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Israeli political discourse has been flooded in recent years with common wisdoms such as "the public is rightwing", "the Left is dead" and "the people are with Netanyahu". Rightwing politicians and journalists proclaim at every opportunity that the public has veered right, so that anyone who wants a broad electoral base has to "take a hard right turn" - or make do with political irrelevance on the leftwing end of the spectrum.

Reality shows otherwise. The fact is that most Israelis hold unequivocally leftwing views. According to the 2017-2018 National Security Index,¹ 55% of Israeli Jews support the two-state solution (as do 96% of Palestinian citizens of Israel). This is not empty support for a slogan but true acknowledgement of what this would demand: 63% of Israelis support evacuation of settlements as part of a permanent agreement with the Palestinians, while only 27% are opposed. In other words, the public wants a Palestinian state next to Israel, and is consistent in supporting this solution: a comprehensive survey from late 2016 found that 55% of Israelis supported the establishment of a Palestinian state;² in April 2016, 52.4% responded that a Jewish majority in the state of Israel was more important to them than sole sovereignty over the whole historical Land of Israel - while only 21.9% gave the opposite answer.³ In a 2015 Molad survey, 50% of respondents expressed support for an agreement with the Palestinians based on the 1967 borders, including land swaps, normalization with the Arab world and dividing Jerusalem, while only 39% objected. These figures are significant as, for the last 20

1 The National Security Index, published by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS): <https://bit.ly/2AwM75V>. A comprehensive public opinion survey conducted by Molad in 2015 resulted in similar findings: 46% of Israelis stated that they support an agreement with the Palestinians based on the 1967 borders, which would include evacuating settlements and dividing Jerusalem, while 40% objected to the idea. If the agreement included normalization with the Arab world, 50% of Israelis would support it, while 39% would object: <https://bit.ly/2mOWAEz> (Hebrew). A survey by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) from early 2017 also found that most Israelis believe that annexing the West Bank would be a disaster and are opposed to a one-state solution (Hebrew): <https://bit.ly/2Qznmel>

2 December 2016 survey: <https://bit.ly/2AyLJUF>.

Molad 2015 survey (Hebrew): <https://bit.ly/2zY5DYI>.

3 IDI Peace Index, April 2016: <https://bit.ly/2yCZTT2>.

years, the leaders of the Left have failed to present a clear plan for resolving the conflict or any alternative to the rightwing government's security agenda. While the two-state solution remains popular, most Israelis are emphatically against solutions proposed by the Right: only 11%, for example, are in favor of annexing the West Bank.⁴

Most Israelis hold liberal views on other 'burning' issues in local politics, such as separation of religion and state, judicial powers or the treatment of minorities. Seventy-three percent of Israelis – and even 70% of Likud voters – support public transport on the Sabbath.⁵ Seventy-two percent are in favor of allowing businesses to open on the Sabbath,⁶ 65% are in favor of equal state recognition for Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism,⁷ and 58% are in favor of chametz (leavened food) being sold during Passover – while only 22% are against the idea.⁸ Sixty-eight percent support complete separation of religion and state.⁹ A clear majority – 68% - support equal rights for the LGBT community;¹⁰ 76% of Israelis – and even 57% of Jewish Home voters – think same-sex marriage should be legalized;¹¹ and 60% of Israelis believe same-sex couples should have adoption rights.¹² Despite the Right's relentless campaign to undermine the legitimacy of the Supreme Court, most of the public still supports this institution: Israelis' level of trust in the judicial system is the highest measured since 2001, they trust the Supreme Court above other courts,¹³ and 58% oppose legislation that would restrict its power.¹⁴ Last but not least, most Israelis do not buy into Netanyahu's explanations about the corruption cases he is embroiled in – only 30% accept his statement of innocence, while 62% don't believe a word of it.¹⁵

In other words, public opinion has not shifted to the right on major issues, and Bibi does not have most Israelis "in his back pocket". On the contrary: at least half, and

4 The National Security Index.

5 Hiddush, "Israel Religion and State Index", 2017 (Hebrew): <https://bit.ly/2x9VBSv>.

6 Hiddush, "Israel Religion and State Index", 2016: <https://bit.ly/2PqifjR>.

The January 2018 Peace Index also found that 69% of Israelis are in favor of having cafes open on the Sabbath: <https://bit.ly/2OU7dnz>.

7 Hiddush, "Israel Religion and State Index", 2017: <https://bit.ly/2SmdPJs>

8 Peace Index, March 2018 (Hebrew): <https://bit.ly/2PjqElR>.

9 Hiddush, "Israel Religion and State Index", 2017

10 Peace Index, July 2018: <https://bit.ly/2z6dG46>.

11 Hiddush, "Israel Religion and State Index", 2016: <https://bit.ly/2PqifjR> and Peace Index, July 2018.

12 'Midgam' survey for the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services (2017): <https://bit.ly/2yfpVvN> (Hebrew) and the Peace Index, July 2018.

13 "The Performance of the Israeli Public Sector: A Citizens' Survey and National Assessment. December 2016" by Haifa University and Ben Gurion University (2016): <https://bit.ly/2Q6j3Yr> (Hebrew) and the IDI Democracy Index for 2017: <https://bit.ly/2CQbZet>.

14 Democracy Index; Peace Index, October 2017: <https://bit.ly/2CPoCXk>

15 Peace Index, March 2018. A Channel 2 survey came up with similar findings in 2017: only 28% respondents stated they believed Netanyahu, while 54% stated they did not: <https://bit.ly/2CPoCXk> (Hebrew).

in most cases more, support the positions that the Left represents on foreign and domestic affairs. Yet for years, national elections have repeatedly resulted in a rightwing government, and this pattern does not seem likely to change any time soon. In other words, **the Left has won the ideological battle but is consistently failing to translate this into political triumph.** What is the reason for this disparity between the popularity of progressive ideas and narrow support for the political parties that represent them? How can this gap be closed, so that broad ideological support can be leveraged to bring about political victory?

Buying into the rightwing spin

The media spin about “the public going right” has gained momentum in recent years, persuading liberal-democrats that they are a minority in Israel – while in reality, they are the majority. The figures are surprising: most Israelis (59%) support the two-state solution – yet most (57%) also believe that the majority of Israelis are against it.¹⁶

Surprisingly, the leaders of the Left have embraced this narrative hook, line and sinker instead of leading the fight against it. It is not hard to guess why. While the Right stands to gain from the claim that most Israelis are rightwing, presenting itself as the authentic leader of the people, the idea is also quite convenient for members of Knesset on the Left. After all, if the people are rightwing, politicians on the Left are certainly not responsible for the repeated failures of their bloc: they have done nothing wrong. It's the people, stupid.

Once leftwing politicians bought into the spin that their ideas are unpopular, they concluded that the way to the public's heart is to mask their views, compromise on progressive values and distance themselves from the brand of “leftist”. They embarked on a series of destructive practices in the hope of “attracting centrists” or “drawing new audiences”. Instead of competing with the Right, they chose to abandon their political views.

