

Notes from the conference “Before it’s too late: moving from protest to persistent activity”, Wahat al-Salam - Neve Shalom, July 22, 2010

A conference in Wahat al-Salam ~ Neve Shalom outlines an up-to-date and assertive agenda for the left, in the wake of the flotilla: a broad movement against the siege and the occupation, for active protection of democratic rights.

July 22, 2010: A conference that brought together more than 120 activists from peace and human rights organizations to Wahat al-Salam-Neve Shalom concluded with a call to build a new strategic agenda including activism against the occupation and a joint Jewish-Arab struggle for democratic rights and peace.

Ahmad Hijazi, director of the School for Peace and one of the conference organizers, said “The conference opened a process for moving from protest to a persistent political struggle. An additional process is planned in order to formulate and organize a broad joint Jewish-Arab movement. Dr. Nava Sonnenschein, another of the organizers remarked: “We began to formulate an up-to-date agenda that touches both on the struggle against the occupation and for the right to struggle – the struggle for the existence of Israeli democracy and protection of all those who dare to disagree and criticize.”

Extracts from presentations

Prof. Neve Gordon, head of the department of governance and public policy in the Ben Gurion University of the Negev: We should awake from illusions regarding the continuance of the occupation in Gaza. Descartes wrote about the “deceptive demon that causes people to think they know reality, while actually they know nothing.”

Israel is the sovereign in Gaza. In its hand is the monopoly and the control of movement through Gaza’s borders. Israel claims to have given up its sovereignty and dismantled settlements. In this, it creatively pretends to be a new invention: a sovereign without sovereignty. The constructing of this deceptive situation is what causes people to ask: “We dismantled settlements: so why are they shooting at us?” The truth is that Israel remains the true sovereign in the territory. She decides who will enter and who will exit.

Recently something happened: the Flotilla tore away the mask, and revealed that Gaza has no territorial waters, and therefore Israel is still the sovereign in Gaza. It is true that following the Flotilla, in order to appease international criticism, the Government permitted many goods to enter. But Israel is responsible for their entry. And this responsibility is a form of sovereignty. We shouldn't be confused, since this is a place where there is no freedom of movement and even export is prohibited.

Hadas Ziv, director of Physicians for Human Rights: "Our association deals with the right to health in Gaza. But this is exactly why I want to avoid falling into a trap in all that concerns the medical services in Gaza: the humanitarian trap. The Oslo agreement formally transferred responsibility for medical care to the Palestinian Authority, and since then, the role of Israel was defined as humanitarian consideration and not responsibility for maintaining the rights of the residents.

In practice, the development of health services in Gaza is prevented. The entry of motorized wheel chairs is prevented for disabled people, except for those whose engine is slow, since this would be a security risk. Radioactive materials are prohibited for the treatment of cancer due to suspicion of "dual use". Students who learned medicine at the University of Abu Dis are prohibited from continuing their studies, and there is a shortage of doctors. Experts in surgery and medical staff training are forbidden entry. Whoever requests to exit to Israel is interrogated by the Shin-Bet. Whoever is involved in anything that could affect security - he or a family member of such a person - cannot pass into Israel unless he is in a critical condition. And today, the loss of a leg or an eye is not regarded as something critical.

Unfortunately, the international community cooperates with the humanitarian minimum set by Israel, and is entirely occupied with the entry of a few doctors or the rescue of patients in a critical condition.

Knesset Member Hanan Zoabi:

A determined assault is being waged against our rights as Arabs or left-wing Jewish citizens. The worst thing is the attack on the very right to a public struggle: the right to struggle, and the limitations of the struggle. The left should have woken up the moment Lieberman was appointed as a minister. When the government was being established, we called to boycott it, but unfortunately the process went through quietly.

Now an era of de-legitimacy is flourishing. Anyone who proposes a bill against Arabs wins sympathy. Any talk of rights is regarded as a provocation. This is the atmosphere in the Knesset: Do not provoke us. Knesset members approached me after the hearing on the revocation of my rights in private conversations that were not captured on camera, saying, “we won’t settle for this; we’re not finished with you. We’ll have you removed you from the Knesset - you won’t be here.” And it’s not just in the Knesset. Today, Arabs feel alone in Israeli society, and this is sometimes true of the Left.

The Flotilla exposed where things are leading. It showed the decline. It speeded up processes. Instead of a decline over six years, it is taking place now with great intensity. It revealed the bluffs and the self-righteousness and brought about an eruption of shameless racism, instead of the racism that is already inherent in the institutional discourse. There is no shame: there is hatred, which I felt even before the Flotilla. And now there is vengeance, both towards me as an Arab and as a woman.

Now, what has to be done? To take an Israeli flotilla to Gaza. This is the time, and it is important to me to take part in this. This time, it is important to think of a broad political framework, not just Arabs and the Left. To wage a struggle against the rules of the game, and for the right to struggle.

Journalist Gideon Levy (Israel): I am more disturbed than ever by developments in Israeli society - more even than I am troubled by the occupation. I am less surprised by the increased manifestation of fascist nationalism. What is most disturbing is that all the control mechanisms that are supposed to stop these processes are collapsing before our eyes.

The struggle should be for the hearts of the paralysed silent majority who think that it won’t happen, who know this is terrible but think that it won’t affect them.

The silent majority should take action because if this continues, tomorrow’s newspaper won’t be like those of today. Tomorrow’s school won’t be like today’s. Tomorrow’s universities won’t be the same, and neither will the courts. The NGOs will be strangled. It’s already a long time that the Knesset does not put a brake on processes like this.

