



President's Message:

The Center Never Holds

The fact that Israel's Kachol-Lavan (Blue-White) party is in the process of finalizing a government led by Bibi Netanyahu, contrary to innumerable promises it made never to do exactly that, reminds us of Israel's repeated bad experience with aspirational centrist parties – at least from a perspective on the left. All have either collapsed within a couple of election cycles – or else toppled over to the right, as Kachol-Lavan is doing. And, interestingly, they are usually led by prominent ex-generals, often even former IDF Chiefs of Staff, an office whose importance in Israel is not far from that of the President and Prime Minister. An incomplete list includes Yigal Yadin (Democratic Movement for Change-1977), Moshe Dayan (Telem-1981), Amnon Lipkin-Shahak (Center Party-1999), Ariel Sharon (Kadima-2005), and now Benny Gantz, along with his fellow ex-Chiefs of Staff, Gabi Ashkenazi and Moshe Ya'alon. Ya'alon, a genuine and unapologetic rightist, interestingly enough, has broken with Gantz and is now semi-united with Yair Lapid in another centrist party in opposition, Yesh Atid-Telem.

All of these parties owed a large part of what success they had (sometimes considerable, if fleeting) to a large contingent of leftist (i.e., mostly Labor) voters who were seeking "change" and believed a centrist party could achieve it, as Yadin's party promised in its very name. They were rarely, if ever, content with their choice, as proved by the fact that they usually returned to Labor in the next election. Now the Labor refuge seems gone, apparently about to be folded into Kachol-Lavan, and it's not yet clear if Labor will keep its identity. Meretz is left (so to speak) as the only representative of the Zionist Left, trying to find its way amid the corona crisis and a new political reality. At least it has the Passover holiday as a brief respite.

A centrist party would seem to make logical sense but in a practical sense it never works, which is why the dustbin of Israeli history is so full of them. But why are they invariably captured by the right? Perhaps because what has passed for the "Left" in Israel is not really left, while the Right is most definitely right? Leftist ideals may appeal to a voter's head but the right appeals to their heart. That is an unequal contest where the heart invariably wins.

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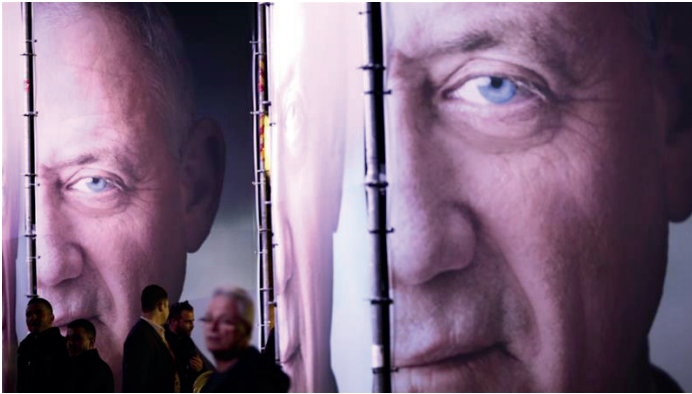
UPCOMING WEBINAR

**Politics and Pandemic:
 Israel's Twin Crises**
 Monday, 13 April, 12:30 ET

Discussant: **Bradley Burston** -
 Columnist for Haaretz

Moderator: **Hillel Schenker** -
 Co-editor of the Palestine-Israel Journal

[Details on Page 10](#)



Neoliberalism has been Israel's economic creed, starting in the mid-1980s, when Labor's Shimon Peres was Finance Minister and used it to extract Israel from its disastrous period of hyperinflation. During the next 35 years, neoliberalism, under both Likud and Labor, also extricated Israel from its welfare state, destroyed the Histadrut, and built the gleaming skyscrapers of Tel Aviv over the shabby Bauhaus city it had been. In the process, it brought Israel from among the two or three most egalitarian societies in the world to vying with the US to be the most inegalitarian. The process was helped immensely by the discovery of the huge Leviathan natural gas field, even if ordinary Israelis benefitted far less than they should have.

At this point, only the Left can offer real change, but it needs to sell itself significantly better than it has, ever since it lost its base in the Histadrut and allied institutions. It indeed has sterling values, high ideals, and even good ideas to offer. But it seems to be lacking the political institutions that can successfully translate those ideals into movements that will produce votes.

During the last two bleak decades, the Left has taken a tip from the Right's successes in creating think tanks and other institutions that incubate ideologies and turn ideals into programs. We in Partners for Progressive Israel have featured many of them in our Kolot program; there are hundreds more doing important work. There are unions, programs working with Haredim, with Mizrahim, in foreign policy, in economic policy, and of course with Palestinian citizens of Israel.

The last group is most important. It is clear that there cannot and will not be a leftwing movement that can win an election in Israel without an Arab component. The Joint List, uneasily and uncomfortably containing "Communists," Arab nationalists, and Islamists, has performed a great service by flexing the muscles of the 21% of Israelis who are Arab. But the Joint List, or at least part of it, eventually has to see itself as a means to an end, namely of Jewish-Arab political cooperation. Not

all Israeli Arabs will want to be part of that, just as many Israeli Jews will abhor it. But until a basis can be found for political cooperation, the Left will not be able to come to power. That may not be for years, but it can happen, with ideas and with leadership.

