

The Left in Israel After 7 October

Article by Ksenia Svetlova

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The public discourse in Israel is poisoned by the very same people who failed to prevent Hamas's attack in early October. Now Netanyahu's government wants to divert attention from its failures by pushing a vindictive agenda. Political analyst and former member of the Knesset Ksenia Svetlova explains what it means to be a leftist in Israel after 7 October, and what should be done to bring back the hostages and help civilians in Gaza.

Green European Journal: How would you describe the political climate in Israel these days?

Ksenia Svetlova: Following the terrorist attack of 7 October, we experienced a sense of unity; we saw a lot of solidarity in society, because the trauma was new and overwhelming. For a few weeks, "politics" as such was on hold, and civil society became very active in helping those who were affected by this horrific massacre. But by now, it seems like we have returned to the old political climate, with extreme polarisation in society. This is mainly due to the acts of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing Likud party. The toxic atmosphere of division created by him and his ministers is coming back. While the soldiers are on the battlefield, he decided to put the blame for what happened on the intelligence community and the military, absolving himself from any responsibility. He and many other people who failed to provide the right prognosis and prepare society for the imminent threat, started issuing very blunt statements. The Minister of Agriculture Ari Dichter [a Likud member] spoke about the possibility of "Gaza's Nakba" – with all the connotations that this term has. The Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir, of the extreme right-wing party Otzma Yehudit, talked about re-establishing Jewish settlements in Gaza. In Israel, we look at these kinds of statements as part of the "poison machine"; and it seems like it is back again.

What were the failures of the government that led to the 7 October massacre?

When Netanyahu was re-elected in 2009 (after being prime minister in the 1990s), he promised to bring the Hamas regime in Gaza to a collapse, as it was already clear back then that Israel cannot coexist with a terrorist organisation at its border. But then, he did nothing. During the many years he spent in power his acts have made sure that the Hamas regime survives. This included allowing cash transfers from Qatar to Hamas, and launching some limited military operations, the longest of which was in 2014. Back then, many people asked why Israel failed to act, despite all we knew about Hamas – the rockets, weapons, 400 kilometres of underground tunnels, and so on.

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At the same time, while staying idle with Hamas, Netanyahu worked very hard to weaken the more moderate Palestinian structure: the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Fatah party in the West Bank. Of

course, the PA can be criticised for the spread of hatred in Palestinian schools, but at the end of the day, everybody knows that it is a partner of Israel in combating terror. And Palestinian security structures work with Shin Bet (the Israel Security Agency) and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the West Bank. Despite this, the government decided to freeze funds for the West Bank and refused to take even minimal steps of goodwill.

Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the Palestinian Authority in 2005 with the promise that he would not use political violence or terror as a means to achieve political success. He put the emphasis on diplomacy. But this diplomacy failed miserably because Netanyahu believed in dividing and ruling Palestinians, and containing Hamas with long breaks between short violent cycles – but he completely miscalculated. I was one of those who were criticising him all along – for example when I was a member of the Knesset [with the Zionist Union, a centre-left coalition of the Labor, Hatnua, and Green Movement parties] between 2015 and 2019 – for doing nothing against Hamas, while killing the alternative that existed for the Palestinians.

Did Netanyahu himself politically profit from the rule of Hamas – conveying that Palestinians cannot be talked to and only a strong leader like him can contain them?

I would not say that he built his political persona around Hamas, but he definitely benefited from the tough leader image. Not even necessarily in the context of Hamas, which he failed to see as a serious danger, but in relation to Iran, which was one of his main topics.

In the past years, Netanyahu managed to improve Israel's relations with some Arab states, such as Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates. Why did that not help in the Palestinian case?

