

# **Confronting the reality of the past – Israeli Jews speak out against apartheid**

BETHANY RIELLY talks to some of those involved in a new open letter, created amid the onslaught on Gaza in May, in a bid to raise Israeli consciousness of colonialism and to build international support for the BDS movement

OVER 1,000 progressive Jewish Israelis have signed an open letter declaring themselves “Israelis Against Apartheid” and calling for decolonisation of the region.

Backed by prominent figures including historian Ilan Pape and B'tselem executive board member Orly Noy, the powerful statement urges immediate international intervention to change Israel's apartheid regime.

“As individuals who belong to the side of the oppressor, and that have tried for years to shift public opinion in Israel in order to change the foundations of the current regime, we have long come to the conclusion that it is impossible to change the Jewish supremacist regime without external intervention,” it reads.

The call by new campaign group Jews4Decolonisation was launched amid Israel's latest aggression against the Palestinian people in May, which saw 257 Gazans massacred and over 100,000 people displaced.

Since then it has attracted 1,041 signatures, making it one of the largest ever anti-apartheid movements among Jewish-Israeli citizens.

The damning letter, also signed by Israeli Black Panthers co-founder Reuven Abergel and prominent journalist Asaf Ronel, calls out Jewish supremacy as the “cornerstone” of the Israeli state.

“Its consistent objective is to transfer and obliterate the Palestinian people, their history, and their national identity,” it says — an objective which manifests in “continued acts of ethnic cleansing” including relentless house demolitions and the nation-state law, legislation which defines Israel as “the nation state for the Jewish people” and them only.

Zionism — the belief that Israel is a state for the Jewish people and Jews have an inherent right to it — is an “unethical principle,” that “inevitably leads to a racist apartheid regime,” it adds.

## **‘We are a very small minority’**

While organisers say that support for the petition reflects a growing understanding in parts of the Israeli left that Zionism is

“immoral” and “a form of Jewish supremacy,” these views are not shared by the vast majority of citizens.

“We are a very small minority,” Dr Ruchama Marton, the founder of Physicians for Human Rights and one of the letter’s signatories, tells me.

“We did not succeed for years to change anything in the Jewish Israeli community so this is the main reason why we need to ask for the international community’s help.”

Of course some do shift their views. Born in Jerusalem, Marton began to turn a critical eye on the state after witnessing Israeli soldiers kill Egyptian prisoners of war during the 1956 Sinai war while serving in the Israeli military.

As a result of these experiences, the doctor has since become a fierce critic of the state and, of late, a prominent supporter of the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

But this is rare. Explaining why, Marton says Israeli citizens' reluctance to wake up to the reality of the apartheid regime, recently acknowledged in reports by B'tselem and Human Rights Watch, is partially down to the absence of any political opposition.

“Right and left, politically speaking, are singing, talking and acting the same,” she says.

“And so this is why there is no chance to change public opinion, because it is a very solid, similar opinion for most of the Jewish people in Israel.”

This is reflected by widespread public support for some of the most extreme right-wing policies of the state, with a 2020 poll showing half of Israeli Jews support annexation of the West Bank, while two-thirds do not even acknowledge that Israel's 50-year hold over the Palestinian territory is an occupation, according to a 2017 survey.

Israeli sociology professor Yehouda Shenhav, another signatory of the letter, adds that extreme right views have also become mainstream, with settler groups now present in the Knesset.

“I think that the settlers, which were a marginal group, today they are in the government, they are everywhere and controlling the agenda,” he tells me.

“And I think that the Israeli left is so weak — if it exists at all — to oppose those tendencies, so we live in a place where there is Jewish supremacy on the ground and very very few people, even those considered the left, argue with that.”

Last week over 70 per cent of Israeli politicians, ranging from parties on the far right to the purported left, signed a letter condemning Ben and Jerry’s decision not to sell in the settlements.

The letter describes the settlements, which are illegal under international law, as “towns and cities in Israel,” reflecting how

the majority of Israel's political class treat the occupied West Bank as annexed.

In this context, the demands of the Jews4Decolonisation letter are pretty radical.

Not only are they pitting themselves against the status quo, but the letter also calls for the international community to adopt the demands of the BDS movement and work towards the right of return for Palestinian refugees displaced in 1948 and 1967.

Finally it demands that world leaders and authorities “reach a just and democratic solution for all, based on the decolonization of the region and founding a state of all its citizens.”

**Yehouda Shenhav / Photo credit: Faud Naqara**

**‘We need to decolonise the Israeli consciousness’**

To work towards decolonisation, as the letter calls, Israelis must not only address the colonial relationship connected with physical territories but also “decolonise ourselves,” Shenhav tells me.

Colonial views are deeply ingrained in the nation’s consciousness, he says, from history to literature and languages and science — “it exists everywhere.”

One of the most glaring examples for the professor is the lack of Arabic in Israeli society.

While it’s common for Israelis to learn English, German, French or Spanish in schools, less than 0.5 per cent can read Arabic, he says.

At Tel Aviv University, where Shenhav works, students can submit a dissertation in English, but not in Arabic.

“Not even the leftists learn Arabic,” he explains. “People don’t make an effort because Jews want to feel like they live in



Europe — that Israel is a branch of Europe and doesn't exist in the Middle East. This is very, very sad.

“This is very indicative, this lack of inclination to make an effort to study the language of this place.”

The language is also being actively erased from the public space, he says, seen by the Nation State Act 2018, which downgrades Arabic from an official language to one of “special status.”

Arabic road signs within Israel are often incomplete or littered with mistakes and Palestinian citizens of Israel are even fearful of speaking their language in public.

Born in Israel to a family of Iraqi Jews, the sociology professor is among that very small minority who can read and write Arabic.

For Shenhav, knowing Arabic was key to waking up to the reality of the state, turning him from patriot to outspoken critic of Israeli apartheid and colonisation.

“Once upon a time, I was a patriot but ... when I started to read, you know, autobiographies and books written by Palestinians, gradually, gradually I started to understand that the story that we are being told in the education system, in the military, in the universities, is a false story about what happened in 1948.”

Hidden in the books were testimonies of massacres carried out by Zionist forces, he said, revealing how more than 700,000 Palestinians were forced to flee their homes in 1948 in what's known as the Nakba, or catastrophe, and did not leave by choice, as the Israeli version of the story goes.

“We need to face that past, we need to face the Nakba, we need to take responsibility for it in order to let these two peoples live in peace with each other.”

To decolonise minds, this historiography must be revised, he says, and the erasure of Arabic in the region reversed to remove those barriers to understanding.

## **'We don't think like the others'**

While Marton does see a slight increase in critical views among some of the Israeli youth, with more teenagers refusing military service, her hope for large-scale societal change any time soon is pretty much non-existent.

“The near future, it's impossible,” she says. “Too many are in the frame of this Jewish supremacy, the land God promised us, the land and whatever we are doing is right.

“And it's very difficult to beat it, it is so convenient and ... to feel that God is with you so people do not tend to change it.”

As such Marton and Shenhav both agree that international intervention is needed to “salvage us from ourselves.”

Against the tide of uncritical Israeli Jews, for Shenhav, the letter is also a symbolic move to signal to the outside that “hey, we are here — we don’t share the same views of the rest of the people.”