

Why has Israel's pacifist movement failed?

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More than 50,000 people came from all over Israel on November 4 to attend a rally to mark the fifth anniversary of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination by a right wing zealot opposed to a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians. It is evidence that contrary to the portrayal by Western governments and the media, the right wing does not command universal support for its policy of Greater Israel and sabotage a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians.

Less than 18 months ago, Israeli voters deposed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud Party and gave Ehud Barak a mandate to seek a final peace with the Palestinians. Repeated polls show that even after more than five weeks of fighting, 60-70 percent of Israelis want to reach an agreement with the Palestinians.

Since the violence erupted at the end of September, however, there have only been small, isolated vigils and demonstrations to protest Barak's use of the Israeli security forces against unarmed Palestinians that has left more than 170 people dead and thousands injured.

"Peace tents" have been set up on highways where Israelis and Palestinians drop in to try to resume a normal dialogue. One was torched, but activists began to rebuild it. Eighty-five Palestinians and Arabs placed a joint announcement in the liberal *Ha'aretz* newspaper calling for an end to violence. Two weeks ago there was a joint demonstration of Israeli Jews and Palestinians in the mixed city of Haifa.

Amira Hass, the Israeli journalist and author, to cite but one example, has written extensively in *Ha'aretz* on conditions facing the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and within Israel itself. Danny Rabinowitz, an anthropologist from Haifa University, wrote an article for *Ha'aretz* urging Israelis to acknowledge that their state was built at the cost of tragedy and dispossession to another people. He wants the government to set up memorials for the Palestinian victims of the 1948 Israeli "war of independence" and change the national anthem and flag. Rabinowitz, in common with Israel's "new historians", wants the Israeli state to recognise the Palestinians' history and understand their claim.

Even given these oppositional political currents, however, Israel still appears closer to all-out war with the Palestinians than at any time in recent history. So how has a minority of right wing extremists been able to bring the country to the brink of a war that could destabilise the entire Middle East region?

The right wing holds the political reins in Israel because the perspective of Peace Now and other liberal and reformist pacifist groups accept the legitimacy of the Zionist state. But this is based on the forced removal of the Palestinians and the continued assertion of the religious and ethnic dominance of Jews over non-Jews. While giving voice to genuine concerns felt by many, Israel's peace movement therefore cannot advance a perspective that articulates the legitimate democratic and social aspirations of both the Israeli and Palestinian people.

The underlying impotence of the peace movement was evidenced at the November 4 rally. Demonstrators carried small Israeli flags emblazoned with the patriotic slogan, "We have no other country. Strong, united and proud." *Ha'aretz* termed the event "a religious ceremony without God," in its ritualistic character. It was much reduced in numbers compared with previous years—due to the widespread crisis of confidence in the face of

the present conflict. Those who did attend heard Prime Minister Ehud Barak give a speech blaming Arafat for the present conflict, while Moshe Katsav, the right-winger who beat Nobel Peace Prize winner Shimon Peres in the contest to become Israel's President this year, also addressed the rally. He was applauded for his call for reconciliation between Israel's right and left, religious and secular, European and Middle Eastern Jews.

The acceptance of the political justification of the government for its military offensive against the Palestinians, the appeals to patriotism and national unity evidenced at the rally are essential features of Israel's peace movement. Its starting point has always been the need to maintain the Zionist state but they argue that this can only be preserved if the Palestinians are allowed some form of state of their own—the "two states" perspective most famously advanced by the "Peace Now" movement.

Peace Now once attracted tens of thousands to its rallies and protest marches. It led a mass meeting in 1982 outside the Tel Aviv town hall to protest at the massacre of more than 1,000 Palestinians at the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps that attracted more than 400,000 people. One in nine Israeli men, women and children were there. The mass rally forced the government to set up an inquiry to investigate the massacre, which found then Defence Minister Ariel Sharon responsible and he was forced to resign. Yossi Sarid, who is now the leader of the Meretz party and a former cabinet member of Barak's coalition government, at the time was the only Jewish member of the *Knesset*, Israel's parliament, to oppose the invasion of the Lebanon that year.

In the past weeks, many of the leading lights of the peace movement have made clear that their commitment to peace is entirely subordinate to their concern for the preservation of Israel. Not only did Sarid refuse to mount any opposition to Likud leader Sharon's provocative September 28 visit to Jerusalem's Holy Places, but he supports the use of Israel's military machine against largely unarmed Palestinians.

