



Eyes Right! **A Leftist Looks at the Israeli Right** By Paul Scham

We have all now recognized that, despite our best efforts, the once progressive State of Israel is currently heavily tilted towards the right. The remnant of the left is now, urgently and appropriately, asking itself “What is to be done?” I don’t claim to have the answer, but I do believe that analysis precedes action, or at least it should. It is a fact that there are several different kinds of “right” in Israel, and we do ourselves no favors by lumping them together and making broad generalizations that do nothing for comprehension nor political action. Obviously this analysis is not an exact science: this is simply how I see it.

First, we have to look at the dimensions of the problem. With a new election scheduled for Nov. 1, the political temperature is continually being measured. The polls have been fairly consistent; the numbers I am using are from the *Ma’ariv* [poll](#) of Sept. 2. They are good enough to indicate where political strength is now (the various rightwing and Haredi parties and perhaps the center) and where it isn’t (the left).

First, there is the pro-Bibi vs. anti-Bibi right. Pro-Bibi of course starts with the Likud (31), which has long since been purged of anyone not absolutely in favor of Netanyahu. There is also the recently reunited Religious Zionism/Jewish Strength list (13), whose most notorious figures are Bezalel Smotrich and the neo-Kahanist Itamar

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Ben-Gvir. They are continually pushing the boundaries of the extreme right; Ben-Gvir could be considered an Israeli Marjorie Taylor Green, while Smotrich's latest call is to remove Israeli citizenship from those deemed "insufficiently loyal." They were each thinking of running in separate parties, which Bibi quashed because he was afraid that one or both might drop below the 3.25% minimum threshold for entering the Knesset. Anything below that mean your votes are lost, and in an evenly divided Knesset every vote counts. Bibi promised the Ben-Gvir and Smotrich ministries of their own if he forms a new coalition, so that government would be far more beholden to the far right than any previous one.



Photo Credit: Etiab

The pro-Bibi Haredi ("ultra-Orthodox") wing of the right includes Shas (8) and United Torah Judaism (6). Shas is Sephardi (Mizrachi) and leans heavily on the ethnic issue; thus its voters are primarily religiously traditional, not themselves Haredi. Its priority is usually getting money for its extensive independent school network, Ma'ayan, but some of its younger male voters are being wooed by the political radicals of Religious Zionism. UTJ is Ashkenazi Haredi, but may be on the verge of splitting into its constituent Hasidic (Agudat Yisrael) and anti-Hasidic factions (Degel Hatorah) factions, the latter also known as Lithuanian. Should they indeed split, Bibi's dreams of returning to power may be dashed, because one or both of the factions may fall below the minimum vote threshold.

The solidly pro-Bibi parties currently total 58 seats in

the polls, assuming UTJ doesn't split and fall below the threshold. That is close to the magic 61 needed to form a government, but not quite there. Defectors from either side are possible but unlikely. If no potential coalition reaches 61, Israel goes to the polls next year for the sixth time in four years.

The anti-Bibi right consists largely of former close associates of Bibi who became disgusted, not so much at his politics, which they share, but at his character and anti-democratic leanings. These include Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu (5), a fixture in Bibi's governments for years until Lieberman finally refused to join in 2019. The party is staunchly secular and its voters have traditionally been immigrants from the former Soviet Union. In 2009 YB used fiery anti-Arab rhetoric to get 15 seats, but its rhetoric and strength have both since moderated.

Until recently, there was a party of rightist anti-Bibi Likud defectors, led by Gideon Sa'ar, a former close Bibi associate, but that is now smushed into a new party whose name is generally translated as "National Unity" (Hamachaneh Hamamlichti-13). It also includes former Army chiefs of staff Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, who are usually classified as centrists or center right. They are presumably staunchly anti-Bibi but by no means at all left; they will certainly shy away from any change in the status quo regarding the occupation.

Until recently this camp included the remnants of the Yamina party of former Prime Minister Bennett, who has left politics, at least for this election. His former no. 2, Ayelet Shaked, until recently a star in her own right, formed a new party named Zionist Spirit, which is now well below the threshold and probably won't recover.

The biggest force in the center, whom some leftists would place on the right, is Prime Minister Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid (24). Lapid would presumably be prime minister again if the anti-Bibi camp reached 61. In order to do that he'd have to pick up enough seats from the two parties of the left, Meretz (5) and Labor (5), who are being urged to run together or else face the possibility of falling below the threshold. The Lapid coalition would be joined by the United Arab List (4), an Islamic party, which was part of Bennett's coalition but also faces stark

threshold problems, with no party likely to merge with it.

Alert readers will have noticed that the pro-Lapid, anti-Bibi parties have 56 seats according to the poll, while the pro-Bibi'istim have 58. The 6 missing seats are projected to go to the Joint List, a leftwing grouping of three predominantly Arab parties that opposes both Bibi and Lapid. They would never join Bibi (nor would he have them) and are almost equally unlikely to join Lapid. Thus, if these poll numbers hold, Israel is bound for another election next year. However, betting on the situation not changing in Israel is never a good idea, nor is this article intended to be about election prognostication, but rather about the Israeli right.