As a result, the Left is now facing two interrelated problems: **an identity crisis and an ideological one.**

The identity crisis of Israel's progressive leaders is evident in their estrangement from their own political base. Liberal-democrat politicians are trying so hard to distance themselves from their voters that they have actually turned against them. A particularly absurd example is the chair of Israel's largest leftwing party, Yitzhak Herzog, declaring: “We are not leftwing”¹⁷ and “I didn't say I was leftwing.”¹⁸ His predecessor, Shelly Yachimovich, went so far as to say that “calling the Labor Party leftist is a historical

16 According to a joint Israeli and Palestinian survey, 59% of Israelis support an agreement with the Palestinians, yet 57% of Israelis are convinced that the majority is opposed to it: <https://bit.ly/2SHSLXj>. The Right, however, is well aware of the truth: “The People Are Not Rightwing, They're Simply Not Voting Left” (Hanoch Daum, Yedioth Ahronoth, 8 June 2017): <https://bit.ly/2y6Gj1d> (Hebrew); “The Myth of Israel's Right Wing Majority” (Akiva Bigman, Mida, March 28, 2015): <https://bit.ly/2yTE2Hf>.

17 “Herzog: We're Not Leftwing but All-Israeli” (Arutz 7, May 1, 2018): <https://bit.ly/2C1e07s> (Hebrew).

18 “I Didn't Say I Was a Leftist. I'm a Leader Who Comes from the Center” (Nir Gontarz, Haaretz weekend supplement, June 11, 2015): <https://bit.ly/2yajPwo> (Hebrew).

injustice.”¹⁹ In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Yair Lapid, the head of Yesh Atid – whose political base is similar to that of the Labor Party²⁰ – keeps insisting “we are not on the Left”²¹ and went a step further: “We’re a centrist party that even tends slightly to the right.”²² The most intriguing example of self-alienation was provided by Avi Gabbay, who said, several months after becoming chair of the Zionist Union, that “the Left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish”²³ – repeating the very words that Netanyahu whispered to Rabbi Kaduri in 1997.

Leftwing leaders have made a habit of shrugging off their base.²⁴ Condemnation and self-criticism have replaced the solidarity and collective pride that glue any political camp together. For years, MKs on the Left have been bending over backwards to show how open they are to criticism of their own ranks, quick to agree with the Right at every turn.

They strain to denounce every unfortunate utterance, trivial as it may be, and endlessly repent for sins carried out decades ago by their political forefathers. That is not merely damaging self-criticism – it is political suicide.²⁵

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Some progressive politicians believe separating from the Left will earn them brownie points for "honesty and integrity" or "reckoning bravely with the past". Apparently, they haven't looked around them recently. The new Right couldn't care less about intellectual integrity and has no intention of rewarding it. The only outcome of this constant grovelling before the Right has been to speed along the demonization of the Left

19 “Yachimovich: Calling the Labor Party Leftwing is a Historical Injustice” (Jonathan Lis, Haaretz, Nov. 8, 2012): <https://bit.ly/2PmR4TI> (Hebrew).

20 “The Political Center and Yesh Atid Voters: Molad Survey Results 2013 –Part I: <https://bit.ly/2Qvzqxs> (Hebrew).

21 “Lapid: I Won’t Join the Leftwing Bloc” (Dana Weiss, Channel 2 News, June 24, 2017): <https://bit.ly/2y6GI3J> (Hebrew).

22 From Yair Lapid’s Twitter account: <https://bit.ly/2y770TQ> (Hebrew).

23 “Gabbay: The Left Has Forgotten What It Means to be Jewish” (Mordechai Sones, Arutz 7, Nov. 13, 2017): <https://bit.ly/2qrA8kd>.

24 It is important to note that there still are Israeli politicians who are proud to call themselves leftwing, but they are mostly concentrated in the Meretz Party, which is not vying for government. As a small party, it tends to focus on politically negligible issues – such as veganism or cannabis – and intentionally targets a niche audience by aiming jokes and barbs at the Right without offering a serious, full alternative that is accessible to potential voters. Even if there is room for initiatives such as a law banning cheerleading at basketball games, adding vegan dishes to the Knesset menu or a motion to recognize the Armenian genocide – they certainly do not help the Left’s mission to win over the public, which is the most urgent task of any functioning opposition facing a dangerous extremist government. On the contrary: they brand the Left as disconnected, esoteric and irrelevant.

25 For example: “After Garbuz’s Speech, I’m Sorry I Didn’t Post on Facebook: ‘I Kiss Mezuzot Too’” (Channel 10, May 20, 2015): <https://bit.ly/2C6wJhE> (Hebrew); “Watch: Gabbay Condemns Secular Man for Swearing at Haredi Man – and Pulls Kippa from Pocket” (Daniel Hertz, Kikar Hashabbat, Aug. 29, 2017): <https://bit.ly/2NrU4fP> (Hebrew); “Student Behind Netanyahu ‘Rope’ Poster Questioned by Police” (Times of Israel, Dec. 13, 2016): <https://bit.ly/2ALs8Rg>.

“honesty and integrity” or “reckoning bravely with the past”. Apparently, they haven’t looked around them recently. The new Right couldn’t care less about intellectual integrity and has no intention of rewarding it. The only outcome of this constant groveling before the Right has been to speed along the demonization of the Left in Israel. Progressives have eagerly joined the rightwing attack on their home base – only to discover, to their dismay, that they are victims of the same stigma they helped flourish. Some believe that by voicing rightwing views, they will convince voters that they are no longer on the left. Yet these poorly-camouflaged liberal-democrats are still identified with the Left, since the public is not stupid and Left and Right are defined in relation to each other. As long as the left wing is in the opposition, with a rightwing government, members of the opposition will continue to be identified with it. In the long run, this pretense feeds the general perception that only the Right can be trusted – and if there is no choice but to have the Right in power, it may as well be the real deal and not a pale replica. The upshot of this entire process is that leftwing politicians are actually helping the right wing by trying to curry favor with the public instead of leading it.

Along with this identity crisis (and partly as a result of it), Israel’s progressive leadership is grappling with a profound ideological crisis. This manifests itself in attempts to become more centrist and tend towards the apolitical. In an attempt to rebrand themselves as centrists, politicians are turning their backs not only on “the Left” as their home base but also on the progressive positions and values they are supposed to represent. An excellent example is Avi Gabbay’s declaration, upon being elected chair of the Labor Party, that he will not dismantle settlements in the West Bank²⁶ – thereby positioning himself to the right of Netanyahu. “Why should they be dismantled?” he queried. “We can come up with other solutions.” Naturally, Gabbay offered no solutions of his own. His statement was not the outcome of comprehensive research that somehow managed to reinvent the parameters of a future agreement with the Palestinians. Instead, it was yet another clumsy attempt at ingratiating himself with the Right and with the powerful settler lobby at its helm, in the false hope of winning over voters. In fact, Gabbay shot the Left in the foot twice. First, he attacked the Left’s historical policy, although it is both popular and just, presenting the left wing as a redundant twin of the Right. Second, tried to sell the public a dangerous illusion – playing straight into hawkish hands – that peace and security can be attained without dismantling settlements. Naturally, the public did not reward this step. Surveys at the

26 “New Leader of Israeli Left: We Don’t Need to Evacuate Settlements If There’s a Peace Deal” (Chaim Levinson, Jack Khoury and Almog Ben Zikri, Haaretz, Oct. 16, 2017): <https://bit.ly/2PCgL6o>.

time showed a sharp drop in support for Gabbay: rightwing voters stuck with their politicians, and leftwing voters switched to other parties. In an attempted damage control, he has not repeated this position, but has not fully regained public trust since.

