-Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem, Beer Sheva, Kfar Sava, Karmiel and elsewhere — stressing that the safe return of the hostages must be accompanied by an end to the war and the further killing of innocent civilians in Gaza. Furthermore, our message is that the long-term safety of both peoples will not be achieved through war, occupation and siege. Rather, it requires ending the occupation and achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace that recognises the right of everyone to live in freedom, security and independence. There are millions of Jewish-Israelis in our country — and none of them are going anywhere. There are also millions of Palestinians in our country — and none of them are going anywhere. This must be the starting point of our politics if we are to imagine a future of justice, liberation and security.

Standing Together established the Humanitarian Guard to counter far-right attempts to block aid convoys going to Gaza. What can you tell us about this initiative?

In mid-May, the Israeli public’s attention was drawn to images and videos of violent and extremist settlers, known as “The Hilltop Youth”. They attacked supply trucks at the Tarqumiah checkpoint —

a main border crossing connecting the Occupied Palestinian West Bank with Israel — that were carrying food and other humanitarian aid to the besieged Gaza Strip. Palestinian truck drivers were beaten and hospitalised, bags of flour and wheat trashed and trucks set on fire. These violent attacks received media attention, locally and internationally, especially as they occurred in front of Israeli soldiers and police who did nothing to stop them.

In response, Standing Together announced the formation of the Humanitarian Guard. This is an initiative to bring together everyday peace activists from across Israel to act as a physical barrier between the extremist settlers and trucks at the Tarqumiah checkpoint, document what is happening and force police to do their jobs. To date, more than 900 people have signed up as volunteers. Everyday, dozens of people come to the checkpoint via organised transport from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv or by private cars. Our protective presence at the Tarqumiah checkpoint allowed hundreds of trucks to safely pass during the first two weeks of the Humanitarian Guard, delivering tons of food to the civilian population in the Gaza Strip where there is growing mass starvation and an unfolding humanitarian catastrophe.

The first day I was there, police were forced to push the settlers aside and allow aid trucks to pass, with drivers honking their horns in support. The settlers looked visibly upset by our presence and the fact we far outnumbered them. They left the checkpoint, but we found out by monitoring their WhatsApp group chats that they were reassembling down the road to attack the aid trucks before they arrived at the checkpoint. When we arrived at the intersection where they were, we found them pillaging a truck, destroying food packets and throwing food on the side of the road. It was only when we arrived that the police reluctantly moved them to the side of the road, allowing the ravaged truck to drive away. Our activists collected the food from the side of the road and loaded it onto the next trucks. We also documented the attacks by the settlers and filed complaints, which resulted in the police detaining a few of them.

We see the Humanitarian Guard as both a way to express solidarity with people in the Gaza Strip and to wage a fight over the character of our society: we refuse to allow Israeli society to be modelled after the morality of the far-right fanatic zealots who dehumanise Palestinians and promote a politics of death. Standing Together, as a movement, is rooted inside Israeli society, with all its complexities, and is working to shift public opinion and organise Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel to build a new majority within our society — one that can advance towards peace, equality, and social and climate justice.

The United Nations recently voted to upgrade Palestine’s status while certain European governments have now officially recognised Palestine. Even the US has drawn a line at supplying Israel with bombs to attack Rafah. Is there a sense within Israel that it is losing international support? What impact is this having on the public’s views towards the government?

The UN vote to upgrade the recognition of the State of Palestine, as well as the statements made by several countries, including Spain, Norway and Ireland, are important diplomatic steps towards reinforcing the international legitimacy of the fight for Palestinian liberation and statehood. I am convinced — and there is broad international consensus around this — that UN resolutions serve as the best basis to allow Palestinians to win their right to national self-determination, through the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. The Green Line (the pre-June 4, 1967 boundary) would serve as the basis for the border between the Palestinian and Israeli states. Such a peace agreement would have to include: dismantling all Israeli settlements in the Occupied West Bank, which are illegal according to international law; a just and agreed-upon solution for Palestinian refugees based on UN resolutions; taking down the so-called Separation Wall built in the early 2000s; and releasing Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, including the more

than 3600 “administrative detainees” who have been held captive without charges, trial or convictions, in some cases for many years.

Within Israel, the mainstream media portrays this shift in public opinion abroad and diplomatic moves as supposedly aimed against all Israelis. The Israeli political establishment tries to conflate the government and state with regular people. It tries to portray international criticism of the Netanyahu government’s action in Rafah as criticism levelled against all Israeli citizens, while war crimes accusations against Netanyahu and other high-ranking Israeli officials are portrayed as accusations made against all Israelis. This has the effect of consolidating people around the Netanyahu government, so that even people who are critical of its actions or who seek a political alternative find themselves siding with him against the Hague.

This shows the importance of creating a space inside Israeli society for criticising the policies of the political establishment. If all critique is external, or if criticisms conflate the people and government, it will have the effect of closing rather than widening the gap between the majority of people and the current leadership.

Amid the ongoing war, local elections were held a couple of months back in which, for the first time, Standing Together obtained representation on the Tel-Aviv and Haifa municipal councils. What can you tell us about these results and their significance in terms of building a new left in Israel?

Local elections were held in Israel on February 27. Originally planned for October, they were postponed due to the war. Held once every five years, these elections determine the makeup of the municipal councils that run the affairs of cities and towns, approve budgets and devise local policy. In the months prior to the elections, two new urban movements, both in ideological affinity with Standing Together, emerged in Tel-Aviv and Haifa to contest those elections.

In Tel Aviv, the local movement, Purple City, is headed by Itamar Avneri, a member of the Standing Together leadership. It unites a coalition of mostly urban youth around questions of housing and climate justice. In September, it joined with others on the left, such as the Communist Party, a local environmental movement and some community activists, to form an electoral coalition called We Are All the City. This coalition obtained 14,882 votes (7.6%) at the election and won 3 out of the 31 seats on city council. Avneri, who was the third candidate on the coalition’s slate, was elected as a city councillor.

In Haifa, the local movement, The City’s Majority, is headed by Sally Abed, another member of the Standing Together leadership. It contested the elections on its own and won 3451 votes (3%), electing Abed as the movement’s sole city councillor. This was the first time a slate for the Haifa city council was headed by a Palestinian woman. The slate also included Orwa Adam, an openly gay Palestinian activist — a first in Israeli electoral history.

Both tickets were joint Jewish-Arab movements and although organisationally, legally and financially independent from Standing Together — as required by electoral laws — both were publicly recognised as in line with our “brand” of politics. These experiences of successful electoral breakthroughs from below are important to build a new, viable, people’s left in Israel — one that is grassroots-based, internationalist in its orientation and grounded in socialist values. In the coming years, this is the main challenge facing everyone who hopes to see a combative left in Israel capable of confronting the mainstream institutional hegemony and building power around an alternative political project.

P.S.

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