This snapshot indicates that the center-right, right, and Haredi parties have 76 seats, nearly 2/3 of the total, with the majority of the remainder in the center and only 16 on the combined Zionist and non-Zionist left. Even if the anti-Bibi coalition wins through one or more of Bibi's parties failing to reach the threshold or some other reason, the resulting government would be skewed center-right, as was Bennett's. I support Meretz and Labor's decision to go into coalition with Bennett and now Lapid, but the left cannot get anywhere when its only victories consist of occasionally moderating rightwing initiatives.

Why has Israel turned so fiercely to the right? Part of the answer is obvious; the failure of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s and the resulting Second Intifada spooked many Israelis who had supported the peace process. The botched Gaza "disengagement" and Hamas's rockets were a disaster as far as Israel's perceptions of the Palestinians were concerned, as has been Mahmoud Abbas's feckless government. And, to be honest, we have to recognize that terrorism is down and the Bibi-Trump Abraham Accords, derided by the left because the Palestinians were not included, have succeeded, and Israelis feel themselves at peace with much of the Arab world. The status quo seems to be working for everyone except the Palestinians—and most Israelis think that is their own fault. The left is largely identified with failed peace processes. Though Meretz has emphasized issues like LGBTQ+ rights, which are popular, it has gained little traction from the issue. The country feels itself largely prosperous, despite the large income inequality gap.

There is also the religious issue, which is partly demographic. The Haredi part of the population is growing faster than anyone else and much of the rest of the population is more religious than a generation ago, even if not Orthodox. The left is traditionally considered alienated from religion, and often accused of lacking a feeling of respect and warmth for Judaism. More cynically, Netanyahu has consistently been willing to pay the financial price of having the Haredim in his governments. Moreover, though Shas has a detached attitude towards Zionism and the Ashkenazi Haredim are traditionally anti-Zionist, youth in both groups are attracted to the "Hardal" (Haredi and nationalist) ideology, which used to be a contradiction in terms but is now an important political phenomenon. The moderate religiosity (despite political extremism) championed by Naftali Bennett seems to have disappeared with his political demise.

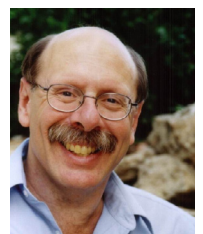
Thus, there is no easy answer as to what the left could do to renew itself. There will presumably be a new Palestinian leadership in the near future (President Abbas is now 86), but that is unlikely to turn around Israeli attitudes anytime soon. Bibi himself is now 73 and cannot last forever, but even if his personal brand of political venality and duplicity does disappear with him, the underlying ideology remains.

But I do know that things change, often faster than can be believed—and not always for the worse. Whether its cause is generational, economic, cultural, climatic, or something else, the future is guaranteed to surprise us. And so I remain genuinely hopeful.

With that, I want to wish all our friends and supporters a Shanah Tovah, hope that our own lives will be happy and successful in 5783, and that it will be a much better year than we fear. ■

Paul H. Scham

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Zehava Galon Retakes the Reins: Did Meretz Just Get its Groove Back?

INSIGHTS

By Ron Skolnik



Photo Credit: Ronen Akerman

When more than 15,000 Meretz members voted in Zehava Galon as their new chair in the August 23 primaries, they might well have rescued the party from electoral oblivion this fall. What is more certain, however, is that they helped the party avert a loss of its very essence and *raison d'être*.

First on oblivion: When, on July 19, Galon announced her political comeback after weeks of pressure from colleagues, led by Regional Cooperation Minister Esawi Frej, Meretz seemed like a party in freefall. Its most senior leaders had declared that they were either taking a timeout from politics for various personal reasons (Frej, as well as Environmental Protection Minister Tamar Zandberg) or, in the case of then-chair and Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz, not seeking reelection to the party's top post.

Meretz had also just suffered some damaging public embarrassment: One of its Knesset members, Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi, who had been handpicked by Horowitz before the 2021 elections to augment Arab representation on the party's list, bucked party leadership in crucial votes, undermining the narrow anti-Netanyahu "change government" of which Meretz was a loyal member. Rinawie Zoabi declared that her conscience would not allow her to accept the huge compromises of principle that Meretz was making in order to keep the anti-authoritarian, but right-of-center, government afloat.

Meretz's voters were none too pleased. [More than 90% of them](#), per an internal poll, saw the government's stability as the top priority. Incensed by Rinawie Zoabi's conduct, they began defecting, with Meretz

quickly [shedding](#) two seats in the polls to the centrist Yesh Atid party of Prime Minister Yair Lapid. Indeed, a series of polls in June and July had Meretz frequently failing to clear the 3.25% minimum vote threshold needed for Knesset representation. The party, in other words, was in palpable danger of ceasing to exist as a viable political entity.