Gabbay is not alone. After stating that the unity of Jerusalem is non-negotiable,²⁷ Yair Lapid added that the settlement of Maale Adumim will always be a part of Israel and that he would like “to build like crazy” in the settlement blocs.²⁸ The latest to flounder ideologically was MK Eitan Cabel from the Labor Party, who came up with a plan to annex the West Bank. In this case, the transformation is complete: the plan, in which Cabel calls for ‘sobering up’ from Oslo, annexing 300,000 settlers and abandoning the ideal of peace, is such a wholesale adoption of the settlers’ hopes for annexation that it was warmly embraced by the head of the Jewish Home Party, Naftali Bennett.²⁹

Politicians such as Gabbay, Lapid and Cabel have given up trying to convince the public that the Left’s solutions for peace and security, the economy, social ills and civil society are better than what the Right has to offer. Instead, they are devoting all their energy to proving that there is no difference between the two. This approach does away with any willingness to fight for values and policies and to put up a worthy competition for the Right. Quite the opposite: the leaders of the Left have adopted the right wing as the gold standard of quality, loyalty and power – and doing all they can to emulate it. Even when members of the opposition criticize the government, they often do so by outflanking this hawkish coalition from the right (as the last rounds of violence on the Israel-Gaza border showed). Avi Gabbay’s declaration that “on security I’m a hawk – there’s no difference between me and Naftali Bennett”³⁰ made this trend crystal clear. Why should anyone, progressive or otherwise, throw in their lot with a political camp whose own leaders avoid being identified with it?

Liberal-democratic attempts to draw closer to the center in recent years have, in some cases, resulted in political castration. **Fear of rightwing bullying has bred an abhorrence of politics altogether, creating a new species of public representative in Israel: politicians who avoid politics.** Driven by a wish to avoid confrontation with the Right at all costs, leftwing leaders are denying the existence of politics and undermining the legitimacy of the political domain. This effectively drains the

27 “Lapid: I Want To Be Rid of the Arabs” (Gil Ronen, Arutz 7, Jan. 20, 2013): <https://bit.ly/2AKHCVj>.

28 “Lapid Would ‘Build Like Crazy in Blocs’” (Arutz 7, Feb. 8, 2016): <https://bit.ly/2zoAXOV>.

29 “Labor MK: Annex the West Bank Until Palestinian ‘Mandela’ Arrives (Gil Hoffman, JPost, May 28, 2018): <https://bit.ly/2CXQzfw>.

30 “From a Security Standpoint I’m a Hawk – No Less Than Bennett” (Zion Nanus, Channel 2 News, Oct. 17, 2017): <https://bit.ly/2Rze17K> (Hebrew).

democratic system, which is based on parties with distinct ideologies competing for voters, of its essence. Instead, the focus is placed on ideologically neutral issues, such as good governance or corruption. Statements such as "it's not a matter of Right and Left" or "there is no opposition or coalition on this issue" are frequently heard. Even mass protests on undeniably political issues – such as social equality, LGBT rights or the Nation-State Law – have been politically castrated, so that they do not call for the government to be replaced even though the government is responsible for the injustice against which they are railing.

The Left is the one to consistently pay the price for this false consensus. Somehow, calls "to come together to protect Israel's existential strategic interests"³¹ never ask the Right to come towards the Left for the common good. This yearning for unity is aimed at silencing criticism from one political group only – the Left.³² The subtext is clear: "It's not a matter of Right or Left, so the Left has to toe the line with the Right", or "there is no opposition or coalition on this issue, so the opposition will support the coalition".

This forced unison has real consequences. When MKs on the Center-Left declare that "corruption isn't a matter of Right or Left",³³ that "there is no opposition or coalition when it comes to the cost of living",³⁴ or that "there is no opposition and no coalition regarding small businesses"³⁵ – what they are really telling voters is: it doesn't matter for whom you vote. On most of the issues you care about, all the parties are the same. When Lapid and others announced that "concerning the Iran deal, there is no opposition and coalition",³⁶ they effectively silenced public debate and discounted the

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31 From the Likud's Facebook page: <https://bit.ly/2NuxFyI> (Hebrew)

32 For further reading, see Dr. Assaf Sharon, "Civil War": <https://bit.ly/2zh2Yt6> (Hebrew)

33 "Gabbay: 'We must not forget who is responsible for the decay and who is part of it'" (Moran Azulay and Alexandra Lokash, Ynet, Feb. 26, 2018): <https://bit.ly/2zY5CEn> (Hebrew)

34 "Lapid at Signing Ceremony for Establishment of New Ports: 'We must not let threats and strikes stop what Minister Katz and I have started together for the good of all Israelis'" (Yesh Atid website, May 28, 2015): <https://bit.ly/2Nv1xL9> (Hebrew)

35 "MK Erel Margalit: 'There is no opposition and no coalition on the matter of small businesses'" (Mickey Peled, Calcalist, May 11, 2015): <https://bit.ly/2PmcC34> (Hebrew)

36 "Lapid at Start of Parliamentary Group Meeting: 'If the deal with Iran is signed, it will be cause for the prime minister to resign'" (Yesh Atid website, July 6, 2015): <https://bit.ly/2y71zEk> (Hebrew)

opinion of many security experts, that the nuclear deal was actually good for security.³⁷ When Shelly Yachimovich, as head of the Labor Party, announced that she was backing Netanyahu's government "throughout the operation (Pillar of Defense), without considerations of opposition or coalition",³⁸ she curtailed crucial public criticism of the government's policy. By bowing down to rebukes from the Right and choosing to side with it, the Left is effectively forsaking the public good.

The Left's crisis of ideology is marked by an attempt to move towards the center and by shirking politics altogether. The combined effect has erased the Left from the political map, barred it from presenting a clear alternative to the Right, and blocked the possibility of channeling public frustration with Netanyahu's government into political power that could topple it. As a result, Israel's liberal-democratic camp is no longer clear about its goals, its principles, its positions and its policies, and has lost the ability to fight for them (by forming a strong political camp willing to fight for its vision). Political failure inevitably follows.

Since the trauma of Rabin's assassination in 1995 and Netanyahu's rise to power in 1996, Israel's peace camp has struggled to get back on its feet and fight for its values. Rather than gird their loins for political battle, the leaders of the Left have chosen to abandon their political home and turn their backs on their voters. Instead, they have taken to regurgitating the views of their political opponents. **Voters cannot be expected to trust politicians who avoid politics, or leaders who purposely obfuscate their views and turn against their own base.** Leaders who, instead of offering a political alternative, choose to agree with their opponents. Leaders who don't believe in their own political home, abandon their views and attack their own base.

