

## **Bankers, Suicide Bombers and the ‘Real People’**

### A Comparative Analysis of Israeli and European Right-wing Populism

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#### *Abstract*

*The unprecedented rightward shift in Israeli politics has been repeatedly lamented by foreign commentators. However, it has rarely been mentioned in one breath with the recent rise of right-wing populism across the west. This paper offers a preliminary comparative analysis of Israeli and European right-wing populism. It highlights striking structural similarities between the two variants in terms of arguments, policy and political imagination. Nevertheless, it also points at a crucial difference of content: whereas most European populist movements focus on economic and cultural grievances, their Israeli equivalent concentrates almost exclusively on security issues – primarily, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, from which it derives the anxieties, insecurities and tribal impulses that fuel its success.*

*Another similarity examined by the paper has to do with the political circumstances that gave rise to right-wing populism in Israel and Europe. Both variants, it argues, emerged as a result of a dramatic ideological convergence; that is, a blurring of the left-right distinction. The European convergence, which took place in the 1980s-1990s, was economic and consisted of social democratic parties adopting the basic principles of neoliberalism. The Israeli case of divergence, which received very little academic attention so far, had to do with national security. In recent years, the Israeli left has given up on putting forward an alternative to the right’s positions regarding the most crucial issue to the electorate and for Israel’s future: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The paper outlines the process whereby this surrender, and the elimination of political competition over security issues that followed, paved the way for the takeover of the Israeli political mainstream by far-right populists.*

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## 1. Introduction

The past decade has witnessed an unprecedented rightward shift in Israeli politics. Although this process has been widely discussed – and frequently lamented – by foreign commentators, it has rarely been mentioned in one breath with the recent rise of right-wing populism across the West. Indeed, it seems like the exceptionality often ascribed to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has obscured the fact that Israeli politics is affected by the dynamics of global politics as much as any other country. Naturally, this also includes the recent populist turn evident in many liberal democratic states.

This paper offers a comparative analysis of contemporary Israeli and European right-wing populism. It begins by highlighting the similarities between the two in terms of arguments, policy and political imagination. Next, it explains how these shared attributes resulted in the emergence of ‘doomsday politics’ – a transformation of the very meaning of political disagreement. This resemblance, however, should not be overstated, as it is limited to *matters of structure only*. In fact, behind the similar arguments and shared vision lies a crucial *difference of content*. Whereas most populist movements focus on economic and cultural grievances, their Israeli equivalent concentrates almost exclusively on security issues. In other words, it is the Israeli-Arab conflict that provides the lion’s share of anxieties, insecurities and tribal impulses which fuel the outstanding success of Israeli populism.

The second part of the paper points at another important likeness between the two cases; namely, the political circumstances that enabled their rise. Both populisms, it contends, are the result of an ideological convergence between left and right which extinguished political competition over burning political issues. Once again, though, this resemblance is merely structural. While the ideological convergence in Europe was related to economic and social issues, its Israeli counterpart was focused on national security. The paper concludes by explaining how this process of convergence brought about the takeover of Israeli mainstream politics by the populist far-right.

First, though, we must address a vital question: what do we actually mean when we say ‘populism’? Throughout the political turmoil of 2015-2017, this slippery term has been deployed as a ready-made explanation to any significant development in politics. In fact, it has been attributed to such a wide range of political actors – from Viktor Orbán to Bernie Sanders – that it lost any viable meaning. At present, ‘populism’ conceals more than it reveals.

In this paper, therefore, I will use a particular conception of the term, as understood by thinkers such as Cas Mudde (2004) and Jan Werner Müller (2016). Theirs, I believe, is the only definition which highlights a genuinely distinct political phenomenon and renders the term analytically useful. According to their view, populists must be both (1) anti-elitist and (2) anti-pluralist. That is, politicians who draw a clear distinction between *the real people* and *the corrupt elite*, while also arguing that they – and they alone – are capable of representing the voice of the so-called authentic people.