In [announcing](#) her return (“I’m coming back, Meretz is coming back”), Galon stressed the electoral urgency. With the only declared candidate for the chair position at the time being retired IDF major-general Yair Golan, a rather politically-green relative newcomer to Meretz, Galon stepped into the breach, stating that she, rather than Golan, could help Meretz overcome its electoral woes. The polls have given credence to her claim: Those taken ahead of the primary suggested that Meretz would be a full seat stronger under Galon’s leadership compared to Golan’s; those taken since Galon’s emphatic ([61.6% vs. 37.25%](#)) primary win suggest that the party’s electoral standing has now stabilized above the threshold, in the 4-6 seat range.



But Galon’s victory meant more than just keeping Meretz alive, because the choice between Galon and Golan was also starkly ideological, even philosophical. Since its formation three decades ago, Meretz’s core mission has been to challenge the prevailing discourse within the Jewish Israeli community by pioneering new “radical” ideas and injecting them into the mainstream, such as women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, the immorality of the occupation, and more. As Prof. Yossi Mekelberg recently [put it](#), Meretz’s “purpose was to serve as the political and moral compass that Labor had lost.”

While Galon represented a natural continuation of this Meretz mold, Golan took a different approach, suggesting that Meretz revise its discourse and water it down in order to make the party palatable to a wider swath of the Jewish Israeli public. Golan, in other words, wanted to make Meretz look a lot more like the Labor party—a strategy that threatened to recast Meretz’s identity, besides being dubious from an electoral standpoint, with Labor already occupying that lane.

The use of the word “Zionism” figured prominently into this debate, with Golan attacking Galon’s [definition](#) of Meretz as an “Israeli party” that avoids defining itself as either “Zionist” or “non-Zionist” in order to be a home to both Zionist and non-Zionist members, both Jewish and Arab citizens, who share a vision of democracy and equal rights. Golan, for his part, said that Meretz should present itself as “Zionist left,” arguing that Galon’s definition isn’t sufficiently electable: “If we restrain ourselves to a self-definition that most Israeli citizens,” a euphemism here for Jewish citizens, “do not accept, we are condemning Meretz to be a niche party forever.” Instead, Golan signaled, he wanted Meretz to speak in a way that could draw votes away from [centrist parties](#) such as Yesh Atid and Blue and White.

Galon’s [response](#) was that while she herself defined as Zionist, as did all Meretz leaders before her, Meretz needed to remain an “open house” without Zionist “loyalty tests,” where someone like Minister Esawi Frej, a Palestinian Arab citizen of Israel, feels like an equal. She called her approach “inclusive Zionism.” Golan insisted that Zionism was a core part of his, and others’, [identity](#) and needed to be at the forefront of messaging. Galon [stressed](#) that the struggle of Zionism, the establishment of the State of Israel, “is behind us” and that the “Zionist yardstick” had been introduced into Israeli discourse by the right wing as a litmus test for delegitimizing Arab citizens and their representatives.

The difference gains sharper resolution when the two frame their aspirations for the future of the Israeli left. Golan believes in a “big, strong Zionist left,” and has suggested in the past that, between Yesh Atid to the right and the non-Zionist Joint List to the left, there is [room](#) for only one Zionist party—in other words,

a full and permanent Labor-Meretz merger. Galon, like Golan, has endorsed a joint ticket with Labor in the upcoming elections. But Galon regards this not as a path to merger but as a “technical” move, intended to make sure that both parties, while keeping their independence, pass the threshold and keep Netanyahu out of power. Ultimately, her [hope](#) is for a “big Israeli, Jewish, Arab social-democratic left.” Golan, upon joining Meretz in late 2020, came out against the vision of a Jewish-Arab party, saying that those in Meretz pushing in that direction needed to be [“silenced and suppressed.”](#)

Galon and Golan also clashed on the way that Meretz should talk about the Palestinians and about the West Bank and Gaza. Golan tries to avoid using the word “occupation” to define the military regime beyond the Green Line. In a moment of transparency, though, he [explained](#) that while “I recognize there’s an occupation,” his campaign language refers to “separating from the Palestinians” since “the word ‘occupation’ has a negative connotation,” and Israeli voters, he says, won’t support a party that depicts Israel as “the bad guy.” Galon, on the other hand, insisted she’s “not afraid to say ‘occupation,’” noting that this was part of Meretz’s historic role: “Every government needs a left flank to act as a conscience.” Golan seems to believe that Meretz can succeed only if it frames ending military occupation as an Israeli interest and he has criticized the party’s emphasis on its rectitude. Galon believes it’s possible to stress not only Israeli self-interest, but also the moral imperative of bringing Israel’s role as occupying power to a close.

In understanding the differences between Galon and Golan, it is useful to recall their political origins. Galon has been part of Meretz since its founding, while Golan entered Knesset in 2019 through the short-lived “Democratic Israel” party put together by former prime minister and former Labor party chair, Ehud Barak. Democratic Israel teamed up with Meretz in the 2019 elections and Golan joined Meretz only later, once the Democratic Israel framework was put into mothballs.