Many people on the Israeli left, but also centrists, agreed that it is wise to establish peaceful relations with Arab countries around us, as we did with Egypt, Jordan, and so many other countries after the 1993 Oslo Accords. But we also said that it is a mistake to think that signing agreements with Emiratis, Bahrainis, Moroccans, and Saudis, will make the Palestinian issue go away. This is a logical fallacy because we did not have an open conflict with these countries, and the agreements will mainly serve to improve our commercial relations. The Emiratis, for example, had their own issues of trust with the Palestinian leadership, so they did not make the Abraham Accords conditional on the continuation of negotiations with Palestinians.

Of course, it does not mean that we could not have used this new partnership with the Arab world to promote some degree of understanding with the Palestinians; but the initiative for that should have come from Israel – given that we are talking about an issue that affects Israel more than the other countries. Morocco, for example, could have helped, given its excellent relations with the Palestinians. And actually, during the short-lived government of Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett in 2021-2022, there was some cooperation with Morocco on the issue, and the government issued commercial permits for Gazan merchants to sell their goods in Israel. But all in all, no one thought of using that opportunity to look for a longer-term solution. No one took the Saudis seriously, who kept saying that they wanted normalisation with Israel to go hand in hand with finding a solution for the Palestinians.

How do you see the role of the United States and Europe in working towards a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

During his presidency, Donald Trump sided with the Israeli right-wing, and tried to promote a solution that was not realistic, but at least he put some deal on the table. When Joe Biden became president, we had high hopes, but nothing happened. This was widely regarded as a continuation of the status quo

and of the micromanagement of the conflict. The issue of Israel and Palestine was just not on the agenda – in part because there was the war in Ukraine, the tensions with China and many other things that the US presidency had to deal with.

As for Europe, I remember very well a visit I participated in as a journalist 10 years ago – we went to Brussels and met with many officials there. Behind closed doors, some of them said that they no longer knew whether it made sense for them to support the PA, because it seemed like that support was not going to lead to the creation of a Palestinian state. There was an extreme right-wing climate in Israeli politics, a lack of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, and Europe just decided to focus on other issues instead. It is not like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the only issue in the Middle East – there was the Arab Spring, the rise of ISIS, wars, and a refugee crisis, just to name a few. Europe might have just thought that it was better to let the Palestinians and Israelis work it out themselves – but in fact, if there is mediator, or even some pressure from the outside, that might help the process.

There have been talks lately that the Israeli Left feels misunderstood or betrayed by its western allies. What exactly is the reason for that?

The Israeli Left has been very critical of Israel's governments and their policies towards the Palestinians. There were many people who spoke out for peaceful coexistence. In fact, the people who were slaughtered by Hamas on 7 October came from the most left-wing communities in the whole country. Many of them volunteered with Palestinians, drove patients from Gaza to Israeli hospitals, supported the idea that Gazans should have a right to work in Israel again. And then, this horrific act of violence happened. We still do not know all the details, but we heard enough from people who survived and were eyewitnesses. We are appalled when we hear people, including leftists, who justify this unbelievable, extreme savagery of violence, that is in tune with the violence of ISIS.

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When we hear people on the Left, many of whom we used to have connections with, argue that oppressed people have the right to do anything and that it should be considered "self-defence", we feel hit from both sides. There is no international document that would say that killing soldiers who are sleeping at home in their beds or murdering small kids is an act of self-defence. It is also not a struggle for independence.

I do not know how to react to people who rip off posters of kidnapped babies, women, or old people. To me, such a gesture seems like pure evil, and it is perceived here – rightly, I believe – as an act of antisemitism. This is why supporters of the Left or the centre-left feel so lonely these days in Israel.

How would you define the Israeli Left, given that even the larger opposition parties in the Knesset are closer to the centre-right?

Netanyahu would say that everyone who does not agree with him is a leftist, including some who actually come from the deep right. Of course, I would never use this kind of reasoning. Politically, there are two left-wing parties: Labor, which is in the Knesset, and Meretz, which was not elected this time – maybe next time it will be the other way around. Still, there are sizeable parts of the population in Israel

that hold left-wing views but might vote for different parties – for example, some of those who used to be Labor voters now favour Benny Gantz [of the National Unity alliance]. Gantz tries to position himself on the centre-right, but many of his voters might have a rather left-wing view of the world.

