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# ‘No democracy with apartheid’: Inside the radical bloc at Israel’s anti-gov’t protests

Monday 29 January 2024, by [REIFF Ben](#) (Date first published: 25 January 2024).

**Activists tell +972 that they want to challenge Israeli protesters to look beyond the far-right coalition and see the conditions that enabled its rise.**

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Amid a sea of Israeli flags in downtown Tel Aviv last Saturday, carried by the more than 100,000 protesters attending the biggest anti-government demonstration in recent history, stood a pocket of protesters that looked rather out of place. For those marching past them all evening, they were impossible to miss — and that was the point.

Palestinian flags were waved aloft, while striking black banners were unfurled, bearing slogans such as “There’s no democracy with apartheid,” and “A nation that occupies another nation will never be free.” They chanted in support of the Israeli teenagers currently serving jail time for refusing to enlist in the army, and handed out flyers that concluded: “Instead of mourning a pseudo-democracy, let’s demand change from the root!”



*The radical bloc at an anti-government demonstration in Tel Aviv, January 21, 2023. (Oren Ziv)*

An amalgam of dozens of independent activists, several established anti-occupation groups, and a contingent from the left-wing Hadash party, the “radical bloc” has grown larger and more prominent with each demonstration over the past three weekends, growing to a few hundred people on Jan. 21. And while their numbers may be dwarfed by the wider protest, their Palestinian flags and signs calling for decolonization have drawn the ire of both the main demonstration and the people they are [protesting against](#) — escalating to confrontations and physical attacks in every protest so far.

The demonstrations, which are centered in Tel Aviv but also taking place to a smaller extent in cities across the country, [erupted earlier this month](#) primarily in response to the government’s plans to [strip oversight powers](#) from the judicial system. The calls for “democracy” and “equality” have taken on a strongly Zionist character, with Yair Lapid, Benny Gantz, and other opposition leaders featuring

prominently alongside figures from the military and judicial establishment. Instead of merely joining forces with the main protest, activists from the radical bloc told +972 that they are seeking to be a disruptive presence within it, and to convey the message that a return to the status quo ante will not suffice. [Full disclosure: I am an active participant in the radical bloc as part of the “Kasamba” drummers group].

*Activists march in the radical bloc at an anti-government demonstration in Tel Aviv, January 7, 2022. (Ahmad Al-Bazz)*

“Of course this government will affect us in some ways, and I can understand that people are scared, but I think we need to see the bigger picture,” said Jonathan, who preferred to give only his first name. “Israeli Jews will never feel the effects of this government the way Palestinians will, yet [the protests] are not talking about Palestinians. In last week’s protest [Jan. 14], some of the speakers were ex-combat officers who spoke about equality in the army — these are the people talking about democracy. So we wanted to come and put more pressure on this demonstration to look at other aspects: apartheid, occupation, ethnic cleansing, and racism against non-white Jews.”

“I don’t think we’re against the protests,” said Yaara Bengier Alaluf, another activist from the bloc. “We are certainly against many of the speakers or the people who see themselves as the leaders of the protests, but I agree that this is going to be a bad, dangerous government. And not just in some kind of detached solidarity — I fear it as a woman, and as an LGBTQ person. But [the protests] are talking about democracy without taking into account not only 50 percent of the people who live in the land [between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea], but also all the Palestinian refugees who don’t have any say and whose rights Israel also controls.

“So far these demonstrations are very conservative,” she continued. “It’s the old Ashkenazi elite, who are calling themselves the ‘people of light,’ trying to preserve its power [in the face of] the religious Zionists, who they call the ‘people of darkness.’ But it’s all within the same framework of Zionism and Jewish supremacy, and within the paradigm that it’s okay to occupy another people.”

### **‘A motor for radicalization’**

The radical bloc took shape in the wake of the first major anti-government demonstration in Tel Aviv, on Jan. 7, where, rather than being organized together, activists holding Palestinian flags and signs bearing slogans against apartheid and settler-colonialism were dispersed throughout the wider protest. This left them prone to attacks from other protesters who sought to repress any political expression that strayed beyond the center-left’s usual discourse, fearing that it would be used by the government to paint the entire protest as illegitimate.



*The radical bloc at an anti-government demonstration in Tel Aviv, January 21, 2023. (Oren Ziv)*

The decision by many of the activists to bring Palestinian flags came as a show of defiance after National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir ordered police to [enforce a ban](#) on the flag in public spaces. While police in Tel Aviv have so far refrained from interfering in the demonstrations (though police have at times cracked down on those carrying Palestinian flags at recent protests in Haifa and

Jerusalem), other protesters have been doing much of their work for them.

In addition to providing greater safety in numbers, the bloc was also conceived as a “motor for radicalization” — as Eyal, who also preferred to give only his first name, put it — for other protesters who are starting to ask questions that go beyond the new government. This, in fact, was one of the lasting impacts of a [similar radical bloc](#) that formed during the anti-Netanyahu “Balfour” protests, which took place weekly outside the Prime Minister’s Residence in Jerusalem for much of 2020 and involved regular clashes with police.

“People who had never participated in radical actions against the occupation before Balfour — in [Sheikh Jarrah](#), in [Masafer Yatta](#), and other places — joined these actions after Balfour,” Eyal explained. “It’s true that that is only a small handful of people, but we are already only a small handful, so it [strengthened us significantly](#).”

