

Toward an anti-fascist front in Israel

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“What’s happening to you?” That’s the question Yoana Gonen posed, in her recent [column](#) for Haaretz, to the so-called “leftists” vowing to vote for Israel’s right-wing former prime minister, Naftali Bennett. The fact that such a trend exists is bewildering, but the answer to Gonen’s question is clear. What is happening to these “leftists” is the same thing that’s happening to all of Israeli society: a profound and accelerating slide toward fascism.

Nine months into a war with no end in sight, the Israeli revenge campaign in the besieged, starved, and devastated Gaza Strip continues apace. This is despite the unprecedented number of casualties, the significant diplomatic cost, and the genocidal [war crimes](#) in Gaza, for which [arrest warrants](#) [hover](#) over Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.

It’s very difficult for a society stuck in a continuous state of trauma to evaluate or even notice the transformations it is undergoing in real time. The Israeli public is still recovering from the shock of October 7, and while the world keeps its eyes on Gaza — and rightly so — Israelis’ attention remains focused elsewhere: on the hostages still trapped in Gaza and soldiers killed there; those evacuated from their homes in the north and the south; the shattered economy; and a war in the north that could break out at any moment.

But it’s impossible to ignore how Israel has adopted a new national ethos under the auspices of this war — one that completely abandons any lip service to the idea of democracy in favor of fascist values.

Since the start of the war, the Knesset has exploited the chaos and confusion among the public to advance a [series of extreme anti-democratic laws](#). “The IDF and Shin Bet Certification Law” makes it easier for these bodies to penetrate private computers used to operate CCTV cameras and to erase, alter, or disrupt materials on them, without the knowledge of the computer’s owner and without permission from a court. A recent amendment to the “Fighting Terrorism Law” criminalizes the prolonged consumption of content produced by Hamas or ISIS, punishable by one year in prison.

The “Likes Law” bill seeks to penalize the mere act of “liking” social media posts that “incite terror”, while another proposed law would expand the Shin Bet’s [surveillance of teachers](#). And to these we must add the forced closure of Al Jazeera’s offices, which only increased the appetite of Israeli ministers to promote a law permitting them to shut down Israeli media outlets without any limitations.

Another particularly alarming manifestation of this slide toward fascism is the transformation of the police into a body of henchmen that almost exclusively serves the interests of the government and its worldview. Instead of protecting Israeli citizens, police are cracking down on those who protest the government and the war — even those demanding to bring the hostages home — while also inflicting

horrifying violence on demonstrators during detention and imprisonment.

The police have [arrested hundreds of Palestinian citizens of Israel](#) for expressing solidarity with their people in Gaza, opposing the war, or participating in nonviolent protests. And the appalling treatment of Palestinian prisoners and detainees is a category unto itself, with mounting, chilling evidence of what takes place inside the [Sde Teiman detention center](#) and [other prison facilities](#).

An equally worrying transformation is occurring among ordinary citizens, who are reporting to the authorities their colleagues, neighbors, classmates, schoolteachers, and professors who have dared to deviate from the monolithic national narrative. Teachers like [Meir Baruchin](#) have been fired; Dr. Anat Matar has faced a despicable campaign against her for [eulogizing](#) Palestinian prisoner Walid Daqqa; and the National Union of Israeli Students is proposing a law to mandate the dismissal of any academic who questions Israel's character as a "Jewish and democratic state."

The examples of genocidal statements from elected officials are too numerous to tally, but plenty of them were [presented by South Africa](#) in its genocide case against Israel in The Hague in January. More recently, Rabbi Eliyahu Mali — the head of a religious school in Jaffa — suggested in March that Judaism dictates that all the residents of Gaza should be killed (the police have recommended [closing the case](#)). And just last month, former Likud MK Moshe Feiglin [argued](#) that, just as Hitler said that he couldn't sleep so long as even a single Jew remained in the world, so too can Israelis "not live in this country if a single Islamo-Nazi remains in Gaza."

Then there is the explicitly fascist language that has become part of most Israelis' everyday parlance: calls for genocidal violence flood social media networks in Hebrew, and the Israeli authorities don't object or even lift a finger to try to stop it.

One day — and who knows how much more destruction and death will be wrought before this day comes — the war will end. Israeli society will emerge more violent, more nationalist, more militaristic, and more openly fascist. But right now, we must begin preparing for this day by building a broad anti-fascist front that can curb the worst impulses of this new society and chart a different path forward.

The Jewish center-left must understand that what was can no longer be. The camp that paid lip service to the idea of democracy only to more firmly [establish Jewish supremacy](#) between the river and the sea has [almost entirely disappeared](#) from the political map. It is certainly not up to the task of leading an anti-fascist front.

It cannot be led by Benny Gantz, the [bellicose general](#) who time and time again has saved Netanyahu's political career, and who joined the prime minister's war cabinet in October [only to leave it](#) criminally late and without any serious rebuke. Nor will it be led by Yair Golan, the new chair of the Labor-Meretz merger known as "The Democrats" and a rising star on the Zionist left, who hastened to clarify that he is [ready to sit down and talk](#) with Likud and [Mansour Abbas](#) but not with other Arab parties. And it won't be led by [Yair Lapid](#), for whom even Abbas is not good enough to serve as minister, and who dismisses all Palestinian parties in one fell swoop.

The anti-fascist front that must arise here can only be led by Palestinian citizens — not only because no other political camp comes close to matching their record of struggle against Israeli fascism, but because no one else has a coherent political vision, based on the values substantive democracy and full equality, as Palestinian citizens have articulated in various party platforms and [civil society statements](#).

Today, after the shock of October 7 that has convulsed Israeli society, decent citizens are faced with

an existential choice. They can continue to cling to the idea of “Jewish and democratic” Israel, a [dangerous deception](#) that masks an increasingly fascist ethnocratic state. Or they can strive for a substantial democracy, without which Israeli society will irrevocably plunge into the abyss.

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