
Normalizing international alliances with the Israeli left – a double-edged challenge

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When a new Israeli government ousted Prime Minister Netanyahu in June 2021 after 12 years in office, many in Israel's left-wing community sighed with relief, but not because they thought their agendas would finally materialize. The zeitgeist amongst many left-wing politicians and civil society organizations was that even though a unity government with the right-wing might not yield the political outcomes they were seeking, it could perhaps moderate the persistent delegitimization of their political camp in recent years.

Being called a “lefty” in the Netanyahu era had become a popular curse, synonymous with unpatriotic and traitorous. The delegitimization of these groups' ties with the international arena was a key component of this demonized depiction of the “traitors” on the Israeli left and in the human rights community. Any connections between left-leaning politicians, and even more so civil society activists, and “foreigners” (including, somewhat surprisingly, liberal-leaning Diaspora Jews), was widely regarded as a political taboo, prompting accusations that the left was “washing the dirty laundry” abroad in full view of the international public. This remains so to a large extent and is especially true of any attempts to present

international bodies and forums with alternative Israeli perspectives opposing the occupation and, of course, of any foreign funding for anti-occupation activities.

The left's hope for change relied inter-alia on the fact that taking part in the new government should at least change its image as an external opposition force banned from representing Israel abroad. This hope was quickly dashed, as Public Security Minister Omer Bar-Lev learned last December, when he caused a political storm after telling US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Victoria Jane Nuland, that Israel views settler violence “severely” and is taking steps to tackle it. Even as a senior minister, many in his own government thought Bar-Lev should have kept the criticism to himself, or at least only shared it with a domestic audience. Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked of the right-wing Yamina party, for example, scolded him, tweeting, “The settlers are the salt of the earth”.

This anger Bar-Lev encountered for criticizing settler violence in the international arena pales, of course, compared to the domestic difficulties Israeli civil society repeatedly encounters when criticizing government policies abroad, including a law that forces NGOs to disclose all funding from foreign states. It illustrates the extent to which delegitimizing left-

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wing ties with international players has grown. Even senior members of government are now expected to abstain from voicing any left-leaning criticism in international settings.

The right's international connections

But while the left is condemned for speaking out abroad against current policies, the Israeli right-wing enjoys vast and deep connections in the international arena in general, and with right and far-right organizations and parties in particular.

Donald Trump's presidency and the American evangelical lobby is a known example. Years of well-cultivated ties between Israel's settler lobby and evangelical leaders resulted in a series of new Middle East policies, such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem and recognizing the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights. Netanyahu's government, his party ("Likud") and the settler lobby built ties with evangelicals and Republicans (at one point, Netanyahu's Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer even suggested Israel should prioritize the support of evangelicals over the mostly-liberal Jewish community). They also targeted far-right and conservative alliances abroad led by such politicians Viktor Orban in Hungary, Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland (before the Holocaust law scandal), Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. European parties with known fascist affiliations that now direct their racism mostly against immigrants, Blacks and Muslims also found an ideological partner in the Israeli right under what they call the "Judeo-Christian alliance".

To be fair, this did not begin nor will it end with Netanyahu. Israel's foreign policy was always characterized by a dissonance between its desire to belong to the liberal world, and its territorial occupation and general attitude to international law at odds with the liberal world order. In order to justify its military control over the Palestinians to international multilateral forums, and forestall criticism of these policies, Israeli governments have created alliances with anti-liberal forces.

In other words, while the Israeli right and far-right has been aligning itself with like-minded leaders and groups abroad to buttress government policies, it has

been delegitimizing alliances between the Israeli left and foreign liberal, progressive leaders and groups.

But international alliances with the Israeli left face a growing, double-edged challenge: The anti-normalization and Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movements, powerful and understandable tools in the hands of the Palestinians, also challenge Israeli progressives seeking international partners to support their resistance to Israel's military occupation. Paradoxically, while facing domestic censure for seeking international alliances, the left encounters difficulties in mobilizing partners abroad because the anti-normalization and BDS movements do not see the empowerment of the Israeli left as their goal or interest. These movements have gained popularity among progressives worldwide and are considered the bon ton in some circles.

This reality makes it more difficult to forge a coherent international political alliance. When an Israeli official, activist or organization seeks to address an international audience on the occupation, BDS or anti-normalization activists sometimes try to cancel the event or silence them for being so-called "partners in crime" of the Israeli regime. This is especially true in academia and the cultural sphere, where Israeli leftists are occasionally caught between a rock and a hard place. Their problems are compounded by Israel's Anti-Boycott Act, prohibiting promotion of pro-Palestinian boycotts by Israeli citizens or organizations. This includes the boycott of Israeli settlements. Some international players understand this delicate complexity while others shun any connection to potential Israeli allies.

The importance of being visible

Policy makers who understand the importance of left-wing alliances in such settings should strive to publicly normalize these ties through high-profile, high-level meetings and forums rather than constant attempts by the Israeli center-left or international progressives to apologize and explain these encounters. This includes, for example, resisting the Israeli tendency to demonize and marginalize the Democratic Party's "Squad" (especially Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar). The "Squad" is just one example of the ongoing erosion of America's automatic bipartisan support for Israel's occupation policies. For

anti-occupation Israelis, this should not necessarily be bad news. Instead of running away from the progressive crowd, the Israeli left should engage more with the progressive discourse. Netanyahu nurtured the relationship with Trump and his circles long before he came to power. How many Israelis are nurturing ties with the next Democratic US president?

At the same time, the international progressive community in the US and elsewhere should ask itself whether those in Israel fighting to end the occupation are enemies or partners. External, international pressure, as sadly proven these days, is never sufficient to end wars. Critical voices from within are needed as well, and thus should be strengthened – not boycotted.

Left-leaning Israelis and international players should strive to normalize high-visibility international alliances because the other side, right-wing players, is doing so more than ever, making a difference in policies on the ground. The building blocks for such a political camp should include more official ties between Israeli left-leaning institutions and their counterparts in parties, unions, movements, think tanks and more. These ties should be utilized to learn from each other's experience but also to produce more joint statements and actions.

This might sound trivial abroad, but not to Israelis. International alliances with “foreigners”, by all means possible, are essential to outplay the ideological adversary. Netanyahu and Trump understood this, the settlers and the evangelists understood this. The left should, too. This is not only about drafting policies and funding, but also unapologetic networking to learn from each other and advance shared political goals.