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Israel - A flawed peace conference offers a radical proposal: hope

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In a context of fear, hatred, and violence, an Israeli-Palestinian gathering that seemed detached from reality actually represented something revolutionary.

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At first glance, the [Israeli-Palestinian peace conference](#) in Tel Aviv on July 1 appeared detached, almost delusional. And in some ways, it was.

With around 6,000 attendees, the [event](#) was the country’s largest anti-war gathering since October 7, outside of street protests. As they filed into the Menora Arena, giant screens displayed a video from 2019 about a group of musicians from the southern city of Sderot who teamed up with a group in Gaza to create a joint music and dance video. As if to further emphasize the stark distance between that time and our current one, it was immediately followed by a segment from John Lennon’s song “Imagine.”



Israeli-Palestinian peace conference in the Menora Arena calling for an end to the war and a solution to the conflict, Tel Aviv, July 1, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

This idyllic atmosphere inside the stadium was shattered by the first group of speakers to take the stage: Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel, whose family members were killed or kidnapped in the Hamas-led attack nine months ago, or killed in Israel’s ensuing bombardment of Gaza. One speaker, Liat Atzili, was herself kidnapped and held captive until late November.

Listening to each speaker’s personal horror stories felt like being punched in the stomach over and over again. There was hardly a dry eye in the audience — especially when they collectively read the poem “[Revenge](#)” by the late Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali, as a collective stand against retribution. In between such stories, in what felt like an unbridgeable emotional leap, peace anthems were sung throughout the event, including the uplifting “Today,” “The Prayer of the Mothers” and “Song for Peace” — forever associated with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin — which were met with festive applause and enthusiastic dancing.

It was difficult to reconcile the dissonance between these moments of jubilation with the reality outside. Israel's onslaught has killed nearly 40,000 Palestinians, obliterated the entire Gaza Strip, forced hundreds of thousands to live in tents without food, and thrown thousands of others into [prison camps](#) under conditions of torture and abuse. Meanwhile, since the October 7 attack that killed around 1,200 Israelis, tens of thousands more remain displaced from their homes in the north and south of the country, and the fate of the remaining hostages suffering in captivity continues to preoccupy everyone's minds.



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Adding to all this, while the crowd in the stadium was dancing, the Israeli army ordered thousands in the city of Khan Younis to flee ahead of yet another ground incursion. None of the speakers addressed these developing events, and much less was said about the horrors of the war than one would expect.

The dissonance was further exacerbated by the absence of any real solutions to the enormous problems facing Israeli and Palestinian societies today. Many of the speakers demanded an immediate ceasefire and a hostage-prisoner exchange, some vaguely mentioned a "political settlement," and a few spoke of "two states." But for three hours, not one of the dozens of speakers outlined a concrete plan for the "peace camp" that this event was meant to revive. (Peace activists Maoz Inon and Aziz Abu Sarah, among the initiators of the conference, promised that they are working on a detailed outline which will be published soon.)

Pragmatically-speaking, any large Israeli mobilization for peace must inevitably account for security needs, and this is a debate that we must [continue to develop](#) on the left. But nobody at the conference suggested how to deal with the challenges of Hamas and Hezbollah beyond the short term, nor the growing illegitimacy of the Palestinian Authority among Palestinians — very real and pressing issues for many Israelis.

For the most part, the Israeli left's best answer is that these threats will disappear when the occupation ends and a peace deal is reached. But this doesn't quell the existential fears of most Israelis, who are still traumatized by October 7 and fear that it could happen again. In the absence of such answers, it will be difficult to offer an alternative to the right wing's absolute hegemony in Israeli politics.

'Hope as a verb'

Yet despite all this, there is another way to understand this event. Along with the war, there is a social and emotional context in which the conference was organized: a society mired in fear, hatred, despair, racism, and cruelty.