## **2. Structural Similarities**

### **2.1 The Populist Imagination**

Despite operating in profoundly different socio-historical contexts, Israeli and European populists share many characteristics (see: Table 1). First, they both launch *highly publicised assaults on democratic institutions* – be they genuine legislative efforts or mere PR stunts – while putting special emphasis on the media (e.g. Erdoğan), the judiciary (e.g. Kaczyński), NGOs (e.g. Putin) and the civil service (e.g. Orbán). As for the Israeli case, countless examples come to mind, among which are: PM Binyamin Netanyahu’s two-decade-long feud with the media; Ayelet Shaked’s meticulously planned crackdown on the Supreme Court; Yariv Levin’s notorious NGO bill, specifically targeting human rights organisations; and David Bitan’s ‘political jobs bill’ which aims at dismantling the professional base of the Israeli civil service.

At times, the likeness is staggering: such, for instance, are Binyamin Netanyahu and Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s takeovers of their countries’ public broadcasting companies under the same guise of ‘pluralism and diversification’. Similarly, both attempt to restrain private media outlets in the name of an economic agenda which ostensibly fights ‘market concentration’ in the name of the ordinary citizen.

Second, populist parties in Israel and Europe alike are characterised by *hollowed-out party mechanisms*. That is due to the influence of a charismatic leader, who disapproves of institutionalised deliberation, perceives politics as a one-man show, and controls the party through centralisation. This phenomenon’s quintessential European example would be Berlusconi’s ‘Forza Italia’. Its Israeli equivalent is Netanyahu’s takeover of his party’s institutions, as well as the cult of personality surrounding him and his family. In addition, populist regimes to hand over state resources to cronies. Indeed, Netanyahu and his close circle of confidants and family members are entangled in a large number of severe corruption cases still under police investigation.

Third, both Israeli and European populists see themselves as *eternal underdogs*, even when they firmly hold the reins of power. Furthermore, they show a strong *inclination toward conspiracy theories*, which they use as explanations for any of their shortcomings, thereby maintaining their otherwise unconvincing victimhood.

Most importantly, though, is that all the characteristics mentioned above are underpinned by a *shared political logic* – a common understanding of what the demos looks like and what politics is about. This unique perception gives meaning, context and direction to their every action. Müller (2016) calls this outlook '[the] moralistic imagination of politics', which 'opposes a morally pure and fully unified – but ultimately fictional – people to small minorities who are put outside the authentic people'.

In the Israeli context, the salience of this phenomenon cannot be overstressed. During the past decade this new politics of contempt has totally eclipsed Israeli politics – overshadowing any substantive debate about policy, ideology and the nation's future. The exclusionary vision promoted by the Israeli right marks out two groups which – according to this view – do not truly belong to the 'real people': (1) the Arab citizens of Israel and (2) the Israeli left. Both are repeatedly portrayed as 'the enemies within': every Arab – a ticking bomb, every leftist – a weakly collaborator.

Admittedly, the hostility toward the Arab citizens of Israel has always existed to some extent among most political parties in Israel, let alone parties of the right. Recently, though, this hostility has radically accelerated, with most of the taboos underlying public debate gleefully crushed by attention-seeking right-wing politicians.

To be sure, the claim that Arabs do not belong to 'the people' in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. the Jewish people, is not controversial as such. The problem arises when this argument is used to implicate that Israeli Arabs should also be excluded from 'the people' in the broad sense of the term, i.e. from the Israeli citizenry.

That is exactly what happened on the 2015 election day, when PM Netanyahu made his infamous remark, warning about the 'Arab voters' who were 'heading to the polling stations in droves', driven by 'left-wing NGOs' who were 'bringing them in buses'. This falsehood, knowingly delivered without any factual basis, could be considered as the archetype of right-wing populism in Israel, combining incitement toward Arabs, leftists and civil society – all packed neatly into one deceitful conspiracy theory.

Still, it is important to remember that despite the recent escalation, anti-Arab rhetoric is not a new phenomenon. The delegitimisation campaign against the left, on the other hand, is a novelty whose success stands out even on a global scale. This is the issue to which we turn now.

## 2.2 The Emergence of ‘Doomsday Politics’

Within less than ten years, an astonishingly effective public campaign carried out by right-wing politicians, journalists and NGOs succeeded in creating a cast-iron equation whereby holding or being associated with left-wing views equals treason. Absurdly, even supporters of the Israeli Labour Party – which founded the State of Israel – are condemned nowadays as morally corrupt and spiritually degenerate.