37 Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis, "Why the nuclear deal is good for Israel": <https://bit.ly/1GITkrx>

38 "Yachimovich: 'Don't want too much left wing on list'" (Noam Dvir, Ynet, Nov. 28, 2012): <https://bit.ly/2E644fj> (Hebrew)

The Left has fled the security debate

For almost 20 years, the Left has neglected the most important issue in Israeli politics, the one that divides the public into political camps and decides votes: national security. Since Rabin's assassination, and more so since Ehud Barak's government fell, the leaders of the Left have stopped offering an alternative when it comes to peace and security. At best, they keep silent on the most urgent public topic; at worst, they regurgitate the talking points of Netanyahu and Bennett.

The reason is that progressives have accepted the right wing's answers to fundamental questions such as what it means to be liberal, Zionist, Jewish and patriotic. They have also adopted the historical narrative that the Right is pushing to serve its own interests: the disengagement from Gaza was a disaster, the Oslo Accords were a fateful mistake, and the Left is responsible for both these cardinal sins. Progressive politicians have succumbed to right-wing propaganda that the failure of the Oslo Accords means that the two-state solution has failed and that the Left has nothing to offer for national security. As a result, its leaders have come to believe that their own camp is weak when it comes to security and that this issue is better left to the nationalists because, well – what do we have to say on the matter?

This faltering, evasive approach towards one of Israel's top concerns is not only spineless but also lacking in basic comprehension. **The Left's solution for security is the safest option for Israel's future.**

It is no accident that the country's top security experts, whether past or present IDF commanders or the upper tiers of the Mossad and Shin Bet, are unanimous on this. They have repeatedly stated that an agreement with the Palestinians is vital for national security, while maintaining the status quo is not in Israel's interest and any scenario except separating from the Palestinians poses a security risk.³⁹ As

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³⁹ "Israeli Security Pays Price for Settlements" (Molad report, 2017): <https://bit.ly/2DrQqhM>

MK David Bitan from the Likud observed in a frank moment: "Something happens to you over the years in these positions... over the years the heads of Shin Bet and Mossad become leftists."⁴⁰ That "something" is called security expertise, actual experience defending the country and real knowledge of the field.

The consensus among security experts that the Left offers the best solution makes its choice to downplay this plan, rather than showcase it, all the more baffling – and simply irresponsible. Instead of leveraging the defense establishment's support of the two-state solution, the Left's leaders imitate the Right, present a watered-down version of Netanyahu's policy and wait for voters to reward them on election day. Instead of hearing, over and over, that Israel's top security experts support the core element of the Left's ideology, we remain with resounding silence, other than the sound of eggshells cracking underfoot. Instead of explaining that they have a better solution that will save our country's future, the leaders of the Left have opted out of the discussion.

Beyond the matter of giving up on core principles, this is also electoral folly. **Despite the dearth of progressive leadership in the Knesset and the lack of messaging in favor of the two-state solution, most Israelis still support an agreement with the Palestinians based on the 1967 borders, including dismantling settlements and dividing Jerusalem, over any other solution.**⁴¹ This support remains consistent despite rounds of violence every few years. A political camp whose agenda is supported by the majority should translate this into political power and strive to replace the government in order to implement its policies.

The fact that most Israelis still support the two-state solution is partly because no real

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40 "Coalition Chair: 'Security chiefs all become leftists on the job'" (Times of Israel, June 25, 2016): <https://bit.ly/2Onbivn>

41 National Security Index, 2018

alternative has ever been presented. After 25 years of vilifying the Oslo Accords and more than 10 years of bemoaning the disengagement from Gaza, Israel's conservatives have no real plan. They attack the Oslo Accords, yet after a decade in power do not dream of cancelling them. Politicians, journalists and various lobbies regularly decry the withdrawal from Gaza, yet do not plan to reconquer it and rebuild settlements.

Netanyahu's policy of maintaining the status quo (or "managing the conflict") sentences Israel to regular rounds of fighting once every few years. In the latest, residents of southern communities suffered burnt fields, rocket fire and days on end of running for shelter to the sound of sirens. As no one denies that Gaza has become a pressure cooker waiting to explode, it is clear that the next round is waiting to happen, and the only question remains when the extremists who dictate its timing and progress will choose to begin and end it. As opposed to Netanyahu, the pro-settler Right talks of annexing the West Bank and establishing a bi-national state – a solution that the public fears and refuses to accept.⁴² In other words, Netanyahu is offering a path that was tried and failed. The settler bloc is offering an experiment that most Israelis rightly refuse to allow.

In fact, even conservatives admit that they have no real answer for Israel's most pressing security concerns: "I have no good answer for the question of what do with Gaza" (MK Shuli Mualem, 2017⁴³); "Israel has no policy on Gaza" (Minister Israel Katz, 2017⁴⁴); "all the crises are based on the fact that the rightwing government has no foreign policy and falls back on endless self-victimization and undermining the legitimacy of the Left" (Amit Segal, 2016⁴⁵); "I, who am rooted in the heart of the settlement movement and in the heart of the right-wing camp, started to hem and haw [when asked by a friend about the right wing's alternative to the two-state solution]... I asked questions, spoke to people and discovered that it's not just me – others, too, are slightly confused" (Sara Haetzni, 2016⁴⁶).

On security, as on other issues, the Right has replaced the need to come up with a positive policy with an unbridled assault on the Left. With the noise machine reverberating the idea that the two-state solution is dead, progressives nod in agreement that there is no partner on the Palestinian side, that two states are no

⁴² For example, the National Security Index.

⁴³ Said at Israel's Peace Conference, June 12, 2017: <https://bit.ly/2NvLYCS> (Hebrew)

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ From Amit Segal's Twitter account: <https://bit.ly/2zYw9RE> (Hebrew)

⁴⁶ "No Peace Vision: How Israeli Rightists Propose to Deal with the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict" (Hilo Glazer, Haaretz, Sep. 3, 2016): <https://bit.ly/2P9gjNy>.

longer a relevant concept and that maybe one state really is better. Yet reality proves how justified and irreplaceable the two-state solution is: if the Oslo Accords really were a disaster, the rightwing government would have cancelled them; if the disengagement were a colossal misjudgment, it would have reoccupied Gaza; if the two-state solution really was dead, Israel would have annexed the West Bank long ago. The question remains, therefore, why the Left has surrendered its vision.

