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Silence on the Israeli Left

by Daan Bauwens
April 21, 2009

TEL AVIV - Even though atrocities committed by Israeli soldiers have surfaced and the appointment of a right-wing government diminishes the chances for peace in the Middle East, no left-wing Israeli is taking to the streets.

During the war in Gaza, modest peace manifestations brought together a few thousand protesters at a time. After the war and the elections, the voice of the Left is completely muted.

"Where is the left in this country?" says Alina Charny, a yoga teacher from the Pardes Hanna district of Haifa. "There is a growing feeling that people from the Left have lost all belief there can be a change. We have been in this war for too long now, but the voice of peace has never been in such a bad condition."

All is still on the left side of the Israeli political spectrum. "We were left with all the guilt and no votes," says Ido Gideon, an Israeli film producer and former spokesperson of Israel's largest left-wing party, Meretz.

In spite of confessions of atrocities by Israeli soldiers and growing evidence that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) deliberately committed war crimes, no political force aside from Israeli human rights organizations is pushing for an independent investigation into what the army's internal investigation later dismissed as "rumors."

"We're in no position to push for anything right now," says Gideon. "I am indifferent, I don't care anymore, a lot of people I know have become indifferent. For the moment, we are trying not to get too much affected by things. Too many bad things happened at once."

"When you don't know, it never happened," says teacher Alina Charny. "People don't want to feel guilty, so they don't want to hear about destruction or death. At the same time, everyone does want to know what happened, but in a perverted way: they read and talk in aggressive slogans, without taking into consideration what was happening on the ground. The Israeli public has detached itself from feeling, from any emotions."

Yossi Wolfson has worked over 20 years as a human rights lawyer in the occupied Palestinian territories, focusing on conscientious objectors in the Israeli army. "The public prefers not to acknowledge what its power-addicted discourses mean on the ground," he says. "They said the time had come for revenge, but didn't want to think about children losing their limbs and being attacked while being taken to an ambulance. Now they don't want to think about their neighbor's son having shot a family drinking tea while sitting down, or having given orders to a drone. You just don't want to think about that, so nobody talks about it. Even newspapers, except for *Ha'aretz*, don't want to publish what really happened."

Israel lives with too many contradictions, Wolfson tells IPS. "We have been living in a dream for too long. You cannot be with the occupation for the sake of the survival of Israel, but against it for the sake of the Palestinians. You cannot go to the army because you are obliged, but convince yourself you can change it from within. You cannot have a democratic but strictly Jewish state."

Israelis now seem to be changing their very conception of peace. "The mainstream discourse has always been: we want peace," says Wolfson. "But in fact, nobody wanted peace with all the implications of it. Now the popular discourse is: we don't want the peace process to die."

"When you go to war, you shoot to kill, not to play games," Haim Gordon, senior lecturer at the department of education at the Ben Gurion University in the Negev desert, tells IPS. "Have you ever heard of a war where civilians were not killed? It's good that we did what we did. The people in Gaza are big boys now, they're responsible for their own lives now we're not there anymore. Today the oppressors are Hamas, and the people from Gaza accept the oppression; they even support it."

Gordon, formerly a human rights activist in Gaza, adds: "Not only should the Israeli public not protest, they should go to war when others shoot at us. The Israelis are not indifferent; on the contrary, they are very determined not to let Hamas change the rules of the game."