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Israelis are faced with a [political landscape](#) in which there is almost wall-to-wall denial — from Itamar Ben Gvir to Yair Lapid — of the need for a political agreement, for justice for Palestinians, and for substantive Jewish-Arab partnership. We are dealing with a mainstream media that for years has tried to conceal the occupation and siege from the Israeli public, and now [hides the truth](#) about the horrific war crimes Israel is committing in Gaza and in its detention facilities, while silencing every critical voice for peace and justice.

Even the peace conference barely received a mention in the local media; the only item offered on a TV news show ran clips from the October 7 attack while interviewing a conference speaker, as if to tell viewers who these leftists want to make peace with.

Because of this, a gathering that might have come across as detached, and where seemingly banal declarations were repeated for hours, actually represented something revolutionary.

The event brought together Jewish and Palestinian survivors, displaced persons, hostages, former prisoners, bereaved families, activists, security officials, religious and cultural figures, intellectuals, and current and former parliamentarians to echo a common commitment to justice, nonviolence, partnership, equality, democracy, self-determination, security, freedom, and peace for all who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. It was a radical proposal for hope.

As Maoz Inon said on the stage that night, hope is not something that simply exists or that you find, but rather should be understood “as a verb.” In the current context, where public discourse is suffused with genocidal speech, reaffirming our shared fundamental values and rebuilding a sense of community are vital and urgent rituals.



Maoz Inon, one of the organizers of the Israeli-Palestinian peace conference in the Menora Arena calling for an end to the war and a solution to the conflict, Tel Aviv, July 1, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

Without a horizon that sees there are two peoples who will forever live together in this land, and that life together is possible, it will be impossible to build an alternative movement to the prevailing currents of ultra-nationalism. Without consensus on these basic values, it will be impossible to propose sustainable solutions that will benefit both peoples.

But even on the political level, there were some important moments at the conference. Several Palestinians who took to the stage spoke about the Nakba and its personal significance — how

members of their extended families were displaced to Gaza in 1948, and how those very same relatives were now being killed by Israeli bombs. This connection of the Palestinian people in all its parts, across borders, is rarely grasped by Jewish-Israeli society, and there is value in bringing it into focus. The insistence on equal treatment of all those living between the river and the sea is also a positive development in the broader leftist discourse in Israel.

Two videos screened at the event showed how hope can be translated from an abstract message into concrete steps. The first featured Palestinian activists and organizations in the occupied territories working against apartheid alongside Israeli groups committed to equality and peace. The second highlighted a series of bloody conflicts — South Africa, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, and between Israel and Egypt — in which ending oppression and injustice, and striving for reconciliation, helped bring those conflicts to an end.

Imagining a future

To even begin discussing the future, it is essential to first stop the war, the destruction, and the captivity. But for the peace camp to amass the power and influence necessary to bring about real change in Israel-Palestine, there is still a long road ahead, with many obstacles along the way.



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Developing a detailed plan for how security and equality can be offered to both peoples is one challenge. The large gap between the significant Palestinian presence on stage, and the small number of Palestinians in the audience, also signals a problem that the movement must urgently address (Inon and Abu Sarah promise that there will be future events in the occupied West Bank as well).

Only four sitting Knesset members attended the event (Ayman Odeh, Ofer Cassif, Naama Lazimi, and Gilad Kariv), while Yair Golan, the leader of the new merger between the Labor and Meretz parties called “The Democrats,” was absent; it showed how far this camp is from the corridors of power.

A moving speech by the Palestinian writer Muhammad Ali Taha, which was full of humor and compassion but sharp in its criticism of both Israel and Hamas, captured the essence of what the conference seeks to re-activate. He spoke of the horrors of the current war, the principles of a political solution, and a distant imagined future where both nations play football, listen to music, and celebrate life “in West Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, and in East Al-Quds, the capital of Palestine, as well as Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Beer Sheva, and Gaza.”

Taha may be a dreamer, but in the words of Lennon, and as the conference shows, he is not the only one.

Haggai Matar

P.S.

- +972 Magazine. July 4, 2024:
<https://www.972mag.com/peace-conference-hope-israeli-left/>

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A version of this article first appeared in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Haggai Matar is an award-winning Israeli journalist and political activist, and is the executive director of +972 Magazine.

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.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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