Israelis, I hope, have seen again that the center cannot hold, and perhaps the lesson will stick this time. But the Left has to find itself leadership and structures that will induce movement towards it, rather than towards the center. Ironically, it is the Israeli Arabs who have successfully organized themselves, with 15 Knesset seats, while Meretz only has three (seven in the current polls).

This is a hard time for everyone – and not a good time to make political decisions, though they have to be made, of course. Let's fervently hope the new government will succeed in containing the coronavirus. Let's hope just as fervently that it won't succeed in annexing the West Bank settlements, though that seems to be a Netanyahu priority that Gantz and Kachol-Lavan have swallowed without gagging. Only after the virus has departed, or been defeated, can the real political work commence to build a successful Left and a better Israel. *Inshallah, b'ezrat hashem.*

I would like to wish all our friends and supporters and all of Beit Yisrael a joyous and safe Passover, whether alone or online or however you are celebrating Hag Herutaynu, the holiday of our liberation. We hope you will support our programs like Kolot and Conversations with Israel and Palestine, read our online magazine Israel Horizons, and keep the faith.

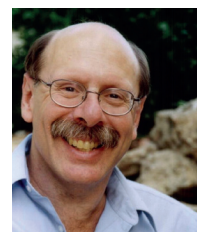
L'shanah haba'ah b'yerushalayim ha'b'nuyah.

Next year in a rebuilt Jerusalem – wherever and whatever your Jerusalem may be. ■

Keep safe.

Paul Scham

Paul Scham is President of Partners for Progressive Israel; Associate Research Professor of Israel Studies at the University of Maryland and Executive Director of its Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies.



A Rosy Phantasmagorical (and Probably Counterfactual) Report from Israel's Future

By Ron Skolnik



As Israel celebrated its centennial Independence Day in May 2048, its media reflected back on the many red-letter dates that had marked the tumultuous life of the nation: The UN vote of 1947, the various wars, of course, and the diplomatic agreements reached, first with Egypt and Jordan, and decades later with the rest of the Arab world. But of all the historic turning points cited, the one that stood out the most, the one that marked the sharpest divide between the dark days of before and the brighter days of after was the first half of 2020.

The country at the time was going through a period of instability, and had just experienced a bruising election campaign, its third in less than year. In an effort to stay in power, then-Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who headed the Likud party (it would break apart nine years later), made use of harsh, explicit fear-mongering which focused on the supposed threat that the 20 percent Arab minority posed to the nation. (Part of his motivation

to remain in power was to avoid standing trial on several serious felony charges.)

Public expressions of racism had become rather common in Israel over the previous decades, and especially during Netanyahu's unprecedented eleven consecutive years in power, so the pundits of the time did not foresee any momentous change on the horizon. Indeed, Netanyahu's Israel had recently passed a quasi-constitutional "Nation-State Law," which gave the country's Jews legal supremacy over their Arab compatriots in several key areas. (The legislation would be suspended in 2024 and later superseded.)

But something tectonic began to happen in March of 2020. After initial exit polls from March 2 elections indicated that Netanyahu's bloc of rightwing and orthodox parties was on the verge of securing a small majority, the actual count showed that the exit polls had been slightly – but significantly – off: In fact, after 100 percent of the vote was counted, it turned out that Netanyahu's bloc was in the minority, commanding only 58 out of 120 Knesset members.

Netanyahu's response was to fall back on his go-to move: He insisted that his bloc had nonetheless won because it represented a majority of the country's Jews. Standing next to an eraserboard at a meeting with his bloc, he jotted down the numbers: 58 seats for the "Zionist Right" versus only 47 seats for what he called the "Zionist Left." (This was actually a misnomer as most of those opposing Netanyahu belonged to a large centrist party, "Blue and White," with some even belonging to a right-wing, but anti-Netanyahu and anti-clericalist, party called Yisrael Beiteinu. But "Left" in Israel during that period of time was a pejorative and Netanyahu used it regularly to describe anyone who opposed him.)

But what of the other 15 seats, those won by the "Joint List" party, **over 95 percent** of whose votes came from Israel's Arab citizens? "**They are not part of the equation,**" Netanyahu summarily declared, explaining in essence that while Israel's Arab citizens had the right to go through the ritual of turning out and casting a ballot, the country over which he presided had no intention of allowing those votes to count in any practical sense.

In normal times, Netanyahu's remark would have passed without much notice. The racism of that had once been the



province of far-rightists, like the extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane in the 1980s, had long since oozed into the mainstream, including the ruling Likud party, and was even seeping into its centrist opposition.

But circumstances now were different. Benny Gantz, the former Chief of Staff and leader of the centrist Blue and White party, had withstood a late-campaign surge by Netanyahu, escaping by the skin of his teeth. After three elections, he realized that he was running out of time to replace Netanyahu and that a fourth election might deliver Netanyahu the majority he needed to shatter the country's democracy. Netanyahu's allies had already expressed a willingness to dismantle the High Court and even suspend parliament, when it served their interests.

Gantz understood that he needed to avail himself of all those who would support his premiership, even if that meant courting controversy by accepting support from the country's Arab minority.

