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The anti-Netanyahu Protesters Are Erasing the Palestinians

Jonathan Pollak

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Just like in 2011, when Israel was swept up by the social justice protests, many on the left have taken to the streets over the internal strife in recent months. And just like then, the Israeli left is abandoning the Palestinians and taking part in their elimination from the public discourse.

The people, once again, are demanding all sorts of justice, and the vestiges of the left – members of the ruling group in a colonialist reality – are succumbing to the temptation to take refuge in the warm bosom of left-wing populism and forget that this isn't South America or even the United States after the murder of George Floyd.

In Israel, when the people demand things, the people are Jewish. There isn't and can't be left-wing populism in Israel that by nature is anti-colonialist.

Like then, left-wingers admit that the stench of the blue and white Israeli flags of Jewish supremacy raised at the protests is nauseating, but many say: "We'll breathe later." Back then, too,

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parts of the more radical left were blinded by hallucinations of a tectonic change and some imaginary revolutionary spark that must not be missed out on.

In retrospect, the protest movement of 2011 was an important moment, even if only one of many, in the ongoing elimination of the Palestinians from the Israeli discourse, including Israeli protest discourse, even that of parts of the radical left.

To illustrate how different the protests are now from those a decade ago, dedicated activists – truly dedicated, without a drop of cynicism – note the prominent presence of the killing of Eyad Hallaq at the protests. But in fact, this incident is an excellent example of the co-optation of the fringes to the center at the protests – not the other way around.

In the context of the protests on Balfour Street and their political backdrop, the common attitude is that Hallaq's murder is on the spectrum as a racially charged killing by a police officer. His name will almost always be mentioned before, or following, the names of Solomon Teka, Shirel Habura and Yehuda Biadga – who were also shot to death by police.

These are indeed all cases strongly tainted by racism. However, to bundle them together is to appropriate the Palestinian context by the Israeli one. Moreover, referring to Border Police officers as policemen and not soldiers also conceals the context in which Hallaq was executed.

Not just another country

To frame Hallaq's death as yet another case of police brutality and to protest his death via a demand that the shooters be brought to trial enables the illusion that Israel is a normal place like everywhere else – that just like in the United States or Britain, here too the anger over police violence is pouring out. However, Israel isn't just another country like any other with a problem of a racist and violent police force.

Hallaq, who was autistic and helpless and was shot in the back, is without a doubt the perfect victim. Even parts of the

hard right see the incident as a tragedy. But what's the true significance of framing his execution as police violence?

What if he wasn't autistic? What if the Border Police officers had acted according to the rules, regulations and laws that govern the killing of Palestinian people by military forces? And what, even, if he had brandished a gun in the struggle against the colonialist regime that these Border Police soldiers enforce with the power of their own guns?

Israel isn't just another country, and the struggle against it isn't merely one for civil rights. Hallaq simply wasn't a citizen, but a subject. In the colonialist context, policing cannot be better or not as bad. In its very essence, the regime is hostile foreign rule, and policing is necessarily violent enforcement of that regime.

People aren't stupid, and demonstrators aren't sheep waiting to be led in the right direction. The demonstrations in Israeli cities are anti-Bibi demonstrations, and no radical bloc within them – no matter how big, noisy or dominant – will turn these protests into anything else. As the Hallaq incident proves, chances are that left-wing populism will actually impede the possibility of honestly confronting these critical issues.

While the demonstrations – in part – lament the nearing end of democracy, a democratic regime doesn't exist in Israel. The system of government here moves on the spectrum between apartheid and military dictatorship, depending on the color of your ID card and its nationality section.

This situation is nothing new. This is how Israel has been since the day it was established, and these were the aspirations of the Zionist movement even before that. The root of the matter isn't 1967 and the settlements but the Hashomer organization and David Ben-Gurion.

Illegitimate regime

A short time ago the official annexation of parts of the West Bank threatened to become yet another fake watershed moment in the story of this same imaginary democracy. In the

world of the Zionist left, this is always a moving target – one still always ahead of us – one that if crossed will mean it is finally time to start to resist.

This of course is a fake line in the sand, but for a brief moment, when annexation was still on the agenda, it seemed that the larger groups – those that would never have dreamed of such a thing before – began to realize that an apartheid regime already exists in Israel, no ifs or maybes. The magical thinking about Benjamin Netanyahu's influence enables Israelis to keep concentrating on the internal matters of Israeli society without letting go of a fake revolutionary ethos they've adopted.

Anti-apartheid slogans do sometimes come up at the protests, but such labeling of Israel as an apartheid state must carry far-reaching implications. In its light, opponents of apartheid must part ways with the idea of a struggle over the nature of Israel, and move toward a struggle against Israel itself – not against the occupation or against one aspect or another of the repression, but against the regime itself, which is illegitimate.

As the view of Israel as an apartheid state spreads into circles that were hitherto wary of seeing things this way, the responsibility to act accordingly also expands, and this responsibility carries an obligation to act.

The realization that an apartheid regime is operating in Israel must not remain only theoretical. In a colonialist situation, the group fighting for its freedom is the one that shapes the struggle – and the solution. The role of Jews with Israeli citizenship is to join the Palestinian resistance, led by the Palestinians, and act against the apartheid rule.