Given the unequivocal position of the defense establishment, popular support for the two-state solution and no sustainable security policy on the Right – the Left's neglect of the security issue is a travesty. It is an abdication of responsibility,

not only for political and electoral success but also for national security. Instead of promoting the Left's popular and just solution – it is widely shunned, undermined and replaced by so-called 'sobering plans', for all the world as though it were an intentional effort to erode public trust in the major tenet of the Left's ideology.⁴⁷

A responsible progressive leader would be talking to the public day and night about national security, stressing the vitality of putting a stop to the heavy price we are paying for the settlements and for the right wing's dead-end policy. Instead, the Left's leading politicians, journalists and intellectuals avoid the subject altogether and address it only when they are left no choice, mostly with their backs to the wall. One segment of the Left makes do with moral criticism of the occupation, while the other gives the Right precedence when it comes to security. The idea of winning a general election in Israel without talking about security is tantamount to trying to win a football match without coming out on the field.

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⁴⁷ See: Eitan Cabel's 'Sobering-Up Plan', A.B. Yehoshua's "Time to Bid Farewell to the Two-State Solution" and Avi Gabbay's declaration that settlements do not have to be evacuated in order to end the conflict with the Palestinians (all in Hebrew).

The Left talks policy; the Right talks about the Left

It would take time to review the stack of programs and policy guidelines that the Left has tried to advance in recent years, in an attempt to bend its ideas this way and that until something sticks. On peace and security alone, members of the Zionist Union have come up with at least five different plans (Omer Bar-Lev, 2015; Hilik Bar, 2015; Yitzhak Herzog 2016; Erel Margalit, 2016; Eitan Cabel, 2018)⁴⁸ – all with considerable investment of time, energy and money. Economic plans have also been proposed, by Shelly Yachimovich in 2013, Manuel Trajtenberg in 2015 and the current party chair in 2017.⁴⁹ In the last elections, when Netanyahu warned of Arabs coming in droves to vote with the help of the Left, the Zionist Union's campaign promised a third assistant in kindergartens. Avi Gabbay recently stated that he is visiting hospitals in order to formulate a five-year plan on health, too.⁵⁰

While the Left has been busy drawing up policy plans, the Right has concentrated on a single issue: the betrayal of the Left. Rightwing leaders, NGOs, activists, journalists are all focused on the same clear, aggressive, unapologetic effort to demonize the Left and its associates at any cost. It is no accident that Israel's ruling party did not bother to publish a platform ahead of the last elections: the Likud has long since stopped offering the public any constructive vision whatsoever. Instead of a platform, all we got was a single message, repeated over and over: the Left is traitorous, dangerous, and must not receive votes or even be permitted expression. That does not mean that the Right has forgotten its goals; in Israel, as in other countries, the right wing has an organized list of political objectives. All these are served by delegitimizing the Left: strengthening the settlement enterprise, weakening the judicial system and destroying the free media are all achieved through incitement against the Left. Claiming that the Supreme Court is leftwing undermines the judicial system; accusing the media of being leftist helps shut down various media outlets; and so on.

Instead of rising to the occasion and fighting these lies and slanderous claims, the Left's response has ranged from self-pity and apologizing to condemnation and brownnosing. Unsurprisingly, this tactic has not proven effective. The success of the new Right's flagship project is evident in the total takeover of public debate. The amount of

48 Omer Bar-Lev's plan: <https://bit.ly/2OqpAv9>; Hilik Bar's plan: <https://bit.ly/2DlgbnE>; Herzog's plan: <https://bit.ly/2JDW8B9>; Erel Margalit's Converging Interests Plan: <https://bit.ly/2zqNFWG>; on Eitan Cabel's plan: <https://bit.ly/2AKS7Ii>.

49 Yachimovich's plan: <https://bit.ly/2ALiBti>; on Trajtenberg's plan: <https://bit.ly/2F3wqHO>; Avi Gabbay's plan: <http://avigabbay.co.il/plan/> (Hebrew)

50 From Avi Gabbay's Twitter account: <https://bit.ly/2ONcwo3>

attention devoted by the media and the general public to civil society organizations such the New Israel Fund or Breaking the Silence, or to funding by a Hungarian-American Holocaust survivor, is mind-boggling. Questions such as “who funds you” have become, within a few years, standard grilling for interviewees suspected of leftist views. The message has become ingrained. (Meanwhile, the Left rarely touches on the funding of rightwing NGOs, which not only enjoy generous philanthropy from dubious sources but also rely on taxpayer funds – often transferred to them in underhanded ways, for unacceptable purposes).⁵¹

With unbridled determination, aided by hesitation on the Left, the right wing has managed to define public perception in Israel of the both camps, while the Left has managed to frame neither. Israelis now identify the Right with the values it boasts of: it is good for security, nationalistic, Zionist and strong. The left wing, on the other hand, is identified with the characteristics attributed to it by the Right: not Jewish enough, not Zionist, less loyal to the state, weak, supportive of hostile elements and funded by foreign entities.

The ugliness that has taken over Israeli politics⁵² is not unique; Netanyahu is certainly not the only populist around the world whose career, founded on blatant incitement, has grown stronger in recent years. One of the most prominent global trends in recent decades in many democratic countries in the West is negative partisanship – political support for a party stemming from hostility for the rival, rather than identification with the party itself.⁵³ In other words: many Americans voted for Trump because they hated Clinton, just as many of Netanyahu’s voters don’t believe in his skills or promises but have internalized the general atmosphere and have learned to hate leftists. The effects of negative partisanship are being studied mostly in the US, but are also evident in other political systems.⁵⁴ One finding, which may sound familiar to Israelis, is politically-affiliated media outlets – such as Channel 20 or Yisrael Hayom – is a catalyst for the development of political hostility, polarization and negative partisanship.⁵⁵

51 See, for example, Molad’s investigation into settlement funding: <https://bit.ly/2OrFky2>, <https://bit.ly/1JqJrSU>; Haaretz investigation into Amana: <https://bit.ly/2JBnbNs>

52 To a large extent thanks to Netanyahu, who embarked on his political career in the 1990s with slogans such as “Peres will divide Jerusalem” and “the Left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish”, as well as leading demonstrations in which masses of protesters chanted “death to Rabin” and “we will banish Rabin with blood and fire.”

53 Alan I. Abramowitz, “The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S. elections in the 21st century”: <https://bit.ly/2Odzjtv>

54 Nicholas J. Caruana, “Negative partisanship is real, measurable, and affects political behaviour”: <https://bit.ly/200A8Zm>

55 Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven W. Webster, “Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties But Behave Like Rabid Partisans”: <https://bit.ly/2A0fxsJ>

There are advantages to the sentiment behind negative partisanship. It highlights the differences between rival political camps and can increase civic involvement in politics.⁵⁶ Yet whether you find hope in negative partisanship or fear its consequences, you must acknowledge that it exists – at least, if you mean to influence public life. The Israeli Left tends to avoid confrontation and stick to mantras such as “why attack?”, “let’s focus on the positive!”, or “we have to say what we should do, not what we shouldn’t do”. There is no doubt that presenting a clear vision and sticking to an organized political agenda will help strengthen this camp (this is unfortunately not the situation at present), yet that alone cannot decide the battle. The Likud’s electoral success without offering or committing to any kind of platform is no coincidence. Voting for the Right in Israel is fed by a deep hatred of the Left, injected for years by spokespersons for the deep Right and amplified by an effective propaganda machine. Whoever thinks this narrative can be defeated without a determined, organized counterattack is delusional and in denial about the power of negative emotions in politics.