It should come as no major surprise, therefore, that

Golan’s campaign messaging seemed to resurrect the [“no Palestinian partner”](#) contention used by Barak after the unsuccessful Camp David Summit in 2000. “I’m not sure there’s anyone to talk to” on the Palestinian side, Golan [said](#) in early August, or even “anything to talk about,” appearing to dismiss any diplomatic horizon whatsoever. A nonplussed Galon emphasized in response how out of step Golan seemed to be with the core Meretz mission: “Has he even read the Meretz platform?... Someone has gotten their parties mixed up.” And she slammed Golan’s penchant for diluting the left’s message to such an extent that it ends up reinforcing a rightwing narrative: “No partner?... I gather that Yair’s plan is a liquidation sale of Meretz’s values... This is no way to defeat the right; it’s how to surrender to the right.”

Ultimately, Meretz’s membership voted decisively on August 23 against such capitulation. It endorsed—both in the primaries for chair, and for the Knesset list, where anti-Occupation crusader Mossi Raz secured second spot behind Galon—a party that will continue to speak out forcefully and challenge the axioms and norms embedded deeply in the Jewish Israeli mainstream. In the [victory speech](#) she delivered that night, Galon made clear that, on her watch, Meretz would behave as a “proud left” that refuses to cloak its truths.

In the meantime, such a posture seems to have energized the Meretz base and pulled the party back from the brink. But whether that’s enough remains to be seen on election day, Tuesday, the first of November. ■

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Arab-Jewish Unity, Unburdened from Occupation: Lessons from a Lone Jew in Jordan

INSIGHTS

By Avraham Spraragen



*Balloons released into the air during the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty signing ceremony at the Arava Terminal, 1994.
Photo Credit: Government Press Office (Israel)*

For the past six months, I lived as a lone Jew in Jordan, studying the Arabic language, traveling the country widely, and developing lifelong friendships. Concurrent with my daily classes in Amman, I served as a remote intern at Partners for Progressive Israel (PPI), to advance the PPI goals of Israeli-Palestinian peace and Arab-Jewish unity. Inside the classroom, I studied the Arabic dialect spoken by millions of Palestinians under occupation, in Jordan and elsewhere. Outside the classroom, I worked with Partners to combat the Israeli occupation of Palestinians, some of whom are relatives of my Palestinian-Jordanian friends in Amman. Although I witnessed the daily hardships of Palestinian refugees living in cities and camps throughout the Hashemite Kingdom, I began to consider my overall experience in

Jordan as a living testament to the potential for Arab-Jewish unity on the path toward Israeli-Palestinian peace. However, as long as Israel's occupation persists, true people-to-people peacebuilding is a pipedream.

The 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty, signed by the late Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the father of the current Jordanian king, promised to “end the bloodshed and sorrow.” While the treaty did end the ‘bloodshed’ of Arab-Israeli wars, it did not end the ‘sorrow’ of perpetual occupation and the consequent hostility between Israeli and Jordanian societies. The 1994 treaty, negotiated by U.S. President Bill Clinton, established strategic government-to-government relations without forging meaningful people-to-people ties. This cold peace that continues today created a

dichotomy along my journey in Jordan.

During my half-year stay, Israeli government officials frequently visited King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein at his Amman palace, albeit in secret. First, there was Defense Minister Benny Gantz, followed by then-Alternate Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, and later President Isaac Herzog. The king rolled out the red carpet for the Israeli president, and even displayed the Israeli flag at his palace for the first time. He did so again this summer, when he welcomed now-Prime Minister Lapid to Amman. These visits bore diplomatic fruit, particularly during the period of heightened tensions on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif on Ramadan/Passover 2022, but they had to be hidden from the Jordanian people because of the continued mutual hostility between the two societies. Indeed, the Royal Hashemite Court kept each of these Israeli visits secret until Gantz, Lapid, and Herzog crossed back over the King Hussein/Allenby Bridge. The state of the long-cold Israeli-Jordanian peace is emblemized by the necessity of sneaking top Israeli leaders out of the country, lest they be discovered by ordinary Jordanians.

The Hashemite custodianship of Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, dating back to Mandatory Palestine, was reaffirmed by the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. In 1994, Israel agreed to “respect the present special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Muslim Holy shrines in Jerusalem.” King Abdullah II played this ‘special role’ in April 2022; when Ramadan and Passover converged, and regional violence ensued, Jordan accordingly coordinated with Israel to ease tensions. Israeli Public Security Minister Omer Bar-Lev and Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi met as part of the joint Israeli-Jordanian effort to keep the calm in Jerusalem. Yet again, they had to meet in secret. Furthermore, when Lapid brought the Abraham Accords signatories together in Israel for the Negev Summit in March 2022, the Egyptian foreign minister attended but Safadi did not. Jordanian society has made it clear that so long as the Israeli occupation persists, such cooperation cannot be carried out in the open.