Peace Now was launched shortly after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977. Its formation was triggered by an open letter to Likud Prime Minister, Menachem Begin, signed by 350 reserve officers in the Israeli army, many of whom were highly decorated, opposing the establishment of Zionist settlements in the territories occupied since the 1967 war. They said that they preferred a smaller Israel at peace with its neighbours to a "Greater Israel" at permanent war. Any other policy would create "doubts as to the justice of our cause... Real security can be achieved only in peace. The real strength of the Israeli army grows out of the citizenry-soldiers' identification with state policy," they warned.

The signatories were denounced as traitors and 40,000 people took to the streets to defend them, leading to the development of the mass movement known as Peace Now. A single-issue movement, its leaders believed that peace was possible, not only with Egypt, but Jordan and the Palestinians. The price was a willingness to withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza, territories occupied since 1967.

Peace Now focused on the settlements in the occupied territories as the main obstacle to peace. In June 1979, it organised rallies of more than 3,000 people at Elon Moreh, a Jewish settlement near Nablus. Its demonstrations encouraged Palestinian landowners to file a suit in an Israeli court claiming that their land had been seized illegally. It was a

landmark battle over the whole settler project. Even the Defence Minister, Ezer Weizman, opposed the Prime Minister on this issue, saying that Elon Moreh had no security rationale. The high court ruled that Elon Moreh must be dismantled.

But army chief of staff, Rafael Eitan, and Agriculture Minister, Ariel Sharon, fought tooth and nail to get round it. Within six months, the Israeli cabinet announced, in defiance of international convention, that henceforth any land that had previously belonged to Jordan, or that was unregistered or uncultivated, could be expropriated for settlers. The great West Bank land grab had begun.

For months after the invasion of Lebanon, activists kept up a vigil outside Begin's official residence, demanding a withdrawal from Lebanon, holding up placards with the number of Israeli casualties to date. Many thought that their action had played a part when Begin suddenly resigned, without any explanation, in 1983 shortly after the number of Israeli dead reached 500.

A right wing fanatic assassinated one of Peace Now's leading activists and prominent liberal academics, artists and journalists became targets for right wing violence. When one political pollster reported that the majority of Israelis wanted to trade land for peace, his apartment was torched. Politicians like Sharon, who labelled members of Peace Now "traitors" and "defeatists", stoked the climate of intimidation and fear.

Peace Now became more radical. It protested at the bombing of Lebanon, the establishment of Zionist settlements in the occupied territories and consequent violation of human rights: administrative detention without trial, the imposition of collective punishments and the demolition of suspects homes even before a trial.

While they opposed the war in the Lebanon, however, they did not oppose conscription like the American youth during the Vietnam War and insisted they were patriots.

Peace Now supported the right of the Palestinian people to a "national existence". In 1988, during the *intifada*, the spontaneous uprising of the Palestinians in the occupied territories, Arafat and the PLO recognised Israel and renounced terrorism as a means of achieving a Palestinian state. Peace Now immediately called on Israel to "talk peace with the PLO now" and called for the repartition of Palestine into sovereign Jewish and Palestinian states.

In June 1989 at a Peace Now rally, Amos Oz, Israel's most well known author and liberal intellectual, urged the government not to lose the opportunity to resolve the conflict. Peace Now began to hold meetings with pro-PLO West Bank leaders. The religious fundamentalist, Rabbi Meir Kahane, called on his followers to liquidate liberal Jews whose views he opposed.

But the size of the Peace Now rallies had begun to diminish. By focusing on "land for peace", it ignored the economic and social conditions faced by much of the Israeli population, particularly the Sephardic (Arabic) Jews who had the worst jobs and housing. Despite the fact that the settlements had cost billions of taxpayers' dollars, Peace Now made little attempt to explain that the deteriorating social conditions that Israeli workers were facing were the direct result of the settler policy. This was no accident. It feared that if it did so, it would lose the support of sections of the Israeli bourgeoisie.

The events leading up to the Gulf War in 1991 further exposed the limitations of the peace movement. When the US, Britain and the West corralled all the Middle East states against Iraq, Arafat and the PLO were completely isolated from the bourgeois leaders on whom they had depended. Arafat supported Saddam Hussein, as the only Arab leader to say that it would stand up to the US by taking action against Israel. This left Peace Now activists reeling. Sarid famously told the Palestinians that he was not going to talk to them any more and they could "forget my number".

