



Opinion

Can Jews and Arabs Be True Political Partners in Israel?

The only way to create an alternative to push back against 50 years of occupation and mounting inequalities is for the Zionist and Palestinian-Arab left to form a real partnership.

Yaniv Sagee Feb 27, 2017

In four months, we will mark 50 years of Israel's occupation of 'the territories.' Fifty years, during which the State of Israel has changed from top to bottom.

From being a welfare state fulfilling the founding vision - both of a national homeland for the Jewish people and of an egalitarian state for the benefit of all its citizens - Israel has transformed into one of the worst of Western states in terms of social gaps. A state that discriminates against its Arab citizens and is incapable of connecting with world Jewry.

From a "pursuer of peace," we have become a state that "manages the conflict" through wars and operations where we kill and are killed, because we have become convinced that "there is no partner" for peace. Our actions are directed by the vision of the Prime Minister who told us last year, "We shall forever live by the sword."

This is our government - promoting "settlement" laws and annexations that are meant to prepare us for the plunder led by the radical right wing, who seek to annex the conquered territories and create a state based on inequality between the Jewish minority and the Arab majority, from the river to the sea.

In Israel today, the right is the only camp with a clear vision that has succeeded in positioning itself in the centers of power and directing us along its path. Its vision is neither desired nor accepted by the majority of Israel's citizens, who understand that we pay for it in blood, as well as in the moral and economic prices it entails. But it wins election after election

because it is the only camp offering that kind of vision that *seems* to correspond with reality.

In contrast with this vision of terror, there is appalling feebleness on the "left." There is no vision, there is no plan, there is no ability to connect with the public, and there is no ability to integrate itself into the centers of influence. Instead of presenting alternatives, Yesh Atid and the Zionist Union try to be "Likud Lite." They act within the boundaries defined by the right, continuing the occupation, continuing the predatory, harmful and anti-egalitarian economy, but a little less bluntly. So as not to anger the world so much.

And left of this center – nothing. There is no significant political organizing. There is a lot of talk, people say all the correct things, but they have no impact. To paraphrase Shakespeare, Israel's left is "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

When we talk about a renewed process of building the left, we shouldn't aim at the narrow space between Meretz, which last election barely attracted enough votes to secure their place in the Knesset, and Hadash, trapped inside a joint Arab Palestinian list with a distinctly nationalist tone. Meretz and Hadash are buried in a political framework that does not advance political change in Israel; they are representatives of a left that is irrelevant.

The only way to create an alternative left in Israel is by connecting the forces of the Zionist left and the Palestinian-Arab left, and for this both entities must change.

Both sets of stakeholders must recognize that only the connection between them can fulfill the values of the left and achieve its objectives. The guiding principle of the left is equality. Equality between national majority and minority in Israel is the basis for democracy, and for change. The partnership doesn't need to nullify the various narratives; it must rise above them. It must enable Arab citizens of Israel to access real governing power, a power that was and is the exclusive inheritance of the Jewish Zionist majority. The Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel demand justice, integration and full civil equality. Whoever fights for this will receive their votes and their trust. Today there is no political party responding to this need of one fifth of the state's citizens - a mighty electoral force for change in the country. In contrast, the "Joint List" locks Arab society in perpetual opposition to the state and the role of its victims. Meretz's principle failure is that it functions as a home only for the Zionist left and primarily for the "white tribe." Meretz fails to break into the

geographic and human periphery of Israel, and is not perceived as an egalitarian partnership of all the groups and sectors who are excluded from influencing and shaping the path of the country.

Meretz, so much in need of renewal and of new connections, is not bringing people from the periphery into the centers of influence. Not the south and not the north, not the towns, and not the kibbutzim, and certainly not the Arabs. A party that excludes one fifth of the citizens of Israel from its political calculations will never be a relevant left in Israel. Its political energy is consumed in internal struggles.

The State of Israel, built on the just connection between the Jewish people's need for a national homeland and the democratic ideal based on full civil equality for all its citizens, requires a political connection between Jews and Arabs in a combined list that will be drawn up in an egalitarian manner and will succeed in bringing representation of Arab Israeli citizens into a coalition and into the government. Without this "Left", no coalition can be established as an alternative to the alliance between the right and the settlers, who are leading us to a binational state, not a democratic one, a state that will be shunned by the entire world and alienated from most of the Jewish Diaspora.

We need a partnership of Jews and Arabs, of religious and secular, veteran citizens and new citizens, a partnership that will advance economic and national equality in Israel. A partnership that will become a home for anyone who is harmed by the pro-settlement-right wing vision. For Jewish and Arab citizens, both of whom work hard and earn little, who see the state investing their taxes in territories beyond the Green Line and its capacity to continue controlling them, rather than in the people that live along the length and breadth of Israel within the '67 borders. A partnership of all the complex ethnicities and cultures that make up this country, whose voices are currently muted, while governing power and state resources are far from equally distributed among them.

Yaniv Sagee is the Executive Director of Givat Haviva. A member of Kibbutz Ein Hashofet, he was previously a teacher, school principal, director of the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement and chairman of the National Council for Youth Movements in Israel.