The rigid societal-governmental dichotomy I observed in Jordan was on full display when the Israeli-Jordanian agreements on solar energy, water, and trade

were announced. In defiance of Jordanian society, the Jordanian government signed an agreement with Israel at the 2021 Dubai Expo for a solar power plant in Jordan to generate electricity for Israel and for a desalination plant in Israel to send water to Jordan. As I was departing from the region last month, Jordan signed another agreement with Israel to establish a joint Israeli-Jordanian industrial park called the “Jordan Gateway,” on their shared border connected by an existing bridge, for increased trade and business collaboration. Meanwhile, a recent poll by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy found that an overwhelming majority of ordinary Jordanians oppose such contacts with Israelis as long as Palestinians remain under occupation. Consequently, non-governmental Israeli-Jordanian contacts are severely limited.



Photo Credit: Vyacheslav Argenberg

Except for the occasional Israeli tourist hiking through Petra, civilian interaction is effectively non-existent, including in the NGO and academic realms. The sole non-governmental organization with offices in Tel Aviv, Ramallah, and Amman is EcoPeace Middle East, an environmental peace-building NGO, which works with Partners as well. The Center for Israel Studies in Jordan, the first and only Jordanian center for the study of Israeli politics and society, founded in 2014 by a Jordanian scholar of Israel, was forced to relocate to Dubai. Approximately 70 percent of the Jordanian population is of Palestinian origin, exiled to Jordan and unable to return to Palestine. Understandably, this predominantly-Palestinian population is hesitant about forging meaningful people-to-people ties,

Arab-Jewish Unity, Unburdened from Occupation: Lessons from a Lone Jew in Jordan

whether Arab-Jewish or Israeli-Palestinian, while their brethren in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip remain under occupation.

This tragedy is compounded by the tremendous untapped potential for Arab-Jewish unity that I observed every day in Amman. I lived as a proud Jew in the Arab Muslim world for six months and had the privilege of befriending Arabs and Muslims, Jordanians and Palestinians. My friends invited me into their homes during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan to celebrate their Iftar (the evening meal that breaks the daily fast). They refer to Muslims and Jews (as well as Christians) as “People of the Book” and expressed their interfaith curiosity. Many ordinary Jordanians that I met were eager to learn about Jewish history, beliefs, and customs, especially the similarities to Islam.

Though antisemitism lingers in Jordan, as I [described](#) in *Haaretz*, I have begun a Master of Arts in Arab Studies at Georgetown, inspired by the potential for Arab-Jewish unity in Jordan and beyond. Crucially, in order to tap into this potential, the decades of Israeli military occupation must come to an end. Partners for Progressive Israel is on the frontlines in this fight, for a future of Arab-Jewish unity in Israel-Palestine and the wider region. Unburdened by occupation, Jews and Arabs like me and my Jordanian friends could finally come together for meaningful cultural exchange, as should be our shared destiny as fellow “Peoples of the Book.” ■

Avraham Spraragen is a dual JD-MA Arab Studies degree candidate at Georgetown University. He previously studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University.



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An Interview with Dror Etkes

Seize the Moral Low Ground

Land seizure for
“security needs” in the West Bank



This essay is the latest in our series of ‘Kolot: Voices of Hope’ profiles of Israelis and Palestinians furthering the cause of peace and equality. Find all the profiles in this series [here](#).

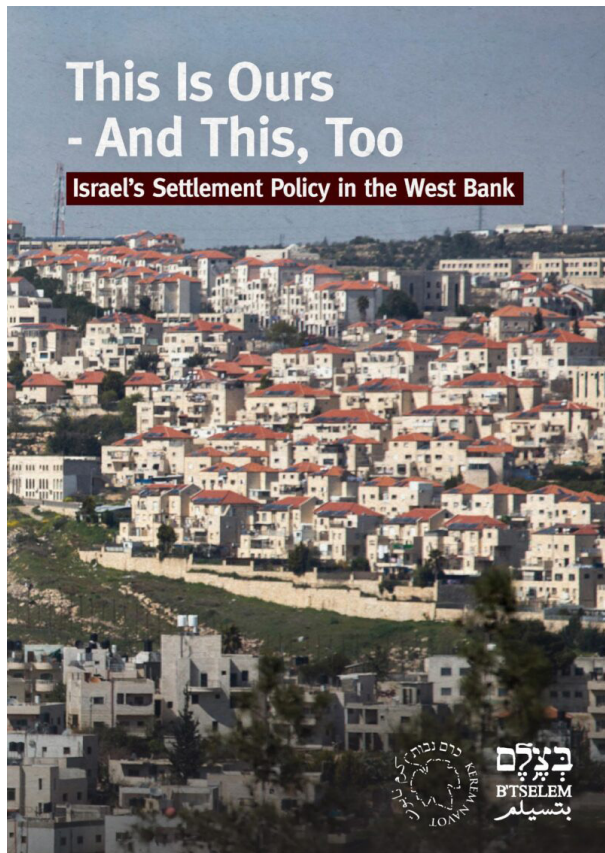
Founded in 2012, Kerem Navot (“Naboth’s Vineyard”) is an Israeli nonprofit that was created to fill a niche in the panoply of anti-occupation organizations—that of comprehensive, long-term land-use research that exposes and challenges the discriminatory, dispossessive Israeli land policy in the occupied territories. The NGO focuses almost exclusively on the West Bank, though it will also report on [land allocations](#) in support of the

settlement enterprise within Green Line Israel.