This attitude, which originated in the fringes of the settler movement, has rapidly turned into one of the elementary paradigms of Israeli politics. Its significance is great, even historical, as it markedly breaks with the Israeli tradition of *familial politics*. That is, a shared understanding that even the most heated debate within the Jewish population always remains within the confines of a family feud: we may scream at each other, but *all of us* do that out of deep concern for our homeland. Up until a few years ago, seriously accusing the other side of malevolent intentions would have been unheard of.

This is not solely a polarisation of ideological positions, but first and foremost a transformation of the very meaning of political rivalry and disagreement. The process has given birth to what can be described as *doomsday politics*; that is, a conduct of politics characterised by the urgency of an existential emergency. Under these conditions, one’s political opponents are considered so destructive and malicious, that absolutely no political battle against them can be lost. What’s more, engaging in any sort of debate with them is deemed futile, since they are not merely wrong – they are actually malignant.

Switching to ‘doomsday mode’, right-wing politicians, religious leaders and media figures now possess the ultimate justification for pushing the boundaries of democratic consensus. After all, if the whole future of the Jewish people is at stake, who can afford to linger over social niceties? This is not necessarily an excuse on their part, used to legitimise lies, smears and taboo breaking. Above all, it is a way of explaining to oneself why one simply cannot afford to abide by the rules of ‘normal politics’, such as toleration of dissent and adherence to truth.

**A selection of populist statements from Israel and Europe**

Theme	European right	Israeli right
<p><b>The real people vs the elite</b></p>	<p>‘Brexit will be a victory for real people’ – Nigel Farage, leader of UKIP, June 2016</p> <p>‘Nothing in Monsieur Macron’s plan, nor anything in his behaviour, indicates the least evidence of love for France... It is time to free the French people from an arrogant Elite’</p> <p>‘[The Polish leaders of the left] were poles of the worst sort... with treason in their genes’ – <i>Marine Le Pen</i>, leader of the Front National, May 2017</p> <p>‘We only want to cure our country of a few illnesses – a new mixture of cultures and races, a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians... What moves most Poles is tradition, historical awareness, love of country, faith in God and a normal family life between a man and a woman’ – Witold Waszczykowski, the Polish foreign minister, January 2016</p>	<p>‘The people go to vote – the left hatches plots’ – an official Likud slogan, August 2017</p> <p>‘They [the left] have V-15, we have the people’ – Binyamin Netanyahu, March 2015</p> <p>‘Lefty politicians and TV pundits rejoiced in the UN’s anti-Israeli resolution, almost as much as the Palestinian Authority and the Hamas. Of all things, some of them focused on attacking... the Israeli government! It is easy to understand why the wise Israeli public refuses to vote for them’ – Netanyahu, December 2016</p> <p>‘The left have forgotten what being Jewish means’ – Netanyahu, 1999</p>
<p><b>The media</b></p>	<p>‘The media is one of our main two adversaries’ – Le Pen, 2016 ‘[State TV channels will] preserve national traditions, patriotic and human values... [and] counteract misrepresentations of Polish history... [as well as] portray family values... and respect the Christian value system’ – the Polish government’s public broadcasting reform, December 2015</p>	<p>‘We know that the left and the media — and we know that they’re the same thing — are on an obsessive witch hunt against me and my family, with the goal of achieving a coup against the government. The thought police in the media work full-time to set the agenda’ – Netanyahu, August 2017</p> <p>‘The leftie media is recruited to</p>

	<p>‘We must go to battle against the media that the Soros mafia and Brussels's bureaucrats operate’ – Hungarian PM Victor Orban, July 2017</p> <p>‘The press can drop dead, suckers’ – Gert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom, December 2015</p> <p>‘Instead of creating a media shield for the Polish national interests, journalists often sympathise with negative opinions about Poland’ – Elzbieta Kruk, PiS MP, December 2015</p>	<p>this Bolshevik hunt, brainwashing and character assassination against me and my family. It’s happening every day and every night. They’re creating a barrage of – there is no other word for it – fake news against us’ – Netanyahu, January 2017</p> <p>‘Channel 10 leads an all-out war against every Jewish and Zionist characteristic in the country... We, the public, are stronger than they are’ – Minister of Education, Naftali Bennett, July 2017</p>
<p><b>Conspiracy theories</b></p>	<p>‘Large-bodied predators are swimming here in the waters. This is the trans-border empire of George Soros, with tons of money... they are trying secretly with foreign money to influence Hungarian politics’ – Orban, February 2017</p> <p>‘The protesters are students who had been paid to attend the demonstration... this is a scheme to destabilise society that did not rise up on its own’ – Russian President Vladimir Putin, December 2011</p>	<p>‘Arab voters are heading to the polling stations in droves – left-wing NGOs are bringing them in buses’ – Netanyahu, March 2015</p> <p>‘Radical left NGOs, sponsored by the American Government and associated with the Labour Party, are trying to stage a coup against the Israeli government’ – official Likud press release, February 2015</p> <p>‘We’ve survived physical and cultural extermination attempts by Baalam, Pharaoh, Babel, Greece, Rome and Germany. No European fund, sophisticated as it may be, will succeed in weakening the Israeli society’ – Minister of Culture, Miri Regev, July 2017</p> <p>‘The demonstrations against me are funded by the “New Israel Fund”’ – Netanyahu, July 2017</p>