Meanwhile, Avigdor Lieberman's anti-Arab Yisrael Beiteinu party, which had carved out a niche as the sole anti-Netanyahu party on Israel's right, was facing a questionable electoral future. With an aging constituency (it appealed in large measure to first-generation immigrants who had arrived from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s), Lieberman took note that his party had lost 50,000 votes – almost one sixth of its total – between the [September 2019](#) and [March 2020](#) elections. Lieberman's strategy, in other words, which had provided such a huge electoral boost between the April and September 2019 elections, was starting to lose its luster. Another election could be his party's undoing. Begrudgingly, he agreed to support Gantz's Blue and White party even as it made a deal with the Joint List representatives whom he had so often demonized over the years.

Led by Ayman Odeh, the Joint List, too, swallowed hard.

Lieberman was an archenemy of the Arab community, having repeatedly questioned their loyalty to the country and having conceived the idea of transferring areas with heavy Arab population into a then-still-envisaged State of Palestine. They were skeptical, too, about Gantz: While the centrist leader did not explicitly endorse racism, he seemed to tacitly accept the rightwing's premise that, in a "Jewish state," Arabs would necessarily be second-class citizens. Despite an understandable lack of enthusiasm, the Joint List agreed to prop up a government that would rid the country of Netanyahu, but allowed Lieberman a central seat at the table.

Weeks of tense coalition wrangling followed those March elections, during which Gantz was tempted to form a "national emergency government" with Netanyahu. But the Blue and White leader eventually made a historic shift and agreed to the previously unthinkable: To establish a government that leaned heavily on the votes of the Arab population. In return for the Joint List's support, the newly inducted Prime Minister Gantz shocked the nation by appointing Knesset members from that faction to head key Knesset committees. A year into his government, he reached an additional deal with the Joint List to appoint one of their members to head a Cabinet Ministry dedicated to economic equality.

While Israel's still-powerful rightwing howled, online and in the streets, and although the threat of civil war hung over the country for months, the majority of Israelis soon grasped that the unthinkable was now thinkable – and that life went on as before. As the chair of the left-of-center Meretz party (a forerunner of the Democracy for All party) [predicted](#) early in the process, once cooperation with Arab Knesset members got underway, more and more of Israel's Jewish citizens realized that "the sky wasn't falling" and that the Israeli right's scare tactics had been baseless: Israel was exposed to no enemy attack; internally, its society held firm. In fact, tensions between the country's Jewish majority and its Arab minority gradually began to ease, a process that would continue over the next decade, paving the way for the long-awaited Israeli constitution of 2033 that guaranteed equality for all citizens.

But politics was only one part of what catalyzed Israel's democratization process in the years after 2020; tragically, it took a major catastrophe as well – a pandemic that was known in Israel as the Corona Plague. Originating in China, the highly infectious virus quickly spread around the globe, including to Israel, where it overwhelmed a health system that had not been properly [prepared](#) for a pandemic.

But rather than produce heightened tensions between Israel's

A Rosy Phantasmagorical (and Probably Counterfactual) Report from Israel's Future

Jews and Arabs, something unexpected occurred: Israelis saw that the virus didn't discriminate on the basis of ethnicity or religion; it took lives in all communities. Israel's Jewish citizens noticed something else: When they or their loved ones went to the hospital, the medical staff fighting to save their lives didn't discriminate either. With Arab citizens [making up](#) one-fifth of all doctors, one-quarter of all nurses, and one-half of all pharmacists, Jewish Israelis began to see their compatriots in a different light.

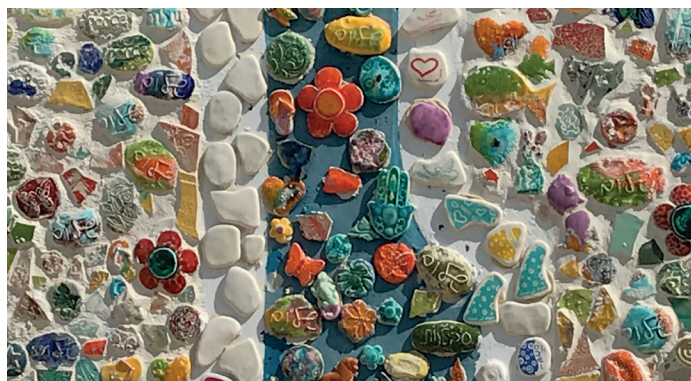
By the time the next elections were held, in 2023, the Corona Plague was gone and the atmosphere in the country had changed. As Israel began to emerge from its darkest era of racist incitement, Likud's old rallying cries grew less effective. And without its charismatic long-term leader, who was convicted of bribery, fraud and breach of trust (but avoided jail time in a plea bargain), the party lost tens of thousands of supporters to Blue and White. Meanwhile, the religious parties that had once been Netanyahu's solid allies saw the handwriting on the wall and made deals with Prime Minister Gantz in the second of his three terms.

Israel still faced years of turbulence, and change did not come easily or all at once. But in the first half of 2020 it turned a corner. It had survived – barely – the Netanyahu years. ■

Ron Skolnik is an American-Israeli political columnist and public speaker, whose articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including Haaretz, Al-Monitor, Tikkun, and the Palestine-Israel Journal.