Where does the huge difference between the political practices of the Right and the Left come from? Are Israeli progressives less sure of their values? Less anxious about their country’s future? Of course not. But the crisis of identity and ideology that has beset the Left is decreasing its ability to effectively fight back. Also, **many liberal-democrats in Israel object on principle to using belligerent rhetoric or negative campaigns. This reticence, informed by postmodern academic theories, is the result of profound confusion between the openness and tolerance of pluralism and humanism – and the unequivocal determination with which the Left must fight for them.**

Whoever thinks that kid gloves, empathy and smiles will be enough to fight those who claim that leftists are better off dead is effectively ensuring many more years of unrestrained rightwing government. In a political atmosphere in which the Right constantly trumpets that the Left is treacherous, talking about the importance of listening, being polite and sharing hugs is not enough – in fact, it spells doom for progressive economic programs. The Left will not win unless it presents clear-cut

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56 “Why Negative Partisanship Is a Good Thing” (Noah Berlatsky, The Nation, 14.2.2018): <https://bit.ly/2NwI9hS>

positions and launches its own aggressive – and justified – assault on the rightwing government.

While the Left has devoted itself to condemnations, wavering and trying to present innovative ideas in all areas of public life, the Right has focused solely on destroying the legitimacy of the Left. That is why, although most Israelis support the positions of the Left, they do not vote for it. Backing a party is like buying an apple: when one vendor shouts that the guy next to him is selling poisoned apples that kill dozens of children a week, while the other guy stammers that some of the apples are a bit rotten and historically, it is true there were some poisoned ones but there's no need to generalize and most are really okay – it is clear where customers will shop.

Hugs and calls for mutual understanding are not a worthy or effective way of preventing violence and incitement. After Rabin's assassination, the Left devoted its energy to dialogue groups, while the Right set out to take over powerful positions and demonize the Left. By now, more than 20 years later, the lessons of this mistake should have been learned. Being a leftist does not mean surrendering your values in the name of tolerance for the values of the other side. Believing in pluralism and tolerance does not mean letting those who are not pluralistic or tolerant dictate the terms of shared life. Courtesies and hugs will have to be abandoned if Israel's liberal-democratic bloc is to effect real change in politics – once it regains pride in its values. The values of the Left are clear, persuasive and important enough to fight for.

The rise of centrist parties has weakened the Left

The rise of centrist parties in Israel may be the most extreme expression of surrender to rightwing bullying, with far-reaching ideological and electoral consequences. In theory, the centrist parties could have been good for the Left, had Yair Lapid drawn moderate rightwing voters, for example, and enabled the formation of a liberal-democratic coalition. Yet the opposite occurred: Yesh Atid did not take a chunk out of the Right's base or help the Left form a government, but rather reinforced the rightwing government. **Most of Lapid's voters belong undeniably on the Left: they support an agreement with the Palestinians and dismantling the settlements, and believe that the settlers receive preferential budgeting and are a toll on security.**⁵⁷ The result is a tragic division of the Left. After all, do Avi Gabbay and Yair Lapid profoundly disagree on policy? Are there meaningful differences between the views of Amir Peretz and Yael German? Does an ideological rift separate Tzipi Livni from Ofer Shelach?

Yesh Atid is drawing leftist votes and handing them over, nicely giftwrapped, to the rightwing coalition. Even in the opposition, Yesh Atid takes care to distinguish itself from the Left, thereby draining the opposition of power. This kind of centrist party, with 85% of its voters supporting progressive positions, allows leftists to vote for the center-Left without fear of being marked as "traitors", "anti-Zionists" or "auto-anti-Semites". At the same time, it prevents the Left from returning to government and implementing these positions (time will tell if MK Orli Levy-Abekasis will try to do the same in the coming elections⁵⁸). If liberal-democrat voters in Israel were to vote for one party rather than two, they would probably defeat Netanyahu. But the fundamental problem that centrist parties pose goes deeper than electoral divisions.⁵⁹

First, in terms of identity, the Center's aversion to any political identification with the Left is expediting an already fast process of delegitimizing the Left. The rush to the Center indicates anxious avoidance of being branded as leftist, and at the same time reinforces this fear. Also, when the Center joins the rightwing assault on the legitimacy of the Left,⁶⁰ it is effectively playing a role in the Right's strategy: demonizing the progressive bloc in Israel.

⁵⁷ Molad survey on the political center and Yesh Atid voters

⁵⁸ From Barak Ravid's Twitter account :<https://bit.ly/2CAKPcc>

⁵⁹ Also, since the leftwing and center parties cater to the same base and compete over voters (accordingly, when one grows stronger the other weakens), instead of waging a joint opposition battle against the rightwing bloc, they often engage in strident fighting with each other. The public grows tired of the mutual recrimination and draws away from these parties and their leaders – a great way to destroy a political camp.

⁶⁰ For instance, see Lapid's statements in the following: "Lapid: The Left can't win an election", "Lapid says no to obstructive bloc", "Israel's defense minister demands probe into Breaking the Silence allegations"

Second, it is important to remember that in essence, the political center does not exist. Centrist parties do not have a clear, established agenda on the economy, security or social issues: their policy is to say as little as possible as vaguely as possible, to avoid touchy subjects (which tend to be the ones most relevant to our lives) and to forever seek the momentary point of equilibrium between Left and Right. Consequently, when one political bloc – such as the Israeli right wing – undergoes swift radicalization, the Center sticks to the “moderate” equilibrium between the two sides and naturally gets swept more and more to the right. As a broad international study recently showed, the Center tends to be the natural partner of the anti-democratic, authoritarian far Right.⁶¹ Once again, it turns out that this is no centrist bloc but rather a camouflaged agent for the Right.

Third, the Center creates the illusion that the political map is a nebulous, fluid range of views and positions with no meaningful differences between right and left. This is a distorted picture:

the difference between Israelis who prioritize sovereignty over the historical Greater Israel and those who support partition is not a matter of “moderation” as opposed to “extremism”. The two worldviews are not on the same scale. Take equality for the LGBT community, the housing crisis or any other political issue – on none of them can the various parties be located along a single spectrum, based on wanting a bit more or less of the same thing. Left and Right, or nationalism and liberalism, are two fundamentally opposed approaches. They are based on different values, draw their authority from different sources, and each offers a distinct vision and set of priorities. Even if each camp has varying degrees of pragmatism, they are still clearly distinct from their rival. They are based on different economic views, different visions for the future of the conflict, and markedly diverging social and civic agendas. There is no way to give

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⁶¹ David Adler, “The Centrist Paradox: Political Correlates of the Democratic Disconnect”: <https://goo.gl/jXRvvi>
 “Centrists Are the Most Hostile to Democracy, Not Extremists” (David Adler, The New York Times, 23.5.2018):
<https://nyti.ms/2GKvFz0>

settlements preferential treatment and dismantle them. One cannot cut taxes for the rich and raise them. It is impossible to both enable same-sex marriage and public transport on the Sabbath and prevent them.