<p><b>Democratic institutions</b></p>	<p>‘The judiciary is a cancerous growth’ – Italian President Silvio Berlusconi, June 2008</p> <p>‘This sentence proves that you judges are completely out of touch... The Dutch want their country back’ – Wilders, December 2016</p> <p>‘[Reforming the civil service would] eliminate the social pathology... it will be possible to immediately fire any person for whom the fact or even the suspicion of them having been involved in this pathology is confirmed’ – PiS’s reform of the Polish civil service, December 2015</p>	<p>‘Zionism should not continue – and will not continue – to bow down to the system of individual rights interpreted in a universal way’ – Minister of Justice, Ayelet Shaked, September 2017</p> <p>‘A D-9 [bulldozer] shovel should be used against the Supreme Court. We, as a legislative system, will make sure to rein in the legalistic rule in this country and the tail that wags the dog’ – MK Moti Yogev of the Jewish Home party, July 2015</p> <p>‘The Supreme Court believes it’s running this country. It is mistaken. Step by step, the Court is forcing us, against our will, to rewrite the law in a way that will enable the Knesset to overturn the Court’s decisions. The representatives of the people should determine what happens – not anyone else’ – Minister of Agriculture, Uri Ariel, December 2016</p> <p>‘The Supreme Court’s outrageous ruling crosses the red line. It is a testimony for the Court’s total disconnection from our people’s values and heritage... I urge the Minister of Justice to lead a far-reaching reform that would restore the Israeli people’s trust in the Court’ – Minister of Tourism, Yariv Levin, September 2016</p>
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### 3. Differences of Content

#### 3.1. Populism as a Problem of Social Integration

As briefly demonstrated in the previous section, there are striking similarities between Israeli and European populisms. However, there are also some crucial differences which must be taken into consideration. The points of likeness highlighted so far had to do with *the structure and rhetoric of populist politics*; namely, the general outline of the populist imagination and the typical arguments this sort of thinking produces, e.g. the demarcation of a ‘real people’ from their morally corrupt antagonists. But this typical structure did not emerge out of thin air: it has a history and circumstances, and these must be understood if we wish to gain a comprehensive understanding of populism’s appeal.

For the last two years, pundits and academics have been obsessing over the following question: Is populism the result of an economic or rather cultural discontent? This debate, I believe, is myopic and barren: why choose between two options that are not only fully compatible but even complementary? Hence, the rest of my analysis will be based on Gidron and Hall’s (2017) definition of populism as a problem of ‘social integration’. According to their view, ‘social integration’ refers to ‘the ways in which people relate to one another in society... the extent to which people have congenial connections to others and feel that they are recognised as full members of that society’. To be sure, a low degree of social integration can be the result of many factors, from income inequality and job insecurity to multiculturalism and immigration. Seen within this conceptual framework, Israel – a newly established immigrant society, ripe with deep national, ethnic, cultural and economic cleavages – seems highly susceptible to problems of social integration.

Israel, in fact, has a lot in common with Europe and the US when it comes to economic grievances. Having undergone a major neoliberal turn during the past three decades, it currently suffers from many of the problems that other liberal democracies are faced with: high income inequality and poverty rates, high cost of living, a prolonged housing crisis, low social mobility, and growing education and health gaps (Rosenhek and Shalev, 2013). All of these issues were foregrounded, after years of political neglect, by the massive social protest movement that swept the country in the summer 2011; an eruption whose ripples are felt to this day.