Like all single-issue protest movements, Peace Now brought together

people with quite different political backgrounds: those who opposed Israel's occupation for moral or narrowly pragmatic reasons. While it expressed the growing sentiment for peace among ordinary Israelis, it rejected a historical or class analysis of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

In 1992, a number of Peace Now activists joined with Mapam and Shinui, former left wing, secular parties, to form Meretz. Meretz won 12 seats in the elections, making it the third largest party, and joined Yitzhak Rabin's coalition government. Its platform makes quite clear that the nature of such a Palestinian state would be little more than an Apartheid-style bantustan. The boundaries of Israel and a Palestinian state would not be the pre-1967 borders, but would be decided subject to Israel's security needs. As few Palestinian residents as possible would remain in Israel and as few Israelis as possible would be subjected to Palestinian rule. Israel's interests in economics, tourism, transportation, environmental protection and the joint use of water were primary. Jerusalem would be the capital of Israel and would remain indivisible.

As far as Meretz was concerned, the use of Palestinian workers in Israel was a security risk and threatened Israeli workers' wages. Its platform said, "A clear separation between the two populations is desirable both from a security standpoint, and as a way of perpetuating Israeli-Palestinian peace." This would entail strict control over the border to prevent "illegal" crossings. The North American NAFTA agreement, with its low wage factories along the US's southern border manufacturing for US corporations, provided the blueprint for the economies of Israel, Palestine and Jordan.

After the Gulf War when the US insisted that Israel reach some accommodation with Arafat, the PLO, and her Arab neighbours, the Labour government was forced to participate in the US-sponsored talks aimed at finding some resolution of the Palestinian question. It seemed that the Israeli government had adopted the peace movement's agenda. But the negotiations were continually frustrated by the need to placate the right wing Zionists, for whom any surrender of the settlements was an anathema.

The bitter logic of the Peace Now agenda, with all its failings, was played out over the next seven years. The limited autonomy granted to the Palestinians brought increasing economic deprivation, social misery and political oppression while a mere handful around Arafat prospered. Nothing that the Israelis could or would offer brought any prospect of alleviating the plight of the Palestinian masses. Thus when Sharon mounted his September 28 provocation, the latent frustration of the Palestinian masses exploded with an intensity Arafat found impossible to control.

The peace movement has been caught out by events. Only last July they thought that it would just be a matter of weeks before a final accord would be signed, a Palestinian state established, and Israel would enter a new stage of development and prosperity. The response of Israel's peace activists has varied widely.

Some like David Newman, chairman of the department of government and politics at Ben Gurion University, still hope that the "derailed process will eventually get back on track, because there is no other realistic alternative". "There can be no return to the pre-Oslo situation, and the quicker this is internalized by the whole of Israeli society, the better for all of us", he continued.

Most, like Amos Oz, uncritically echo the right-wing in blaming Arafat for the collapse of negotiations. In an op-ed piece for Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, Oz uses the words "we were wrong" in relation to Arafat repeatedly, portraying the present conflict as an unfortunate, even accidental, calamity. "It is unnecessary and in vain," he writes. "Everyone knows that when it will be over there will be a two-state solution. Neither the Jews nor the Palestinians are going anywhere. They cannot live together like one happy family because they are not one. The only thing to do is to mark a partition somewhere across the country roughly in

accordance with demographic realities."

Peace Now accepts the *sine qua non* of Zionism—the impossibility of coexistence between Jew and Arab. Zionism's ideology was anti-assimilationist in terms of the Jewish people around the world and its proponents founded a state based on anti-Arab discrimination. As well as the forcible removal of the Palestinians through terror, Israeli Arabs, which make up 20 percent of the population, suffer greater unemployment, are twice as likely to be poor, occupy the lowest paid unskilled jobs and are denied benefits for housing, rent and mortgages. Non Jewish people are essentially barred from owning land, so that no Arab town has been built since Israel was proclaimed in 1948. Social discrimination also extends to Sephardic and Ethiopian Jews and others of non-European descent.

This occurs in a society where ultra-Orthodox political parties have been able to impose their dictates over many aspects of social life against the wishes of secular Jews and those of more moderate religious conviction.

Meanwhile the gap between rich and poor becomes ever wider, with unemployment as high as 10 percent and wages and benefits under constant attack.

Without addressing these basic democratic and social questions, it is impossible to advance a genuine opposition to the Zionist warmongers. The most advanced workers, intellectuals and peace activists must recognise in the failure of Peace Now that there is no way forward other than through the difficult political struggle for unity between Arab and Jewish workers on a democratic, secular and socialist basis.



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