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Partners for Progressive Israel Condemns Labor Party Joining Netanyahu Coalition

Partners for Progressive Israel joins the Israeli Meretz Party and the World Union of Meretz in condemning the reported decision of the chairman of the Israeli Labor Party, MK Amir Peretz, to join the coalition-in-preparation to be led by Benjamin Netanyahu. The formation of this coalition betrays innumerable promises that Peretz made in the recent election campaign that he would never join a coalition with Netanyahu as Prime Minister. Peretz's decision dissolves the electoral coalition between Meretz and Labor, whose primary object was to prevent Netanyahu from leading a new government.

Meretz is thus the sole Zionist party which espouses no annexation, an end to the occupation, narrowing of the horrendous income inequality, and equal rights for all Israeli citizens. We call on all those who still uphold these bedrock values to support Meretz, Partners for Progressive Israel, and affiliated organizations in order to return Israel to the path of liberal democracy and civil liberties, and to oppose the new Netanyahu government in its attempts to stifle dissent and expand settlement in the occupied territories.

We recognize that Israel, in common with the rest of the planet, faces the immediate coronavirus crisis, and we will support all necessary measures to limit its spread and protect the Israeli population, as well as Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, whose success in combating Covid-19 is necessarily entwined with that of Israelis. Nevertheless, we will rigorously insist that all measures involve the minimum interference with civil liberties and that they not be perpetuated any longer than necessary to combat the virus.

We call on all those who support our views to denounce Labor's capitulation and to join with us in building an Israel based on the values of peace, civil liberties for all, and equality.



Paul Scham
President, Partners for Progressive Israel

April 6, 2020

Standing Together (Omdim B'Yachad) Against Injustice

By Noa Fleischacker



Amid the COVID-19 crisis, Omdim B'Yachad has shifted most of our work to online formats and we're continuing to organize chapter meetings, conferences, programs, and actions using video calls and online tools. In addition to the health crisis, we're also entering into a socioeconomic crisis in Israel, and Omdim B'Yachad has launched a "Guaranteed Income for All" campaign to fight for the many people who have lost their jobs or been put on unpaid leave at home. The Israeli government is bailing out major companies, but instead should be focused on supporting teachers, plumbers, taxi drivers, restaurant workers, and others who are struggling to pay rent and buy food for the month. – Noa Fleischacker

The Omdim B'Yachad (Standing Together) movement was born in the fall of 2015, when a group of activists came together in response to the wave of violence that had erupted between Israelis and Palestinians around the time of the Jewish High Holidays. Many of these activists were working for Members of Knesset or civil society organizations at the time. They'd been through cycle after cycle of violence, but didn't see any political movement that was engaging people on a grassroots level to work towards an end to the bloodshed once and for all.

Back in 2011, many of these same activists had been involved in the social protest movement (AKA the "tents protest"), a series of demonstrations that brought hundreds of thousands of Israelis out into the streets to protest the high cost of living. These protests were energizing, and addressed a real, urgent need: People were living in poverty and many young people couldn't afford the cost of housing in cities like Tel Aviv. So, they mobilized their friends and neighbors to show up, sleep outside in tents, and make clear that "the people demand social justice." And, for a little while at least,

it seemed like these long-ignored issues were finally going to be addressed.

But while the 2011 protests politically awakened and animated young people, they died down within a few months and changed very little, if anything at all. Up against a Netanyahu government determined to maintain the status quo, the protests lacked a concerted organizing effort. As a result, they failed to build enough power to put sustained pressure on Netanyahu and his administration to invest in solutions.

So, when this group of activists came together in 2015, they organized a movement that would not only bring people out in the streets, but would also provide a vision, structure, and strategy that would sustain it and allow it to grow – creating chapters for ongoing activity and offering a narrative that stressed building power for the long haul. They wanted to create a powerful grassroots movement built on partnership between Jews and Arabs who would stand together and fight for change. That movement is Omdim B'Yachad.

Omdim B'Yachad is now Israel's largest and fastest-growing grassroots movement, with two thousand members and fifteen local chapters around the country. Members of Omdim B'Yachad organize on a local and national level around issues of social justice, equality, and peace. The campaigns take into account the interconnections between different struggles, such as that between social and economic disparities and the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories.

Since September 2019, I've worked as the New Israel Fund / Shatil Fellow at Omdim B'Yachad. As part of the organizing team, I'm working to build Omdim B'Yachad's trainings and teach organizing skills and tactics to the movement leaders and members. I first heard about Omdim B'Yachad when I was working as a community organizer in the U.S. and I was initially drawn to the movement's work two years ago during their campaign to stop the deportation of asylum seekers.

In early 2018, the Israeli government announced that Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers would be deported to "third party countries" (such as Rwanda). Many of these asylum seekers had been living in Israel for years, but right-wing advocates labeled them as "infiltrators," blamed them for economic woes, and pressured the government to expedite their deportation. Omdim B'Yachad joined with other organizations and groups in a coalition to stop the

deportation from happening. They quickly realized that if they were going to be successful, they needed to send a clear message that the Israeli government – not the asylum seekers – was to blame for the high levels of poverty, unemployment, evictions, and failing infrastructure in South Tel Aviv, where large numbers of Eritreans and Sudanese reside.