The Israeli right's populist rhetoric rarely focuses on economic grievances. After all, the government's position is that things have never been better. Public dissent regarding the economy is always dismissed as either the clandestine influence of foreign agitators, or as an issue that the government is already taking care of.<sup>1</sup> This is, then, the major point on which the Israeli and European cases differ: while economic and social issues are the bread and butter of European politics, Israeli politics is still unquestionably dominated by security concerns – the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the Iranian nuclear project, terror threats, etc.

<sup>1</sup> The only case in which the right mobilises supporters on economic grounds is the government's ongoing campaign against the asylum seeker community in South Tel-Aviv. Netanyahu and his ministers blame the distress experienced by the area's local population on African refugees and immigrants.

Security is the issue that has the greatest effect over the voting preferences of Israeli citizens. In fact, the colloquial distinction in Israel between left and right is entirely based on one's position regarding *national security issues* – primarily the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – not on one's approach to social questions as in Europe. This notable difference has considerable effect over the story told by populists, and distinguishes the Israeli variant from other manifestations of populism around the world.

The ghosts that populate the Israeli populist imagination are those of exploding buses, flying missiles and BDS demonstrators. The European populist imagination, on the other hand, is based on a different gallery of catastrophes and villains: financial meltdowns, corrupt bankers, inflows of immigrants, closed down factories, and turrets of mosques. To be sure, both are not fictional in the strict sense of the word: they derive from the reality of everyday life. It is the way in which these real-world images are used, inflated and manipulated that renders them populist.

This disparity of content is evident in everything populists do. Gidron and Hall (2017) name a few factors that affect people's sense of social integration. For example, they mention 'the degree to which people see themselves as part of a shared normative order'. European populists usually highlight normative tensions by stressing the disregard of elites – intellectuals, artists, city dwellers – to traditional values. Their Israeli counterparts follow the same pattern, but fill it with their own specific content by arguing, for instance, that the elites hold a very different moral outlook than 'ordinary Israelis'; namely, that it cares more about the lives of Palestinians than about Israelis.

Another factor mentioned by Gidron and Hall (2017) is ‘the extent to which people feel they are recognised by others’. European populists frequently talk about the complete disregard of the economic elite towards the suffering of ‘ordinary people’. Israeli populists, on their part, underscore the detachment of the elites by claiming that they simply do not care when ‘ordinary Israelis’, especially outside of Tel-Aviv, are killed in terror attacks.

#### **4. The Perils of Mono-ideology**

Another important likeness between the two variants of populism has to do with the political conditions that enabled their rise – namely, a dramatic ideological convergence between left and right. Ideological convergence occurs when the distance between positions taken by major political actors diminishes. A strong ideological convergence may lead to the creation of a *mono-ideological political system*. That is, an electoral system in which all major actors propose very similar (a) interpretations of reality, (b) policy proposals that derive from these interpretations, and (c) values and moral convictions used to justify these proposals.

In the European and American cases, this ideological convergence took place in the 1980s-1990s, following the neoliberal revolutions led by Regan and Thatcher and the demise of communism. During this period, social-democratic parties across the west adopted the basic principles of the neoliberal credo. This dramatic shift rightwards has become known as ‘Third Way’ politics, which is primarily associated with politicians like Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Gerhard Schröder (Burnham, 2001). It had two important implications. First, issues traditionally associated with the left – workers’ rights and redistribution, for example – were abandoned. Second, large groups within society – above all, the working-class – suddenly lost their longstanding representation in the political system (Evans and Tilley, 2017).

Consequently, all politicians started offering the same solutions to the same problems: not merely ignoring ideological alternatives in policymaking, but also overlooking the interests, aspirations and pains of many citizens. What used to be an ongoing, head-strong clash between Left and Right – even at the heart of the political mainstream – transformed within a few years into a complacent ideological consensus (Hay, 2007).

Along came the populists. With mainstream politicians focusing on middle class voters, and refraining from addressing burning social issues, the way was cleared for right-wing demagogues to take over this vast political no-man’s-land. It did not take long before

they could claim complete ownership over those neglected issues which still mattered to large segments of the electorate (Mouffe, 2015).

