

Israel-Hamas war

'We can't solve all problems by force': Israeli left leader sets out alternative vision



Yair Golan of the Democrats says October 7 underscores the need for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

James Shotter in Tel Aviv 8 HOURS AGO

For many Israelis who still believed in coexistence with the Palestinians, Hamas's devastating attack on October 7 was the moment that hope was snuffed out. But for Yair Golan, the catastrophe only underscored his conviction of the need to find a lasting, two-state solution to the conflict.

That morning, as news of the attack emerged, the 62-year-old former soldier who heads the Democrats, a new party uniting Israel's left-of-centre groups, got in his car and drove towards the fighting. Having arrived in the south, he shuttled to-and-fro amid the carnage, rescuing six survivors from the Nova music festival, where Hamas militants killed 364 partygoers.

The scenes Golan witnessed around Nova gave him a visceral understanding of what unfolded that day. But they also strengthened his determination "to move forward, and not to postpone this issue which is so crucial to our ability to survive in this region".

"We need to show where we're heading: separation [from the Palestinians] or annexation [of their territories]," he said. "The meaning of annexation is that Israel won't be a democracy any more."

In today's Israel, that is not a popular position. Even before October 7, the left was in decline, as the country shifted steadily to the right under Benjamin Netanyahu's long rule. At the 2022 election, the centre-left Labour party that was once Israel's dominant political force barely scraped into parliament. The more left-wing Meretz failed altogether.

Hamas's assault — which took a devastating toll on the kibbutzim around Gaza that were home to some of Israel's most prominent peace activists — has accelerated that trend. A Pew poll in April found just 19 per cent of Jewish Israelis thought peaceful coexistence with an independent Palestinian state was possible, the lowest figure since Pew began asking the question in 2013.

“There's no doubt people moved to the right,” said Aviv Bushinsky, a political analyst who previously advised Netanyahu. “It's the most politically incorrect thing in Israel today to lead a party that says we should make peace with the Palestinians . . . it's out of fashion.”

Golan, a former deputy chief of staff of the Israeli military, is no stranger to swimming against the tide. He was passed over for the top job in the army after giving a speech on Holocaust memorial day 2016 in which he drew parallels between trends in Germany before the Holocaust and contemporary Israel.

After the military he entered politics, serving in various left-wing parties, before creating the Democrats in July by merging Labour and Meretz in an attempt to revive the fortunes of Israel's progressive camp. Early polls suggest the Democrats could win about 10 seats in Israel's 120-seat Knesset, although analysts are cautious of making firm predictions about a party that is still only eight weeks old.

Part of Golan's approach is to draw a line between his party and previous iterations of Israel's left, arguing that left-right spectrum is no longer an appropriate yardstick for Israeli politics and that what his party is offering is far more security.

yardstick for Israeli politics, and that what his party is offering is far more security-focused than its predecessors.

“I insist not to call it the left any more, because this is a very aggressive left,” he said. “The new left in Israel will provide Israel with true security, which means that we know on the one hand how to use force. And at the same time, we understand that we can’t solve all problems by force.”

That aggressive stance is perhaps most evident in his thinking on how Israel should deal with Hizbollah. The Lebanese militant group began [firing rockets at Israel](#) in support of Hamas on October 8, and in the months since Hizbollah and Israeli forces have exchanged fire almost daily, displacing tens of thousands in both countries, and fanning fears of a broader war.

Golan believes that is something Israel must countenance. “We should take the risk of having a much wider confrontation with Hizbollah,” he said. “We have tens of thousands of Israelis living like refugees in their own country. This is the most devastating blow the Zionist project ever got — with the exception of October 7. It’s totally unacceptable.”



Security is also at the forefront of his approach to the Palestinians. While a two-state solution is his goal, he assumes achieving it will take years, and insists Israel should keep “security responsibility” in both the occupied West Bank and Gaza “until we are able to trust” the Palestinians. “We should not be naive. We should

not make the same mistakes as before,” he said.

Within that framework of overarching Israeli security control, the key to the “day after” in Gaza was to create a viable alternative to Hamas, he said. In contrast to Netanyahu, Golan believes this should involve the Palestinian Authority — which ruled the enclave until it was ousted by Hamas in 2007 — with support from “moderate” Arab states. Rebuilding the economy, he argued, would be crucial.

“If you destroy Hamas and what you get instead is Isis — well, that is not very promising,” he said, with heavy understatement. “We need to convince the Israeli people that it’s better for us to have some sort of recovery process in Gaza.”

In general, he said Israel should begin a process of “civil separation” from the Palestinians, which would involve giving them greater economic autonomy. Israel should also make clear where its border would be: which West Bank settlements it would evacuate and which — such as those around Jerusalem — it would seek to keep and exchange for land swaps elsewhere.

The alternative, he argued, was a situation in which Israel’s long occupation of the Palestinian territories morphed into an annexation, something he insisted most Israelis do not want.

“If we want a homeland for the Jewish people, a democracy, all over the Holy Land — that’s impossible. You need to choose two of the three,” he said. “I choose the homeland of the Jewish people and a strong democracy. Why? Because with these two elements, we can secure our destiny.”

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