In coalition with other organizations, Omdim B'Yachad mobilized thousands of Israelis in protest. Residents of South Tel Aviv hung banners that said "South Tel Aviv opposes the deportation" and people marched in the streets with signs that read "our neighborhoods are ready to absorb refugees." They made clear that what people in South Tel Aviv actually needed was for the government to stop evictions and invest in housing, welfare, and infrastructure.



Omdim B'Yachad also initiated its own campaign: Members canvassed in North Tel Aviv and asked residents to sign a petition affirming that they would welcome asylum seekers in their own neighborhoods and were willing to have their taxes support rehabilitation programs. After signing the petition, people joined Omdim B'Yachad and knocked doors to encourage their neighbors to sign as well. By the end of the campaign, Omdim B'Yachad had organized ten different "action hubs" and mobilized people around the country who were ready to take on additional issues in the future.

Together with other organizations, Omdim B'Yachad succeeded in stopping the deportations – the biggest defeat suffered by Netanyahu's government during that term. The campaign was also a huge success in terms of movement-building: It created the same kind of momentum that the 2011 social protests had witnessed, only this time it enabled people to get involved and stay involved. Many of the people who joined in actions to stop the deportations have since taken part in numerous other campaigns.

Since launching in 2015, Omdim B'Yachad's members have spearheaded campaigns on a wide variety of issues. Recently the student chapter at Haifa University organized a campaign against sexual harassment, designed to pressure the school's administration to change its behavioral code. There are ongoing campaigns that address issues ranging from the structural and systemic neglect in South Tel Aviv to the Nation-State Law's attempt to erase Arabic from public spaces. The Jerusalem chapter is working with other groups to resist police brutality in Issawiya, and chapters across the country are taking on issues in the healthcare, education, and welfare systems. And, in the recent elections, Omdim B'Yachad members helped shift public perception of Jewish-Arab partnership: There were actions all over the country to legitimize the idea of political cooperation between Jews and Arabs and to stand up to right-wing attacks on Arab voters.

Omdim B'Yachad believes that we fall into cycles of despair because we fail to properly evolve and adapt our tactics. So they're dedicated to studying community and political organizing as a craft and developing their leaders' capacity as organizers. They actively seek out advice and support from movements outside Israel that have succeeded in addressing systemic injustices through grassroots work and political action. This is a big part of why working at Omdim B'Yachad brings me hope.

In December, for example, I joined Omdim B'Yachad leaders and staff at an intensive training with facilitators from Momentum, an American training institute committed to building progressive mass movements. We spent days with the Momentum trainers exploring the rich history of movement organizing around the world and learning tools and strategies that could be adopted in the Israeli context. A few weeks later, we sat down with a labor organizer and brainstormed how union organizing tactics might inform Omdim B'Yachad's efforts to grow its membership. I realize this might not sound that exciting. Trainings? Workshops? Conversations about organizing? But the legacy and tradition of community organizing doesn't exist in Israel the way it does in the U.S. Training institutes don't exist there, and there are few spaces where people are actively trying to learn and adapt tools that will enable them to "do activism" differently.

The reason that Omdim B'Yachad's leaders are so dedicated to learning these skills and doing things differently isn't just because they're a newer and younger organization.

It's because they're planning to win. And, in order to win, Omdim B'Yachad leaders are using what they've learned to build a massive base and engage people and communities that have previously been alienated or left out of progressive political activism.

When I was first getting involved in anti-Occupation activity ten years ago, I spent a summer going to protests and events all over Israel. Every evening or weekend, I'd see the exact same ten people that I had just seen at a different demonstration or conference. At first, it was sort of heartening to feel like, within a matter of weeks, I'd met every leader of a human rights nonprofit or social justice organization. But that feeling soon dissipated and quickly turned into concern, frustration, and hopelessness. I understand now that many of those protests and demonstrations simply weren't engaging people around issues that impact their daily lives. They weren't talking about poverty, healthcare, or the education system.

Omdim B'Yachad, on the other hand, is connecting the Occupation and settlement expansion to people's lived experiences and giving them a way to take action every day in grassroots campaigns that deal with local and national issues. The movement is dedicated to figuring out how to build actual political power. The leaders of Omdim B'Yachad don't just want to feel like they're on the right side of history: They want to be the winning side. Now, more than ever, in the face of threats to annex the West Bank and revoke the citizenship of hundreds of thousands of Arab citizens of Israel, the progressive camp needs Omdim B'Yachad's political organizing, openness to strategic innovation, and investment in building a massive, powerful movement. ■

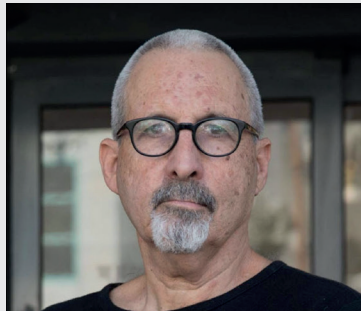
Noa Fleischacker is the New Israel Fund / Shatil Social Justice Fellow at Omdim B'Yachad.



