

Israel's Jewish left is starting to recognize apartheid

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Israel's Jewish left is abandoning the term 'occupation' and adopting the word 'apartheid' to describe the reality on the ground.

The Israeli right is concerned. Ever since the 6th June [mass demonstration](#) against the Israeli government's plans to annex large areas of the West Bank, the right has expressed its worry over the fate of its rivals in the left-wing camp.

Following the protest, prominent right-wing journalist Amit Segal published an article in which he claimed that *should* annexation take place, it will not be due to President Trump or Prime Minister Netanyahu, but rather because Saturday's demonstrators waved Palestinian flags in Rabin Square. Rabin, wrote Segal, would have been [deeply ashamed](#) of such a sight.

Former member of Knesset Rachel Azaria, who voted in favor of the Jewish Nation-State Law, took to Facebook to [warn](#) that "Palestinian flags in a protest against annexation is the worst thing that could happen to this struggle."

One must wonder which flags Segal and Azaria believed the hundreds of Palestinians would wave at a protest. It is possible that this feigned tantrum over the flags actually hides a deeper concern that has arisen among the right over the last few years: while the Jewish left is certainly decreasing in numbers, those who remain view an alliance with Palestinian citizens as a fundamental principle.

For the Jewish leftists who protested in Rabin Square, an alliance with Palestinians is no longer seen as quaint or exotic, but rather a precondition for even calling itself "left" in the first place. It realizes that without Palestinians, there is no left. It is that simple.

This may very well be a reason for the right to worry. The old-school Zionist left, which has historically made every effort to emphasize its commitment to Zionism and its own military pedigree, has mostly disappeared. In its place, a different kind of left is growing — one that feels far closer to Palestinian politicians such as Ayman Odeh, Aida Touma-Sliman, Mtanes Shehadeh, and Heba Yazbak than it does to the likes of Rachel Azaria, Amit Segal, and Benny Gantz.

The rightists and centrists can be angry. They can warn the left against bringing about its own demise — but this situation isn't going to change. On the contrary, it is only likely to accelerate.

I do not want to downplay the huge gaps between the Jewish left and Palestinian citizens of Israel. The two groups are still far from speaking the same language and formulating a single political goal. Many Palestinians have criticized Odeh for his pre-recorded speech on Saturday, in which he said that the protest marks 53 years — rather than 72 years (the founding of the State of Israel) — since the occupation began. This kind of language is still foreign to many Jewish Israeli protestors.

Meanwhile, Palestinian protestors did not appreciate the fact that a small number of Jewish

protestors brought Israeli flags with them. For the sake of the demonstration, however, those differences were cast aside.

But there was another aspect to the protest that should worry the right far more than any Palestinian flag: the ease with which the Jewish left is abandoning the term “occupation” and adopting the term “apartheid” to describe the reality on the ground in Israel-Palestine.

Until not very long ago, one would typically encounter one of two responses from the Jewish left to the attempt to use the term. The first was to deny the comparison by claiming that there is no equivalency between [South Africa's former regime](#) and [Israel's regime in the occupied territories](#). The second response was to turn apartheid into some kind of future threat. That is, to say that currently there is no apartheid, but we are on our way there should Israel not change course.

Saturday night's speakers, including Meretz MKs Nitzan Horowitz and Tamar Zandberg, used the word. It seemed that only Labor MK Merav Michaeli refrained from uttering it.

This change is significant for two central reasons. The first is moral and legal: an occupation can be temporary and even recognized by international law. It is not an optimal situation, certainly if that situation has been exploited for 53 years, but it is neither morally nor legally unacceptable.

Apartheid, on the other hand, is a clear moral injustice, including under international law, which views it as a crime against humanity. The moment Israel is deemed an apartheid regime, there is no moral option but to fight it. This definition sounds the death knell for the illusion that it is possible to create a Jewish-Zionist consensus in Israel.

The second and no less important reason is that the occupation can be ended through Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. This has been the Zionist left's position for over 40 years. It is one that assumes that the moment the occupation ends, the State of Israel will regain its legitimacy. But apartheid can only be ended by bringing about equality — through the termination of the supremacy of one group over others. In Israel's case, that would mean an end to Jewish supremacy.

In other words, the moment the Israeli regime is defined as one of apartheid, ending that regime demands a fundamental change in its very structure. That will go beyond the withdrawing of Israeli troops and the evacuation of settlements from the West Bank. This is an option the right has never known — and it's high time it got to know it.

This article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

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