In addition, every centrist decision to not take a stand effectively leaves the field to extremists – who thereby gain greater weight in the public sphere than their actual size. The vital questions that Israel is facing will not be left undecided. If a significant portion of the center-Left chooses not to take part in the fight, the extreme Right will carry more weight in decision-making. In other words, the centrist parties are sabotaging the Left when it comes to voters, political identity and messaging, and are distorting public perception of politics – and democracy in general. Dismantling them will not resolve all the other problems that the Israeli Left is contending with, nor immediately fix years of ideological dissolution and failed messaging, but a flourishing Center will definitely place more obstacles in the Left's way.

Rightwing organizations have created a well-oiled war machine; the Left has scattered

The battle over public opinion and Israel's political agenda has been decided thanks to a combination of core issues relating to ideology and identity, as well as mundane matters, which may sound trivial, such as methods of organization and funding. It is no coincidence that all the recent campaigns by the Right have achieved such an extraordinarily broad impact. Whenever the Right hones in on a target – be it a private individual, a minority group or an NGO – the entire camp mobilizes to take it down. How does this work?

The Right's successful battles in recent years have been the result of a convenient division of labor and close cooperation between likeminded members of Knesset, civil society organizations, media outlets, educational leadership programs, rabbis, messaging kits and think tanks. Many of these share donors, launch joint campaigns, promote the same values and see each other as strategic partners. While taking over as many centers of power as possible, they are all focused on a single goal – the main project of the new Right – denigrating the Left and branding it as treacherous.

The noise machine of the new Right, led by the settler lobby, consists of various entities established in recent years to work together as an army. Frustration with the Oslo Accords, heightened by public indifference to the evacuation of settlements from Gaza, drove the Right to regroup and build up power in order to put up a political fight. Dozens of entities were formed that have dramatically changed Israel's public domain, training new leaders, formulating policy, promoting legislation, drawing rightwing politicians in the directions that suit them and dictating Israel's national agenda.

These are some of the entities that the Israeli Right has established over the last 20 years alone: the Kohelet Policy Forum (budget example: NIS 10.8 million in 2016); Im Tirzu (NIS 2.6 million in 2016); Regavim (NIS 5.6 million in 2016); Zehut (NIS 4.6 million in 2016, government funding of NIS 1.5 million in 2017); the Mida website (NIS 1.8 million in 2016); the Jewish Statesmanship Center (NIS 2.6 million in 2016); Reservists on Duty (NIS 1.7 million in 2017); NGO Monitor (NIS 5 million in 2015); the Legal Forum for Israel (NIS 1.2 million in 2016); Komemiyut (NIS 394,000 in 2015); Honenu (NIS 4.8 million in 2016); Ad Kan (more than NIS 334,000 in 2016); the Shomron Settlers' Committee (NIS 760,000 in 2016); the Institute for Zionist Strategies (NIS 600,00 in 2016); Israel Hayom (according to estimates, Sheldon Adelson loses USD 3 million a month in funding the free newspaper's losses); the Chotam Forum (NIS 83,000 in 2016); My Israel (which refuses to reveal its budget); Lehava (not disclosed); Galey Israel Radio (not disclosed); the Movement for Governability and Democracy (NIS 805,542 in 2017); the Israel Land Fund (NIS 121,950 in 2016); Channel 20 (which refuses to reveal its budget⁶²); the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies (unknown). All these joined wealthy, longstanding and active organizations such as the YESHA Council (more than NIS 5 million in 2016) and the Shalem College (NIS 34.7 million in 2016).

Every one of these conservative organizations has its specialized niche: singling out leftwing university lecturers; agitating against Arabs; undermining the legitimacy of leftwing NGOs and vilifying human rights organizations; fighting Bedouin settlement in the Negev; promoting the Nation-State Law; integrating religious-nationalist content into the state school system; quashing battles for social justice; supporting the deportation of African asylum seekers; objecting to separation of religion and state, to women's rights and to LGBT equality; establishment of a Halakhic state; propaganda to advance the sectorial interests of settlers; campaigning against the High Court, and so on. Yet **they are all – think tanks, movements, NGOs and media outlets – unified in their aggressive attack on the Left.**

These organizations closely collaborate with each other and with politicians on the Right. My Israel, for example, trained the younger generation of the religious Right – ministers Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked.⁶³ The NGOs Regavim and Horizon for Settlement, as well as the Komemiyut movement, were all founded by MK Bezalel Smotrich (who also made sure, once he became a member of Knesset, to channel

62 "Channel 20 is waiting 'for the news program to settle' – before recruiting more reporters" (Noa Preiss, Walla!, March 29, 2018): <https://bit.ly/2C32JU6> (Hebrew)

63 "'My Israel', Previously Run by Bennett and Shaked, Registered as NGO; the Vision Statement – the Jewish Home Platform" (Lior Dattel, The Marker, March 9, 2015): <https://bit.ly/2y8Fc1c> (Hebrew)

public funds to these organizations).⁶⁴ Minister Uri Ariel came up through the YESHA Council. Close ties also exist between Netanyahu, Im Tirzu, the Mida website and Israel Hayom. Religious cells (garinim torani'im) closely affiliated with the religious Right, which have been established in secular cities throughout Israel in order to bring the Israeli mainstream closer to the settler movement, are staffed by political associates of the Jewish Home Party and were enlisted to help the party with the elections.⁶⁵ Almost every campaign by one of these organizations is coordinated with politicians on the Right, who amplify it.

A short look at some of the persons involved clarifies how close these organizations are to the rightwing political elite: Ran Baratz, who founded the Mida website, was Netanyahu's media adviser (after the Civil Service Commission rejected his appointment as public diplomacy chief in the Prime Minister's Office)⁶⁶, returned to Mida and also teaches at the Shalem College and at the Jewish Statesmanship Center. Yoaz Hendel, chairman of the Institute for Zionist Strategies, also served as chief of public diplomacy in Netanyahu's office. The founder of the Jewish Statesmanship Center, Assaf Malach, teaches at the Shalem College and was appointed director of the Committee for Civic Studies in Israel's Ministry of Education by Naftali Bennet. Moshe Klughaft, who was a consultant for the Reservists' struggle, which was led by associates of Netanyahu's and called to remove then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert; since then, he has worked with Im Tirzu on the "shtulim" ("planted agents") campaign and on the campaign against the New Israel Fund, consulted the Legal Forum for Israel and become a close adviser of Naftali Bennett, who paid him 1.5 million shekels – illegally – from Jewish Home funds.⁶⁷ In fact, Bennett himself is a prime example: from an activist in the reservists' protest, he rose to become the Netanyahu's chief of staff and election campaign manager, went on to run the YESHA Council, founded My Israel with Ayelet Shaked and took over the Jewish Home Party.

Behind the scenes, this rightwing network shares more than human capital. These scores of organizations are financed by the same sources, and this helps strengthen ties between them and stick to an ideologically unified line. Major funders include private donors of Netanyahu's, Christian-evangelist American donors⁶⁸ and foundations such as the Central Fund of Israel and the Tikvah Fund, which also finances the Institute for Zionist Strategies, the Shalem College, the Mida website and the Kohelet Policy Forum.