Kerem Navot shares the results of its research in Hebrew, Arabic, and English. Its trilingual output stems from its refusal to accept the mainstream Israeli assumption that occupation is a domestic Israeli problem. Saying it’s a “domestic” issue implies that Palestinians have no right to participate in a discussion of their future, said the NGO’s founder, Dror Etkes, in an interview with Partners for Progressive Israel. It would be like

claiming that the invasion of Ukraine is a ‘domestic Russian problem,’ he added, noting that the occupation is a “global problem, and definitely a Palestinian-Israeli problem. Palestinians are victims of the system.”

The NGO’s target audience, therefore, is anyone across the world who would find this information useful—the press, the diplomatic corps, policy makers, international bodies, other NGOs in Israel/Palestine, and, of course, the general public.



Kerem Navot researches the various mechanisms which the Israeli government has employed in the service of its “land grab machine,” as Etkes calls it, seeking to document and expose them. In December 2018, for example, a Kerem Navot paper entitled “[Seize the Moral Low Ground](#)” documented how the military uses land seizure orders in the name of “security needs.” Another report, “[Bed and Breakfast on Stolen Land](#),” listed and mapped out, for the first time, all of Airbnb’s and Booking.com’s rental offerings in Israel’s West Bank settlements, while offering policy recommendations to both companies, and to the UN.

Illustrating a Historical Pattern

In the discussion with Partners for Progressive Israel, Etkes explained that one of the goals of the organization is to show that dispossession of Palestinians is not a recent phenomenon, but a pattern that has been going on for decades. “Yes, Netanyahu was more blunt and less interested in concealing the truth, but he didn’t invent [the system],” Etkes noted. Last year, for example, Kerem Navot co-authored (together with the B’Tselem human rights organization) “[This Is Ours—And This, Too](#),” which shed light on the financial, legal, and planning mechanisms that Israeli authorities have been using for over five decades to bolster the settlement project.

Kerem Navot also digs for historical documents in the State archive in order to expose the roots of the current policy, dating back to the 1970s. One recent archival find, for example, involved official letters to the government in the late 1970s from three early West Bank settlements—Ofra, Tekoa, and Kiryat Arba. The settlements expressed deep concern over the possible implementation of then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin’s West Bank Autonomy Plan and explicitly urged the government to grab additional Palestinian lands to guarantee the settlements’ continued expansion.

Involvement of the World Zionist Organization Settlement Division

One area of Kerem Navot’s research of particular interest to those who live in the Diaspora is the dispossession work being perpetrated by the World Zionist Organization’s (WZO) Settlement Division.

The Settlement Division (SD), Etkes explained, organizationally is part of the WZO, but 100% of its budget comes from the Israeli government—specifically from the Prime Minister’s office. That budget amounts to hundreds of millions of shekels each year, making the SD the Israeli government’s main subcontractor for creating new West Bank settlements.

Despite its public status, though, the work of the Settlement Division has become virtually opaque. A

[law](#) passed in 2015 shields the SD almost completely from Israel's Freedom of Information Act, [blocking transparency](#). As a result, exact numbers are currently impossible to come by, but Etkes estimates that “hundreds of thousands of dunams” of expropriated land (1 dunam = 1/4 acre) have been transferred to the SD by the Israel Defense Forces (via its “Civil Administration” division); the SD in turn allocates that land to settlers in a process that the public is barred from seeing. “We know for sure the SD gave land to settlers,” Etkes stated, but “we are totally blocked” from



knowing the exact amounts, the specific recipients, and the precise conditions stipulated.