UPCOMING WEBINAR BRIEFING

Politics and Pandemic: Israel's Twin Crises

Monday, 13 April, 12:30-13:30 ET



DISCUSSANT:
Bradley Burston
Columnist for *Haaretz*



MODERATOR
Hillel Schenker
Co-editor of the
Palestine-Israel Journal

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April 6, 2020

Hosted by



Welcome the Stranger: Refugees and Asylum-Seekers in Israel



This webinar was conducted by Partners for Progressive Israel on January 8, 2020. This version has been edited for length and clarity. The full webinar can be accessed [here](#).

Kayla: I'm Kayla Rothman-Zecher. Over the past decade I have worked in Israel, Palestine, and the United States on refugee-related issues, with HIAS Israel, as well as at the African Refugee Development Center.

Mutasim Ali is a co-founder of the African Students Organization in Israel and a former executive director of the African Refugee Development Center. A Darfur refugee, Mutasim attended law school in Israel and is currently studying at George Washington University.

Dr. Tally Kritzman-Amir is a visiting associate professor at Harvard University. She is a leading expert in Israel on immigration and asylum law and policy and has authored dozens of articles.

Kayla: First, for background, let me ask who is coming into Israel and why, and where do refugees fall within this context.

Tally: It's very important to think about the issue of refugees in Israel in its broader context. There are also other categories of non-Jewish migrants in Israel. For example, Israel has about 200,000 migrant workers who come to Israel temporarily to work in specific economic sectors. What we will be focusing on today are the refugees.

The people that we will be talking about today were never defined by the State of Israel as refugees. We nevertheless

here will refer to them as refugees because they meet the definition of refugee in international law, in the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which Israel helped to draft. It holds that refugees are people who cross international borders and whose migration is inspired by a fear of future persecution on the basis of either race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Kayla: Let's turn to the two large groups of non-Jewish refugees in Israel, those from Darfur, who started to arrive in 2007, and those from Eritrea, who began arriving in 2009.

Mutasim: I'm so glad and excited to be here with you. Just wanted to say that today is the second time I have seen snow!

Most of the refugees and asylum seekers in Israel are from Sudan and Eritrea. There are others from Western African countries such as Ivory Coast, some from Guinea, and a few Nigerians. Sudanese are coming from war-torn zones, primarily from Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and the Blue Nile, regions undergoing persecution and oppression. It began when in 2002 and 2003 when the Sudanese government launched a genocidal campaign against ethnic groups in Darfur. Thousands of villages were burned down, their residents displaced, and hundreds of thousands became refugees. These refugees went to many countries. There are over 300,000 in Chad, hundreds of thousands in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Uganda, and Ethiopia, in addition to Israel. In Eritrea there is no war, but there are grave human rights violations, indefinite detention, military conscription, and disappearances. Currently there are about 30,000 African refugees in Israel, not including children of refugees born in Israel. It is unfortunate that Israel cannot deal with less than 30,000 refugees living within its borders.

The majority of refugees in Israel first went to Egypt and Libya but in 2005 many Sudanese refugees in Egypt were sent back to Sudan, viewed by the Egyptian government as security threats. During a protest demonstration, 29 Sudanese refugees were killed by Egyptian security forces. In Arab nations, detention or deportation was a constant threat, so many refugees tried to cross the Mediterranean into Europe, while others made their way to Israel.

Kayla: Though there are about 30,000 African refugees in Israel now, from 2007 to 2012 as many as 60,000 entered

Israel. And in response Israel instituted some pretty terrible policies.

Tally: Although Israel was a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention, the government never thought about non-Jewish refugees. For many years this issue was dormant. Refugees were accepted into Israeli society but outside of the Refugee Convention, simply as demonstrations of goodwill on behalf of Israel. Initially, when the African migration began, Israel didn't even have a process and a bureaucracy to deal with asylum applications, and relied on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, but since 2009, Israel has taken over the process of interviewing asylum-seekers and making determinations on their cases. However, what hasn't changed was the philosophical framework that Israel is not an immigration state but, rather, a Jewish state, and therefore, refugees who are not Jewish are not welcome.

Mutasim: We've never felt welcomed in Israel. Until the present day there are exclusionary policies preventing refugees from living in certain areas. The Holot detention facility was erected in 2013 and thousands of refugees from Sudan and Eritrea were detained solely to make their lives miserable so that they would choose to leave Israel voluntarily. You can apply for asylum today and you will wait indefinitely, without having the government decide on your asylum claim.

Tally: Most importantly, in 2013 Israel erected a wall along the Egyptian border, which was the longest continental border with Africa. This is probably the most effective border wall in the whole world because the numbers of people going into Israel dropped to zero. And because it's near Gaza it is heavily militarized in a way that few countries can do. That's the first mechanism.

The second mechanism was putting people into immigration detention. When that was challenged in court, Israel created the residency center, which was the same thing, more or less, with a different name. In recent years Israel has tried to transfer people to third countries. It realizes that these people cannot be sent back to their country of origin. What it did

instead was to create a third-country agreement very similar to the ones that the US is currently establishing in order to transfer refugees to third countries. But because of political pushback, the efforts to force involuntary deportation to Rwanda and Uganda were stopped.