64 "Israel Watchdog Suspects Settlement Body of Illegally Funding NGOs Connected to Far-right Lawmaker" (Yotam Berger, Haaretz, Nov. 21, 2017): <https://bit.ly/2DoRrLa>

65 See Molad report on the Settlement Division: <https://bit.ly/2F2yJL9>

66 "Baratz appointed to PM's PR chief through roundabout appointment", Ynet, June 22, 2016: <https://bit.ly/2P3VcvQ>

67 "Bennett's campaign spending illegal" (Calcalist, Aug. 11, 2015): <https://bit.ly/2QeOYWp>

68 For further reading, see Molad report: "U.S. Christian right wing harming Israel": <https://bit.ly/2P84J5l>

This impressive infrastructure, built up in the two decades since Rabin was assassinated, has enabled the Right to gain almost full control over Israel's political agenda, carry out effective and aggressive opposition research, impact media discourse and breed a generation of experienced, confident young leaders. The settlers and their supporters, whose image was at an all-time low in the 1990s, rose to the challenge, pinpointed strategic targets, worked incessantly to achieve them – and, in the end, succeeded in becoming the strongest lobby group in Israel, certainly considering the fact that settlers make up only 4.6% of Israelis.⁶⁹

One example of the effectiveness of these new-Right organizations and the way they shape reality in Israel is the Kohelet Policy Forum – a nonpartisan think tank that champions extreme libertarianism and minimal state involvement, along with weakening the Supreme Court and promoting a religious-nationalist, pro-settler agenda.

Through close ties with top figures in the coalition, headed by Jewish Home leaders Bennett and Shaked, members of the forum have managed to push through a series of bills born in their offices: the 'political jobs' bill (enabling ministers to appoint political associates to top positions at their ministries), the 'overriding clause' and other bills aimed at fundamental change that would grant the government growing powers and minimize judicial review. MKs from the coalition work closely with Kohelet (and other organizations) and adopt these bills. In some cases, they manage to get them passed into law – the most blatant example being the Nation-State Law, which redefines, a priori, the character and identity of the State of Israel.⁷⁰

While the right wing was busy building up and perfecting this bombastic war machine, the opposite trend grew among civil society organizations on the Left: fragmentation and de-politicization. The proliferation of small NGOs that do not work in concert, each devoted to a specific struggle of its own without connecting to a broader agenda, has spread progressive resources thin. Energy, activists and funds have scattered among small organizations, most involved in humanitarian work, with no intention or shared goal of strengthening the political base they belong to. Every one of the objectives promoted by these organizations is important and worthy in its own right, but as all the power and capital (both human and financial) are diverted to them – the liberal-democratic camp as a whole has failed to build up the organizational infrastructure needed to advance ideas, messages and future leaders.

⁶⁹ For example, the proportion of Knesset members who live in settlements has gradually risen over the last 20 years. In 2015, the representation of settlers in the Knesset was double that of their weight in the general population: <https://bit.ly/2PC00X7>

⁷⁰ "The Right-Wing Think Tank That Quietly 'Runs the Knesset'" (Shuki Sadeh, Haaretz, Oct. 5, 2018): <https://bit.ly/2RyGsSv>

Instead of a network of large, financially stable organizations that can attract talents and creative thinkers among progressives and create long-term work plans – small, isolated NGOs have popped up everywhere, hanging by a thread and usually wielding negligible impact on the general public.

While the Right's organized network effectively promotes a unified political agenda – on the Left, every organization has found its particular niche, does not cooperate with other progressive forces and usually denies any connection to them.

Meanwhile, unlike rightwing organizations, which are devoted to strengthening their political camp, leftwing NGOs are often cut off from their political home and even undermine it.

Like MKs on the Left, some civil society organizations have undergone dangerous de-politicization at the expense of strengthening the Left's political infrastructure.

Attempts to work within small communities, avoid identification with a particular political camp and deny any connection to the political system – while the initiative driving them may be highly positive – channel progressive energy into directions that prevent meaningful change. The political system cannot be changed by running away from it.

Why are rightwing NGOs devoting themselves to increasing their camp's power and shaping Israel's political reality, while leftwing civil society organizations balk at this? One reason is the way these groups are financed: while rightwing NGOs are funded by individual donors who wish to influence Israeli politics, some civil society groups are funded by foreign governments who condition their support on not engaging directly with politics – which further de-politicizes leftwing organizations.

Small wonder that each of these NGOs has found it hard to influence the national agenda alone. Even when one or another did achieve success of some kind, it was not chalked up to the Left and did not serve the greater purpose – the only scenario in which real change can be effected in each of these struggles: a liberal-democratic government.

Ironically, at the end of the day, the fragmentation and de-politicization of leftist civil society organizations reduce their ability to bring about broad, substantial change in the political domain – but also work against their declared goals. A real transformation

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of the state's treatment of refugees, the LGBT community, the environment, workers, Bedouin communities, Arab citizens of Israel, the occupation and other progressive issues can only occur if the rightwing government, which is driven by an unbridled extremist base, is replaced by a liberal-democratic coalition.

The network of rightwing organizations built up in Israel over the last 20 years is based on a similar revolution on the American Right since the 1990s.⁷¹ The joint, systematic strategic activity that brought George W. Bush to power and was later imitated by the Democratic Party propelled the Israeli Right forward, too. There is no reason why the Israeli Left cannot learn from the professionalism, determination and effectiveness that have helped the new Right attain such formidable influence over public life in Israel, based on sustained effort on several fronts.

Many on the Left, overcome with fatigue, have reverted to faith in magical solutions: a new leader, a new campaigner, new policy, a new slogan. But a retired general, an attractive presenter or a new American consultant will not solve the problem. Without a broad, functioning operative network on one hand and conviction on the other, political representation of the Left will remain feeble in Israel – despite the victory of progressive ideas among the public. Therefore, the first step must be to stop thinking in terms of the coming elections. This is not only because winning them does not seem realistic, but also because, given the current state of progressive leadership, even winning the elections will not bring about the urgent, needed policy changes. Without a broad, effective network of organizations, donors, policy thinkers, campaigners and activists all devoted to the same ideological backbone and to the success of the Left – no worthy leader will emerge, and even if one does, he or she will not be able to flourish. Building up this network will take time, energy, money and patience. To govern Israel again, the Left must stop being intimidated by rightwing bullying, trying to escape itself, thinking in immediate terms only and then waking up in a panic when elections are announced. Instead, we must start rebuilding Israel's liberal-democratic bloc slowly but surely, by formulating an updated worldview that is committed to liberal principles on one hand and political realism on the other, and establishing an institutional network that can cultivate and disseminate these ideas and fight doggedly for them.

⁷¹ For further reading, see: Susan George, *Hijacking America: How the Secular and Religious Right Changed What Americans Think*. Polity, Cambridge, 2008.



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