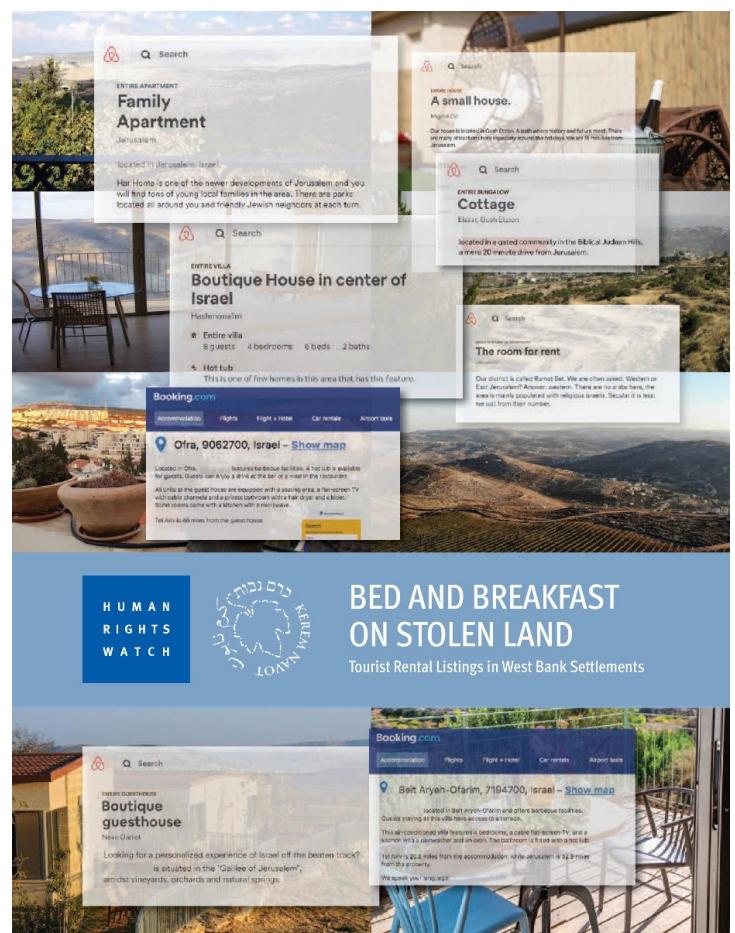
To correct this situation, Kerem Navot is planning to serve a legal petition in an effort to compel the State of Israel to force the SD to open its database to the public. But this will be a drawn-out and complex juridical process.

Etkes stressed that Israel's settlement enterprise has always operated on two parallel channels—an official channel that the Israeli government uses to take occupied land and give it to Cabinet-authorized Israeli settlements, and, from the very beginning, an unofficial channel of land grab that promotes the same goal, but employs tools that are illegal even under Israeli occupation law. The SD, he said, is involved financially and organizationally in both channels, and we have evidence of this also from the 2005 [“Sasson Report,”](#) completed before the anti-transparency legislation went into effect.

The Sasson Report, which detailed unauthorized outpost activity in the late 1990s and early 2000s,

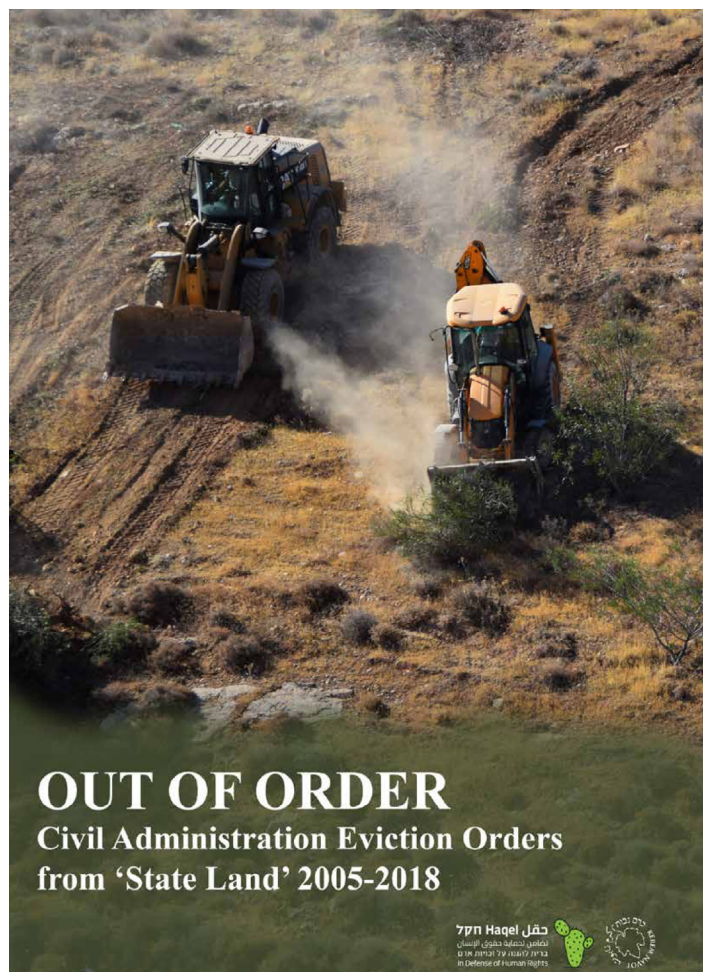
found that the Settlement Division was one of the main bodies involved in what Etkes referred to as “criminal land grab—I don't have a nicer way of saying it.” Unfortunately, he noted, the efforts that ensued following the report's publication to restrain the SD's activity or at least make it more transparent were stymied by Netanyahu's return to power in 2009.

In the unofficial channel, Etkes continued, the Settlement Division works together with settlers to distort legal reality—creating the false impression that private land which belonged to Palestinians had been officially expropriated, even though that was never the case. The extra-legally expropriated land is then allocated to settlers, who build upon it to cement their control. Etkes: “The Settlement Division is deeply involved in this fraudulent mechanism—not one or



two cases, but systematic involvement in support of the criminal channel of the Israeli land grab machine in the West Bank.”