#### **4.1 The Double Convergence of the Israeli Left**

Israeli politics has turned mono-ideological through two consecutive processes of convergence: the first was economic, part of a global trend, and it happened in the 1990s; the second, over security issues, was uniquely Israeli and took place at the beginning of the 21st century. It is the latter that will now be examined.

The fall of communism is widely regarded as the instigating event which brought about the crisis of social democracy. The equivalent watershed moment in the convergence process of Israeli politics would be the 2000 Camp David Summit – an effort to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict led by President Clinton. The utter failure of the summit, and Labour PM Ehud Barak’s decision to publicly place the blame for its collapse on the Palestinians, gave rise to the influential ‘no partner’ thesis.

According to this argument, advanced by Barak and his communications team, reaching an agreement with the Palestinians is not really an issue of compromise and goodwill: no matter what concessions Israel will be ready to make, the other side will never be satisfied. Moreover, the Palestinian leadership is deceitful, unready for a historical compromise, and must not be trusted. Within three months of Camp David’s failure, the Second Intifada broke out. This five-year-long bloodshed was framed politically in a way which only buttressed Barak’s thesis of despair. Thus, the optimism of the Oslo Accords era ended with an explosive bang – and so did the *raison d’être* of the Israeli left.

In 2005, PM Ariel Sharon, a lifelong supporter of the settlements, decided to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. The leadership of the settler movement was shocked and enraged. As a result, it decided to launch a long-term effort to transform Israeli society. One of the project’s main objectives was to completely discredit the left on national security issues. This was executed, for instance, by falsely attributing to the left all negative implications of the disengagement from Gaza – omitting the fact that the whole operation was engineered and carried out by a right-wing government.

Over the next decade, this coordinated effort yielded astonishing results. First, the long-established public association of the Labour Party with military issues was broken. Second, far-fetched arguments about the contribution of the settlements to Israel’s

national security have turned into an indisputable orthodoxy. Third, any sort of doubt in the effectiveness of using military might has come to be regarded as outrageous and unpatriotic. More generally, being a leftie and being a patriot became mutually exclusive. Within a few years, so did being a leftie and a Zionist.

The real tragedy, however, lies in the left's cooperation with its own public execution. It is vital, of course, to make changes to policy proposals and even to ideology when reality changes. But this is not what the left has done. Insecure and humiliated, it systematically avoided any confrontation with the right, while internalising every smear thrown at it by its rivals.

We can discern three types of reactions to these developments among the centre and the left. The radical left – including many public figures, intellectuals, activists and NGOs – responded by wilfully reaffirming the right's slanders; that is, giving up any attempt to communicate with the wide Israeli public. The one state solution, mostly popular among academics, has never taken root in Israeli public opinion and is too marginal to be considered a real challenge to the status quo (Sharon, 2015). Meanwhile, centre-left parties – e.g. the Labour Party – started parroting the right's terminology, ideas and policy proposals. Political actors to the left of Labour, on their part, found a solution of their own: avoiding security issues altogether and addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the legalistic-moralistic prism of human rights violation.

The combination of these typical reactions – estrangement from the Israeli public, imitation of the right, and adoption of a human rights centred approach – meant that for the first time in Israeli history no one contested the right's ideology within the political mainstream. In essence, the left gave up on putting forward an alternative to its rivals' stance on the most crucial issue to the electorate and for Israel's future. Unsurprisingly, it did not take long before it lost any political relevance.

#### **4.2 The Politics of Powerlessness**

The new security paradigm, which replaced the decades-long debate between left and right, consisted of the following assertions: (1) Peace is unattainable; (2) Israel's security depends on the settlements, which serve as a buffer between the Arab world and Israel proper; (3) settlement evacuation has become practically impossible due to the large number of Jewish citizens in the West Bank; (4) violence must be reciprocated with greater violence; (5) the only course of action available to Israel is long-term 'conflict management' (Sharon, 2014).

The similarities between this approach and the worldview which characterised the European and American left after the neoliberal convergence are striking. First, both *downplay our capability of being active agents in the world* and of shaping the future. Second, both *sanctify the status-quo* by lamenting its existence on the one hand – and arguing that nothing can be done about it on the other. Third, both choose to *compete with political rivals over issues of ‘management’ (as opposed to leadership)*: who would be better at minimising the injuries that reality inflicts upon us.