The activists expected that it would actually be easier this time to insert the Palestinian issue into the messaging of the protests, given that there is already a focus on democracy and equality. “At Balfour, they talked about corruption, but when people go out to shout about democracy, it’s important to remind them that democracy is for all, not just for Jews,” said Eyal. Yet at each of the big protests in recent weeks, activists from the radical bloc have routinely faced aggression from other protesters — from regular shouts of “You’re ruining our demonstration!” to physical violence.

### **‘A protest of Jewish supremacy’**

At the second major protest, on Jan. 14, where around 80,000 people filled Tel Aviv’s Habima Square and some later marched eastward and briefly blocked the Ayalon Highway, Eyal was one of several dozen activists holding Palestinian flags. “The square was very crowded, and I started receiving a few unpleasant reactions [from nearby protesters]. At a certain point, someone grabbed my arm and didn’t let me go. I managed to get free, and then someone else grabbed my arm. Even though it didn’t escalate, I felt like in a moment I could be on the ground with them kicking me.”



*The radical bloc at an anti-government demonstration in Tel Aviv, January 21, 2023. (Oren Ziv)*

It didn’t end there. Eyal later joined the march toward the highway with his flag, alongside a few hundred others, which included a group of people holding tiki torches. “Someone tried to snatch my flag, and then he left. Then two more people came and tried to burn the flag [with their torch], and I managed to get away but they kept coming back and trying,” Eyal recalled. “What happened in that protest is that they managed to establish a norm that it is impossible to hold a Palestinian flag outside of the [radical] bloc. But a protest in which Israeli flags are allowed but Palestinian flags are forbidden is a protest of Jewish supremacy.”

Islam Azem was also attacked at the Jan. 14 protest for holding a Palestinian flag, this time by a bystander. “Some guy just saw the flag and came and started hitting me,” he told +972. “I called over the police, but they just separated us and told me to go home, even though lots of people filmed the attack.” A week later, on Jan. 21, Azem was attacked again while holding a Palestinian flag, this time by people within the protest. “They broke the stick I was holding the flag with,” he said, adding

that next week he'll be back again with his flag, which he sees as "a symbol of fighting the occupation."

Azem is one of very few Palestinians showing up to the mass demonstrations in Tel Aviv. "I think it's because the protests are about protecting the Supreme Court, which Palestinians don't really support, because it [allowed the Jewish Nation-State Law](#) and [authorized evictions in Sheikh Jarrah](#)," he posited. "But in the radical bloc I meet a lot of people who think like me. And a lot of young people are coming [to the demonstrations] who have never met activists from the radical left, so it's also an opportunity for them to hear voices that they don't hear in their daily lives."

## **'These have been Israel's policies for 75 years'**

Standing with the radical bloc on Saturday, though organized separately, were activists calling themselves "the bloc against the occupation." Uniting a broad array of established anti-occupation organizations, this bloc was dominated by activists from Looking the Occupation in the Eye, a group of mostly over-40s who organize weekly demonstrations against the occupation in the West Bank and Tel Aviv, as well as joining Palestinian-led protests in Sheikh Jarrah and elsewhere. "Balfour opened a lot of people's eyes [to deeper-rooted problems], and we want to do that here too," said Ronit Shaked, an activist with the group.

"We spoke to people we knew in different organizations and said we need to stand up together, there's no sense in being scattered," she continued. "In Israel, it's always: 'We're not talking about that now. We're not talking about the occupation. We're not talking about the Nakba. And now [the other protesters] tell us we're stealing their demonstration. But this is also our battle, it's not just theirs. And you can't talk about equality while ignoring 20 percent of the population even inside the Green Line, and you can't talk about democracy while there's an occupation. So we're here to say that this is also part of the struggle — it can't be separated."

*An activist from Looking the Occupation in the Eye waves Palestinian flags at an anti-government demonstration in Tel Aviv, January 14, 2023. (Tomer Neuberg/Flash90)*

Shaked was shocked by the level of vitriol the anti-occupation activists faced in these demonstrations from the very beginning. "We're being attacked all the time, even if we're not with [Palestinian] flags," she said. Nonetheless, last Saturday, the group handed out thousands of stickers and posters to sympathetic protesters, bearing slogans like "There's no democracy with occupation," "Palestinian lives matter," and "Jewish and racist" — a twist on Israel's traditional self-definition as "Jewish and democratic."

"I went to get more posters because we handed out everything!" said Shaked. "There were over 100,000 people there, so a few thousand is not a lot, but it's a lot for us; I go to protests in the West Bank with 15 people and think that's a lot. Many people stopped and spoke to us — I'm optimistic some will join our activities. Maybe I'm naive."

Benger Alaluf also saw some reasons for optimism in Saturday's demonstration. "I was actually surprised," she said. "Many people stopped, read the signs, took pictures, and took our flyers. I saw people reading something, asking 'What is that?' and then Googling it." Yet despite the new enthusiasm, the activists of the radical bloc still see a long way to go in encouraging people to look beyond the current government to the roots of the problem.

"We're trying to explain that, like with many other things in Israeli society, [the conventional narrative] is actually the wrong way around," explained Benger Alaluf. "For them, this government is ruining democracy, and will bring years of violence, racism, and misogyny. But these have been

Israel's policies for 75 years. This government isn't a deviation from that, maybe it's just more magnified. There is something about the whole historical narrative that needs to be shifted. I don't think the bloc is the answer to everything — there is a lot to do."

**Ben Reiff**

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**P.S.**

- +972 Magazine. January 25, 2023:

<https://www.972mag.com/radical-bloc-israel-protests-tel-aviv/>

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- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

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