From among all the democratic processes, that which most shirks from its role is the Israeli media. Without the help of the media, the occupation could not have

continued for 43 years. After all, if there is a collaborator in the occupation, it is the media. It is not that the media has been commandeered: there is no significant censorship or government pressure. The media has decided to censor itself and commandeer itself, of its own volition.

Attorney Abir Bakr (Adalah)

Today, an effort is being made to criminalize political activity, to transform people into defendants and force them to exculpate themselves. If in the past, Adalah worked to expand rights, today we are forced to focus on defending the rules of the game.

Indictments are being submitted for problematic offences such as contact with a foreign agent. Today, when I meet Arabs from abroad at an international conference, suddenly I have to be careful. And this is dangerous because if legitimate political activity is pushed underground, the existing restraints connected to remaining public will be removed. Such a process leads to a slippery slope, and reflects the government's march of folly.

Elizabeth Milikovsky, Sheikh Jarrach dialogue group: The struggle in Sheikh Jarrach gave birth to a glimmer of hope. More and more people arrive, see the injustice and discrimination and stand together with people who were subject to discrimination. They understand that such discrimination can also come to us, that these dangerous moves harm Arabs and Jews and affect the future of all of us. People come to Sheikh Jarrach who were never at demonstrations, and these circles are expanding.

In the past the marches in Sheikh Jarrach passed quietly. But on December 11, the police attacked the demonstrators. There were people who needed hospital treatment and 23 were arrested without cause, other than entering the neighborhood. Since then our struggle moved into a higher gear, and more than a hundred demonstrators have been arrested. Again and again, false arrests have been made and people have been held in detention over long weekends, for no reason. Since December a roadblock has been placed at the entry to the neighborhood that permits settlers and their political activists to demonstrate, hold rallies and celebrate all the Jewish festivals - while we are not permitted to enter. This is a Palestinian area, but the police and the municipality behave as if it is under Jewish ownership.

The threat to democracy has come home: literally. In March the police showed

up at the house of one of our veteran activists while she was having her sabbath meal and arrested her without cause. A month and a half ago, the police came looking for me at my parents' house because they received a message that I am going to throw Molotov cocktails and immolate myself. In one of the Shin Beth interrogations a detective said to one of our activists, "We hate Arabs but we hate people like you even more."

Prof. Gadi Algazi (Hithabrut - Tarabut): Democratic entities are very fragile. And if there is something that is especially fragile and delicate it is human rights - even in the US and Britain. But here the fragility is special. Here basic rights can be erased in a moment, because this is a colonial society, isolated and crumbling, in which there is no recognition of democratic and collective rights of those living here, and first and foremost those of the Palestinian minority.

It is an illusion that you can build liberal and democratic reforms and promote individual rights while there is no infrastructure of collective rights. It is not possible to construct individual rights on the basis of discrimination and collective dispossession, in a reality of occupation and oppression. The rights do not pass the test. When politics is based on hatred and fear, individual rights are fragile and shaky.

It is true that Israel has achieved to a certain degree citizens rights that permit the waging of struggles. But everything is fragile, and existing rights contain the danger of illusion: Preoccupation with the freedom of the individual can divide and weaken the struggle. It creates the illusion of individual advancement, at the expense of the demand for social change. If we don't relate to the collective dimension we will remain within a closed circle.

The reasons for the murky wave sweeping around us are deep. First, those who fought for the impaired rights of the minority in Israel are a part of the array of powers. The balance of power between Israel and the Palestinians in the occupied territories reflect what is happening in Israel. We are living after the worst defeats in Palestinian history, and since the rights of both peoples are deeply interrelated, the Palestinian defeat in 2002 reverberates, and the Right make use of this. It uses this victory in order to impose its way. This is the moment in which we are living: a moment of defensiveness.

Second, we have moved from a process of concentration of power to wild privatization. People found themselves helpless because they did not know how to deal with this wave. A person who has had his social rights smashed, with no

one to defend him, does not identify with the suffering in the occupied territories. According to my experience with activism in poor neighborhoods, he does not even identify with the person in the next building. The smashing of rights destroys the ability for empathy. "If no one helped me when they took away my guaranteed income allowance, why should I listen to the liberals when they ask me to identify with the suffering in Gaza? This is the main reason why the Right penetrated so deeply into the Labor party and Kadima.

The Right's project for the last two years has been to deeply change the rules of the game: not to defeat the adversary but to destroy him. To determine anew what is legitimate. Is it legitimate for there to be Palestinian Knesset members? Academic freedom? the right to demonstrate? freedom to marry whoever one wants?

What can be done? We can point to three ways to change.

1. In order for the struggle not just to be for the right to struggle, deployment of human rights and peace organizations needs to be shared, Jewish and Arab. If they do not join forces they will not succeed. Any attempt to promote a single sector is doomed to failure. Alliances are needed.
2. If we do not want to make do with defensiveness and helplessness, the goal cannot be just the realization of human rights. We must promote social change. We must form an alliance of those who are discriminated against: Palestinians, Ethiopian immigrants, *Mizrachim*, residents of towns in the periphery, and the rest of those who have been trampled upon. Without fixing this, the Right can use the politics of fear and hatred in order to isolate each time a different struggle. The main task is to build trust between these groups: an alliance between people who are not equal - and who are aware of the differences between them.
3. An alternative vision is needed: recognition of the Vision Documents that propose a bi-national Jewish - Arab state in the '67 borders. A nation that confronts collective rights and historical injustice. A project like this can unite and galvanize people on both sides.