True, left and centre parties kept on declaring their commitment to the two-state solution. Nevertheless, they offered no critique of the right’s policies and ended up supporting its decisions in every crisis. Thus, their adherence to the peace process seemed feeble and unconvincing – a mere lip service paid to their past. This attempt at maintaining some sort of cosmetic distinction between left and right brings to mind similar strategies employed by ‘Third Way’ parties in the 1990s. With one significant difference, of course: as opposed to the success of Clinton, Blair and their likes, the Israeli left was sent by voters to a long electoral exile.

#### **4.3 From Convergence to Right-wing Populism**

This ideological convergence, which persists to this day, proved to be disastrous as it provided the conditions for the ascent of the populist right.

The demise of political competition over security issues created the ‘doomsday politics’ we are now so familiar with. How exactly did this happen? Under the mono-ideological condition, public debate is constructed in such a way that *there is only one imaginable way to keep citizen safe: the right-wing way*, i.e. building more settlements, using more military force and weakening the Palestinian Authority. Any other proposal put forward can no longer be perceived as an effort to defend Israelis. Rather, it is immediately interpreted as a disregard for their safety and wellbeing.

It became impossible to make a case for a left-wing approach to national security. Hence, support of the two-state solution can now be considered only as a moral argument: no other interpretive frame is available for it. Under these conditions, the populist argument comes rather naturally. If the left insists on advancing a plan that would put the public in immediate danger, that necessarily means it cares more about the Palestinians than its own people: a cosmopolitan elite disconnected from the concerns of real Israelis. If the left advocates such a dangerous solution, it is less probable that it

genuinely believes in it – it makes much more sense that someone, possibly foreign, is paying for that.

There is no longer a political spectrum – a continuum containing multiple shades, each representing a worldview. We are, instead, left with a mere circle: you can either be in it – and adopt the realistic, hard-nosed, no-nonsense view of the right – or stay outside. You can either be a genuine part of the people – or a harmful infiltrator. The choice is binary.

Furthermore, in the absence of any strong competition from the left over the defining issue of Israeli politics, its centre keeps sliding rightwards. By now, the pattern is clear: after the public gets used to the right's latest provocation, its fringes can start dismantling the next taboo in line. The consensus over what permitted and reasonable to say in politics changes quickly, with no one bothering to counteract its dangerous drift towards fanaticism and racism.

## **Conclusion**

As demonstrated in this paper, the Israeli and European variants of populism share similar structural characteristics. First, in the way politics is conducted, i.e. argumentation, rhetoric, policy and political imagination. Second, in the way both populisms emerged, i.e. the conditions that paved their way to success. The resemblance, however, is limited: even if Israeli populists sound a lot like their European counterparts, it does not follow that they speak about the same things. As we have seen, while European populism feeds on economic and cultural grievances, its Israeli counterpart derives most of the anxieties which fuel its success from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, whereas the rise of populism in Europe was closely related to ideological convergence over economic issues, the rise of Israeli populism had to do with a convergence over national security questions.

Although the current political situation in Israel seems rather grim, the preliminary analysis presented here offers some hope. First, it points at concrete reasons for the success of the Israeli right, avoiding the usual despair which attributes the Israeli left's dismal state to some metaphysical damnation. Second, it underlines the fact that the left had a hand in its own loss of authority over security issues; and that the right reinforced this process using coordinated action. Since this was a contingent process – subject to political influence and agency – it could also, potentially, be reversed.

This suggestion seems even more plausible considering the following facts. (1) A majority of Israelis have been showing consistent support for the two-state solution throughout the past two decades, in spite of the left's electoral failures. (2) The issue that troubles most Israelis regarding an agreement with the Palestinians is indeed national security – not religious attachment to Judea and Samaria. (3) There is an overwhelming consensus within the Israeli Security Forces – IDF, Shin Bet and Mossad – in support of the two-state solution on security grounds. (4) Although Netanyahu and Benet enjoy speaking in the name of 'the people', their share of the vote amounts to little more than 30%. This is not a majority of Israelis and it is certainly not 'the people'.

As the cases of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn indicate, when political competition is reintroduced into mono-ideological systems, the public reacts with enormous enthusiasm. To be sure, the Israeli case is profoundly different from the British and American ones. However, as this paper attempted to show, it is also similar enough in terms of political structure and conditions to provide us with some cautious optimism. 15

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