Kerem Navot has also conducted a careful analysis of mortgage records and found that the Settlement Division for years has [provided](#) land-grabbing settlers with favorable mortgages and loans, whose repayment is often excused. Most of these mortgages have been issued over the last decade, Etkes noted.



Under Netanyahu, Etkes added, the Settlement Division amped up its involvement with the unofficial land grab channel, and this became even more acute during the Trump presidency, when the U.S. gave Israel freer rein, and towards the end of Netanyahu's premiership, when his legal woes made him vulnerable to growing settler demands.

The WZO Settlement Division, Etkes summarized, is there to do the job that the Israeli government doesn't want to do directly and sometimes can't do officially—that's an open secret, he said, and is why the SD gets its budget and enjoys impunity.

Final Thoughts

Etkes stressed that it was important for him, in creating Kerem Navot, not to compete with other NGOs, or duplicate their important work. As a result, his organization focuses on an obscure, yet crucial, area of activity that no one else has taken on in order to reveal information that otherwise would remain concealed.

In closing, Etkes observed that, now that a Democrat has returned to the White House and Netanyahu is out of office, Israeli expansion on the West Bank might not be as unabashed as it once was. But the land grab situation in practice, he said, is not substantively different. In today's domestic and international reality, he argued, there are simply no counterforces to compel official Israel to behavior otherwise. ■

To learn more about Kerem Navot, please visit their [English website](#), and make sure to follow their English-language updates on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#). You can also visit Kerem Navot's [YouTube channel](#) or reach out to them via their website's [contact page](#).



Dror Etkes is the founder and chief researcher of Kerem Navot. He was interviewed by Ron Skolnik.

Israel-Palestine Symposium 2022

The Struggle For Human Rights: From Declaration to Occupation



Photo Credit: Gili Getz

7 Sundays between October 23 - December 18, 2022

Interact with Israeli & Palestinian NGOs protecting human rights
by working to end the occupation.

Meet with Israeli & Palestinian government leaders standing up for human rights.

Explore key issues while Israelis go to the polls on November 1st to elect a new government.

Visit with Israelis and Palestinians whose human dignity has been violated.

Examine the struggle both at home & on the West Bank for Israel
to live up to its commitment to human rights.



Israel-Palestine Symposium 2022

The Struggle For Human Rights: From Declaration to Occupation

For the third consecutive year, Partners for Progressive Israel will host a digital trip to Israel and Palestine over seven Sundays between October 23rd and December 18th. *The Struggle for Human Rights: From Declaration to Occupation* will examine Israel's endeavor to live up to its commitment to human rights both at home and in the West Bank and Gaza. Participants will have the opportunity to meet with government and NGO leaders fighting to protect these rights. The opportune timing of this Symposium will give participants the chance to explore the struggle for human rights while Israelis go to the polls on November 1st to elect a new government and as the ensuing coalition is built. Participation in the Symposium is limited so that direct dialogue between members and speakers from Israel and Palestine can be meaningful.

On May 14, 1948, twenty-five leaders of the Jewish Community signed a Declaration of Independence for the new State of Israel. The Declaration proclaims that Israel “will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.” In the same year, the UN passed its Declaration of Universal Human Rights. Both declarations were etched in documents, which, to borrow words from Martin Luther King Jr., were “promissory notes,” and in the words of Torah, “Israel’s covenant (brit) with all its inhabitants.” Throughout the seventy-four years to follow, Israel has fulfilled only part of the promises made in both Declarations. A relentless and growing Occupation in the West Bank and ongoing discrimination against Palestinian Israeli citizens have given the lie to much that was avowed in 1948.

Partners for Progressive Israel invites you to join this exploration of Israel’s path from declaring high ideals to its struggle to realize these same ideals on the ground. For more information, [click here](#).

General Information

The Israel-Palestine Symposium will take place via Zoom over fourteen, two-hour sessions (from 10:30am - 12:30pm ET & 1:30pm - 3:30pm ET) on seven Sundays:

- October 23
- October 30
- November 6
- November 13
- November 20
- December 11
- December 18

Pre and Post-Symposium Films: Information to come.

To allow for substantive discussion, each session will be limited to 50 participants and will be divided as follows:

- 45-minute presentations by the invited guest speakers
- 45-minute direct Q&A conversation with the speakers
- 30-minute discussion among Symposium participants

Registration Information

Space is limited to 50 participants per session.

We recommend signing up early to secure your spot!

Program Cost:

\$180 - Register Now, before Rosh Hashanah (by Sunday, September 25th) and save \$30!

Sponsorship Information:

The cost to host the 2022 Israel-Palestine Symposium is greater than these fees will cover. Support this important and timely program by becoming a Sponsor today.

As a Sponsor, you can attend all 14 Symposium sessions, plus access links (for a limited time) to the 2 films. You will also be acknowledged at each session, in our promotional materials, e-blasts, social media and on our website!

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