Furthermore, asylum applications can be pending for a decade or more. Just yesterday I spoke with a woman whose asylum application has been pending for seventeen years. Instead refugees get temporary visas that offer very partial access to rights and have to be constantly renewed. In May 2017, Israel enacted the Deposit Law which imposes an obligation on employers to divert 20% of the salary of asylum seekers to a deposit that's made available to them when they leave Israel, which of course for many of them is not a real possibility.

On top of all that, there's also the social exclusion. In many ways asylum seekers are really struggling to integrate into

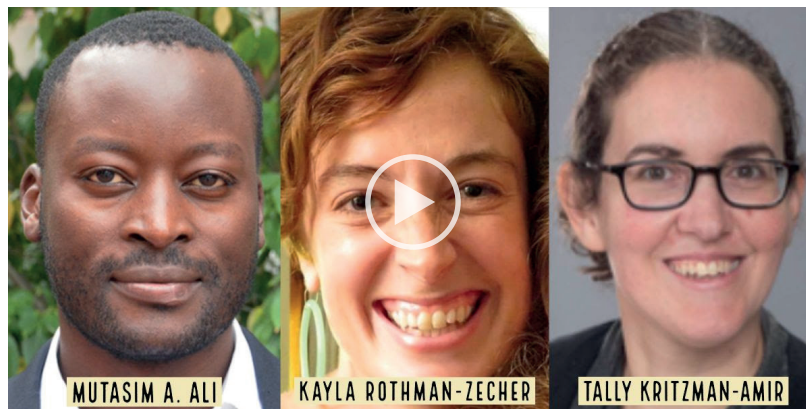
Israeli society, only to find themselves targeted by politicians, most notoriously in 2012 when Miri Regev, the Minister of Cultural Affairs, referred to Sudanese refugees as the cancer in our bodies.

Mutasim: A few days ago, there was a flood in Tel Aviv and the Mayor

actually blamed refugees and asylum seekers saying, "The problem with south Tel Aviv is not the infrastructure but the infiltrators." This was the Mayor of Tel Aviv!

The African Refugees Development Center (ARDC), which I work with, is a community-based organization in which Israelis and asylum seekers come together to confront the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers. To this day the government offers no assistance. With the ARDC, the idea was to offer humanitarian assistance, providing shelter, food, and all essential items, but when they erected the fence in 2012 and no more refugees came, we shifted our mission from offering humanitarian assistance to focusing on how to influence policy; especially, how can we work together with the local residents?

One of the projects that I was really inspired by was Power to Community. The idea was to bring refugees and asylum seekers together with local residents. One thing that we all acknowledge



is that the local residents in south Tel Aviv, primarily in the neighborhoods of Hatikva, Neve Sha'an, Florentin, and Kiryat Shalom, really endure miserable situations, and feel totally ignored and abandoned by the government. We tried to tell the refugees, "Hey, we acknowledge your pain and your suffering and we can work together to address these issues." Meanwhile the government is doing everything possible to turn the African refugees and Jewish Israelis against each other. With that project we conducted a number of meetings, home visits, and security patrols. It's limited and didn't solve all the problems, but at least it was an initiative that brings refugees and local residents together.

I and a few others were able to go to Israeli universities. We weren't able at first to apply but we managed to get that changed. We created an organization called the African Students Organization and the idea is to help our friends from the community to go to universities. We have dreams to achieve and in fact many of us were involved with issues back home. Education is one way to influence both the situation in Israel and back home.

Kayla: Mutasim was the executive director of the African Refugee Development Center, and Tally served on its board. It provides language classes and a lot of the refugee community speaks fluent Hebrew now, and their children are enrolled in Israeli schools, and higher education is becoming more and more accessible to the refugee community.

Tally: In recent years the Israeli government has had to walk a very fine line between not granting any rights to the refugees and not being portrayed as violators of international law. I think the accumulation of all the exclusionary practices does paint a picture of a country that is evading its obligation under refugee law. But Israel can violate the 1951 refugee convention without real consequences. We've seen how people who left Israel and went to Libya either died or found themselves in grave danger.

Kayla: What I think we've seen over the past couple of years is that many members of the refugee community, even if they've tried to assimilate into Israeli society and can speak Hebrew, don't see a future for themselves there anymore.

Mutasim: In 2018, there was a deal that was signed between the Israeli government, Netanyahu's government and the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees, to halve the number of refugees in Israel and resettle them in third countries. However, it also called for the other half to remain in Israel and receive a durable status to live and work in

a dignified way. Unfortunately, the next day Netanyahu canceled the deal because some local residents thought this was too good a deal for the remaining refugees. I really hope that deal will be reinstated. We will see what happens if Israel ever forms a stable government again. I can tell you a lot of the African refugees want to leave Israel. This is not only because of their status but because of the way that they're being treated, referred to as criminals and rapists and the like.

Kayla: Here is a question from the audience:

I get that right-wing Israeli politicians like to demonize the refugees but how do regular Israelis react to this? Do they buy into the scare tactics and how do the centrist and left-wing parties relate to this issue?

