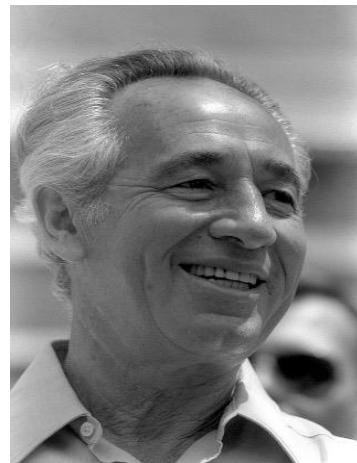


# Israeli Socialism is dead, long live Nationalism?

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*The passing of Shimon Peres marks the end of an era in Israeli politics. More than just a statesman, he embodied the symbol of a winning and dominating left, that now belongs to the past. Hope and ambition repeatedly give in to defeat and misery as successive ballots produce the same losing pattern. Where has the Israeli socialist pioneer gone, who hoped for a fairer society? Do these successive defeats of the Israeli Left indicate that an urban, liberal and nationalist-oriented society has now prevailed over the socialist and internationalist worker?*

*The reality is much more complex. A 2014 study from the Israeli Democracy Index shows that a relative majority of Israelis are still supportive of a social-democratic model.<sup>1</sup> The Labour Party must now search within itself to identify the main reasons for its successive defeats.*

*[Picture: Shimon Peres, founding father of Israel and leader of the Israeli Left for several decades]*

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<sup>1</sup> HERMANN Tamar, *The Israeli Democracy index 2014*, The Israel Democracy Institute, 2014, p.17

# From the birth of Zionism to the emergence of a democratic and socialist Jewish State

It all began at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Zionism was originally a project, backed by secular Jewish intellectuals from Eastern Europe and a minority of religious thinkers. It arose as anti-Semitism and pogroms in Russia were gathering pace, and spread rapidly among a nation that had been in exile for nearly 2000 years. For all these years, Jewish people had navigated, walked and wandered from country to country, from Africa to Europe, through the Middle East, departing from their tradition as they departed from their homeland. Priority was then given to assimilation.

Two 19<sup>th</sup> Century religious thinkers, Judah Alkalai and Tzvi Hirsh Kalisher, gave new impetus to the Zionist project by urging all the Jews in the world to go settle in Israel and build a peaceful society based on land work.<sup>2</sup> The expansion of religious Zionism was soon hampered by a strong Ultra-Orthodox opposition, which opposed returning in Israel before the coming of the Messiah. The experience of secularist statesmen (such as Theodor Herzl or David Ben Gourion) meeting with growing anti-Semitism then turned this utopia into a historic reality. Finding that Jews in their respective countries could not assimilate, Theodor Herzl advocated the creation of a secular and pluralistic Jew State, where priority would be given to national unity. His project has remained, long after he passed away. Two trends of secular Zionism have been fighting over his legacy: on the one hand, socialist Zionism has been supporting a fair society based on the value of labour. On the other hand, revisionist Zionism, backed by Zeev Vladimir Jabotinsky, has been advocating a “Great Israel” on both shores of the Jordan river, based on private initiative.

The first *alyas*<sup>3</sup> originated in Eastern Europe and Russia where they were strongly influenced by socialist ideas and democratic values. They chose a parliamentary system for Israel.

The Prime Minister is the main actor of the Knesset, *i.e.* the Israeli Parliament, and is elected by its 120 members. Facing this omnipresent Government leader, the function of President of the Republic is merely symbolic. Until the end of the 1970s, the Labour movement enjoyed unchallenged supremacy over the country's governance. In order to challenge this Labour hegemony, the liberal and revisionist movements united to form the *Gahal*, and subsequently the *Likoud* in 1973. This new alliance marked the beginning of a severance between Zionism and socialism. Socialist intellectuals became less and less Zionist, while Zionists became less and less socialist. Then began the Labour's “descent into hell”. This whole process cannot be understood without further delving into the origins of the Israeli social-democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> GREILSAMMER Ilan, *Religion et État d'Israël*, Paris, éditions du Cerf, 2013, p.15

<sup>3</sup> *Alya* is a Hebrew noun used to designate the immigration to Israel

# The endangered Israeli left? Looking for the Israeli Labour Party

As revolutionary socialism was claiming victory at the Congress of Tours in 1920, the reformist movement represented by David Ben Gourion progressively started to prevail over the Israeli socialist movement.

The myth of a revolutionary worker now had to give way to social-democracy and national unity. A new dichotomy between “workers and owners”, the new actors of this Zionist socialism, took over the “bourgeois vs. proletarians”. The history told by Marx was rejected, as the class struggle had been overcome and liberalism accepted.