It is difficult to answer the question of what the Israeli left is. If you asked Israelis if they considered themselves left-wing, you would only get a small minority. However, if you asked how they feel about a peaceful solution to the Palestinian conflict, how they feel about a two-state solution, then you would find that more people share a rather left-wing perspective on things.

In Israel, the political identification of people is very different from that in the EU, because the main criterion is their attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. You can be a venture capitalist or a neo-liberal in your economic views, but still think that the two-state-solution is the best option for Israel.

In an article in *The New Yorker*, Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen wrote that many pro-peace activists in Israel feel threatened and are considered traitors by the rather right-wing parts of society. Do you see such an atmosphere of intimidation within Israeli society?

The Right in Israel – not only the extreme Right, but also the Likud, which is on paper more moderate – tried to castigate anyone with a different view on the relations between the Israelis and Palestinians – even those who are coming from the Zionist centre-left and centre. They are labelled as traitors, and there is a campaign going on against them at least since 2014. Unfortunately, it managed to convince most of the Israeli public of that. We can see a lot of outrage at any expression of sympathy for the Palestinian side – this is aggravated by the pain and anger of the last month. Nevertheless, we hear a lot of voices advocating different political solutions, highlighting, for example, that the priority of the state should be to take care of the hostages.

In your opinion, what kind of action is needed now?

First of all, the Hamas regime should have been eliminated already in 2014, when it was clear that the group used all of its infrastructure to increase its military power. We know that their declared goal is the eradication of Israel. If we had acted then, perhaps we would have had fewer casualties. I am saying it with great sorrow because I have personal friends in the Gaza Strip. I worked as a journalist in Gaza for many years, and I am still in touch with friends there who are not at all supporters of Hamas, and I look at them as hostages.

Right now, I see no other option than military confrontation, unfortunately. Without that, we would encourage not just Hamas, but also Hezbollah in the north, which has been training for years for these kinds of terrorist actions. Hamas built its underground kingdom not without a reason, and it is not going to leave just like that.

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Still, it matters how this confrontation takes place. The current government is vindictive, and politicians are saying things that are not acceptable. Vengeance is not something that states should do – especially not democratic states. Those who murdered should be brought to justice, as they brought it on themselves; but all the others deserve help in the midst of this humanitarian crisis. It should not matter what they think of Israel, whether they feel sympathy for us or not. We should allow unconditional

humanitarian aid into Gaza; and we should even use IDF jets to deliver medicines, baby powder, and other things that are badly needed. There will be many refugees as the campaign continues, and I think Israel has an obligation to let aid in and help. At the same time, it is not Israel's responsibility that Hamas knowingly hides its rocket launchers and stocks in hospitals and children's parks. This is exactly the reason why Israel asked civilians to evacuate.

Finally, we have the question of the hostages, which should be the priority of decision-makers. If the majority of the hostages will not return safely, the trust of Israelis in their government, and in the state in general, will be shattered. The more time passes, the less chance there is of them being released. I see reports – that may or may not be true – that Israel rejected certain deals that would allow some of the hostages to return, and I disagree with those kinds of actions. I think that Israel should use every opportunity to defend and protect its citizens. It needs to take every deal – even if it means giving Hamas some respite before eliminating it.

Who can be the possible mediators when it comes to bringing the hostages back from Gaza?

I think Israel should accept the help of any mediator, but I am not aware of many who have offered so far [as of 12 November, when the interview was conducted]. I only know about Qatar and Egypt – and the Mossad already went to both Doha and Cairo. Many other countries may not know how they could provide meaningful support. I do not know, for example, if the EU has any power to secure a hostage deal. To my knowledge, the EU has no contact with Hamas, and only countries that have some leverage over it can act. Egypt has the key to the Rafah border crossing, and Qatar provided much of Hamas's financial aid in the past. Maybe Turkey could play role, but it has taken a clear anti-Israeli position.



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