Tally: It depends. Some people do buy into the scare tactics. I also think a lot of people don't, and without them the attempt in 2018 to deport people to Rwanda and Uganda might have succeeded. It was also a very hopeful and encouraging moment to see how the population of the State of Israel responded. In the protest to the deportation plans we saw tens of thousands of people going out to the streets, marching alongside with asylum seekers against the deportation. But most political parties are avoiding this issue altogether.

Mutasim: Support for the refugee cause has sometimes come from unusual quarters, such as the Ahoti movement and from feminist Mizrahi organizations in South Tel Aviv. Almost 20,000 people came to the protest in February 2018. But I believe the vast majority of Israelis are buying into the government's policy. Many people are just unwilling to even talk with us. I've been working on this for about a decade, but I must say the situation is actually getting worse. People are still being deported "voluntarily."

Kayla: What is the status of status of children of refugees born in Israel?

Tally: Israel doesn't have birthright citizenship. Unlike the US, children of non-citizens don't become citizens just by virtue of being born in Israel. Children of refugees and migrant workers are undocumented, basically. In the case of children of refugees, they are dependent on their parents to file applications, which as we've mentioned before, could take 10, 15 years to even be processed. What was seen in the last few months is an attempt to deport children who are undocumented with their families, but that was focused more on the children of immigrant workers, not African refugees.

Another development of the last few days is the decision of

the Tel Aviv municipality to open school for the “foreign children,” as they call them, and that school is supposed to be opened on the only park that is still available in South Tel Aviv. Not only is this a decision that suggests deepening or entrenching the segregation in education and sending non-national kids to separate schools but this is also something that has a direct cost for the local residents of South Tel Aviv.

Kayla: David Abraham asks, “Strategically, it seems to me there’s some confusion or ambivalence on playing the Jewish card; based on our own tragic experiences, should we should be generous towards the persecuted?”

Tally: In other words, “never again” for anyone or “never again” just for us? I think the strategic choice of the current Israeli government and its predecessor has been “never again for us,” which means excluding non-Jewish migrants and non-Jewish refugees. To me, that’s the wrong answer.

We are right next to Syria, with everything that Syria is going through. We are right next to Lebanon, which has been shouldering such a significant portion of the responsibility. Jordan, Turkey, all the countries in this region are either in massive turmoil or shouldering much more significant portions of their responsibility towards refugees in the world. Then we have the State of Israel, which currently has just about 30,000 refugees. It’s an economically-stable country, it’s a democracy and yet it’s struggling to provide rights and protections to just 30,000 people.

For me as an Israeli, that’s something that I’m really not proud of. For me as someone whose family has survived the Holocaust, that’s not the lesson we should have learned from this experience.

Mutasim: And even if you have a work permit and right to study at university, you can’t become a citizen of Israel if you’re a refugee and aren’t Jewish. I don’t complain about that because in the end for me, the goal is not to become a citizen, the goal is just to have a safe shelter until I’m able to go back to my home.

Tally: I think a lot of the aspects of Israeli policy are really not unique to Israel. We’ve seen other countries erecting border fences and we’ve seen other countries retaining asylum seekers, but I think there are two things that are different regarding Israel. What makes Israel stand out is the fact that it applies all exclusionary mechanisms simultaneously; a border fence, immigration detention, third country agreements, and very low recognition rates, combined with the economic exclusion, the 20% salary deduction, the bureaucratic hurdles

that people have to cross, and strong xenophobic language. All of those together are what really make Israel stand out, the combination of factors. I do have to say, though, that the Israeli Supreme Court has been quite active in pushing back against some of these policies. But this has helped lead to a lot of questioning of the legitimacy of the judicial system because of the many times that the Supreme Court has struck down discriminatory policies towards asylum seekers.

Kayla: Is there an alliance or connection between the refugees’ struggle and that of migrant workers from the Philippines and other countries in Israel?

Mutasim: Unfortunately, no. We claim refugee status because we are fleeing persecution, while migrant workers have work permits and come to Israel holding valid visas. Most of the refugees and asylum seekers do not have work permits; rather, they have conditional release visas that they have to renew every month or two. Of course, the ways they are treated and suffer discrimination are in some ways similar to ours.

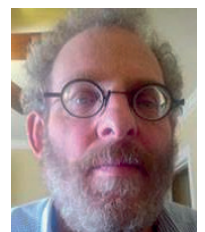
Jews in North America made a gigantic difference, especially during the deportation campaign. Your involvement makes a big difference. One of the reasons why we do not see active deportation of refugees and asylum seekers is because of these campaigns. Your engagement with this issue for the good of Israel but also for the good of asylum seekers can make a big difference. Thank you so much.

Tally: I think this is one issue that is really easy to resolve. It’s a very small population that Israel could easily take in and accept and could actually benefit from. A lot of asylum seekers could really contribute to Israeli society if given the chance.

Kayla: Thank you all for joining us for this Conversation with Israel and Palestine. I especially want to thank our panelists, Mutasim Ali and Tally Kritzman-Amir. ■

Thanks to Peter Eisenstein, a member of Partners’ Board of Directors, for editing and condensing this discussion. The full video is available on the Partners’ website here.

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