Ben Gourion's synthetic socialism reigned supreme in the country until the victory of *Likoud*'s chief Menahem Begin, on May 17<sup>th</sup> 1977. The dominance of the Labour Party and of its forebear, the *Mapai*, went then beyond the mere political sphere. The control it had on *Histadrout*, the biggest trade union the country has ever known, helped it play a leading role in the economic and social life of the country. Once ousted from power in 1977, the Labour Party could no longer rely on the financial resources which had helped it draw the support of a large part of Arab-Israeli voters over the previous three decades.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the loss of voters disappointed with the successive failures of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the Sephardic Community also distanced itself from the Party. Jews mainly coming from North Africa, they had kept in mind the myth of the Ashkenazi socialist leader who would cut sidelocks (*payots*) from young Yemenis Jews as they arrived in Israel. For being so arrogant and closed in on itself, the Labour elite had failed to learn the new ways of Israel and the world. Conversely, the *Likoud* took advantage of its image as a more religious and anti-establishment party to gain new supporters.<sup>5</sup>

It would, however, be simplistic to end our analysis here. The 1977 electoral upset and the successive defeats of both the Labour Party and the Israeli Left also find their origin in the ideological emptiness of the project they then conveyed. Following the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of the USSR, the communist and socialist ideology was falling apart. Thatcher and Friedman prevailed, while Keynes and interventionism fell into disrepute. F. Fukuyama saw it as « the end of history ». From the 1980s onwards, the withdrawal of the State and a higher prevalence of private initiative became the rule in Israel.

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<sup>4</sup> STERNHELL Zeev, *Aux origines d'Israël : entre nationalisme et socialisme*, Paris, Fayard, 1996, 580 p.

<sup>5</sup> DIECKHOFF Alain, « La Seconde République israélienne », Politique étrangère, 1988, pp. 405-411

## The return of revisionist Zionism: a partial victory

Having been sidelined for thirty years, the right wing came back to the fore of Israeli politics on that particular day of May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1977. The *Likoud*, a merger of liberal and revisionist Zionism, was the voice of a market-driven economy and of the “Great Israel” project.

Despite the exponential growth in inequalities across the country, they have held on to power. Electoral campaigns are now fought on security issues, rather than economic ones. Labour's awareness of the situation is long in coming. War for Independence, Israeli-Arab conflicts, confrontations with Lebanon, never-ending conflict with the Palestinian; in the region, military conflicts seem to repeat themselves and look alike. This “constant war” context is a favourable ground for nationalist-oriented parties. As manifest with Isaac Herzog, Labour and its uncharismatic representatives can only concede defeat in their opposition to the rhetorical talents and protective figure of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who does not hesitate to wave the threat of a potential Arab vote in order to lure Israeli voters to the polling booth.

Despite such positive aura and strong support, the current administration is not safe from a Labour comeback, now working in the Zionist Union alongside centre-left party *Hatnuah*. The ruling majority is also threatened by the rising far-right, be it secular (*Yisrael Beiteinu*) or religious (*Jewish Home*). The religiously oriented nationalist parties can rely on favourable demographic trends, as well as on a strong resurgence of religious forces within the country.<sup>6</sup>

## Saving “private Labour voter”

Gone are the days when the Labour Party enjoyed unmatched influence in Israeli politics. Labour remains the symbol of a glorious past that has yet to lay its 1977 failure to rest. In order to defeat the *Likoud*, the leaders of the Israeli Left must now come up with a new project for society, with a major focus on resolving the Palestinian issue.

The Labour Party must also become credible again as a party of government. It needs a charismatic leader, able to enhance a new dynamic that would reunite the Left, reaching as far as the *Meretz* – a political movement sitting left of Labour. Conversely, participating to a government of national unity would deal a fatal blow to its credibility.

The Israeli Left is not alone facing hard times. Progressive and social-democratic movements in Europe are also in a deadlock. To break it, Italian Secretary of State for European Affairs Sandro Gozi calls for a union of progressive European left wing parties. We could go even

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<sup>6</sup> GREILSAMMER Ilan, *Religion et État d'Israël*, 2013, éditions du Cerf, Paris, p.96

further and envision a real union of the international Left, which could notably take the form of weekly meetings.

Changing, evolving and innovating are important steps to achieve the Left's revival, especially in Israel.<sup>7</sup> Here stands the paradox of an innovative Israeli society, led by a political elite struggling to renew itself.

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<sup>7</sup> GOZI Sandro, *Pour une Gauche européenne Unie*, juin 2016, Fondation Jean-Jaurès, 7 p.