

Netanyahu and Erdogan agree: Their political foes are traitors and terrorists

Both Turkey and Israel face elections, and both leaders are playing from the same ethno-nationalist political playbook. But in Turkey, the leftist opposition is still alive and kicking - even from jail

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It was a rare occasion: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu - famously averse to being grilled by Israeli reporters – late last week made a surprise visit to the country's most popular TV news outlet for an impromptu interview. The channel's two political reporters seized the rare moment and interrogated him about yet more accusations of corruption and other campaign queries.

But they certainly didn't ask him to justify his calling the Arab parties in the Knesset supporters of terrorism. And they certainly didn't challenge his recent remark that, "Israel is not a state of all its citizens. According to the Nation-State Law that we passed, Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish People - and them alone."

>> For Turkey, All Kurds Are Terrorists >> For Netanyahu and His ilk, Hatred Is Essential

That comment sparked international condemnation, not least from Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's top aide, Ibrahim Kalin, tweeted: "I strongly condemn this blatant racism and discrimination. 1.6 million Arabs/Muslims live in Israel. Will Western governments react, or keep silent, under pressure, again?"

Both Israel and Turkey are deep in election season, with Turkey's municipal elections coming up on March 31, and Israel's national elections on April 9. A perfect time for mud-slinging, not least on Twitter, between the two countries, who maintain strong economic ties despite their regular, often hypocritical, spats and deep foreign policy chasms.

Triggered by Kalin, Netanyahu lashed out against Erdogan: "Turkey's dictator Erdogan attacks Israel's democracy while Turkish journalists and judges fill his prisons. What a joke!" Not to be outdone, at an election rally Erdogan described Netanyahu as a "tyrant who slaughters 7-year-old Palestinian kids."

This exchange was a salutary reminder to Palestinian citizens of Israel not be too quick to embrace support coming from Turkey. Despite Ankara's sympathetic tone towards them, the Turkish president is not a champion of minority rights. Erdogan and his ruling AKP party have serially smeared the largely Kurdish minority supporters of the leftist HDP party as terrorists, and more generally constantly engaged in delegitimizing Turkey's Kurdish ethnic minority.

Despite the histrionics between them, how close, in fact, is the rhetoric employed by Erdogan and by Netanyahu regarding the politics of citizenship and exclusion in their respective fiefdoms?

For these elections, Netanyahu seems to be taking his political maneuvering straight from Erdogan's playbook.

Like Erdogan, who since last June's crucial presidential and parliamentary elections built a coalition with the far-right MHP party to survive, with its Kurdish citizens, their dignity and rights paying the price, Netanyahu's move to bring the Kahanist Otzma Yehudit party into the Knesset - with Israel's Palestinian citizens paying the price - was also a desperate move born of political necessity.

Both leaders were forced, and not so unwillingly, to turn towards ultra-nationalist parties and rhetoric to maintain their control. But that move was facilitated by the sympathy that a sizeable proportion of both the Israeli and Turkish public buy into the same broad school of racist and nationalist narratives, and are either enthusiastic about - or not bothered by - the exclusion of each state's largest ethnic minorities, around 20% of the overall population.

Both Turkey and Israel are ethno-nationalist states that insist their minorities have to conform to the national needs of the majority, rather than in the path taken by most liberal democracies, where the majority recognizes the needs of - and protects - the minority.

While Kalin was quick to bash Israel's Jewish Nation State Law, it's worth remembering that within the Turkish constitution, "Turks" alone are enshrined as the citizens of the state; Kurds and other ethnic minorities are not recognized in law, and Erdogan has not made any efforts to alter this during the 15 years he has been in office.

Kurds are denied the right to education in their mother tongue. Palestinians in Israel study in Arabic from K-12, but are denied the right to study in their mother tongue at university level.

And the similarities don't stop there.

In Israel, the new anti-Bibi opposition hope, the Kachol Lavan party, has made it clear from the start that it will only form a government with "Zionist" parties, a code word for excluding Arabs, just as many in Turkey's main opposition party, the CHP, would never stomach governing alongside the mostly Kurdish HDP.

Back in 2016, some of the MPs from Turkey's secular CHP even joined forces with the AKP to lift the parliamentary immunity of HDP Kurdish MPs, with predictable results: those parliamentarians now sit in jail.

In the last Knesset, Israeli Labor party MKs joined forces with the Likud to try to lift the immunity of the outspoken Palestinian nationalist of the outgoing Knesset, Balad MP Haneen Zoabi, and have tried in the past to block her from running in elections. Many Israelis wish for Zoabi the same fate as another outspoken woman MP, Sebahat Tuncel, from the HDP, who sits in a Turkish jail.

Certainly, there are still opposition parties in both Turkey and Israel who would consider sitting in a government with the mostly Kurdish HDP or Arab parties respectively, but it is clearly a taboo for the mainstream parties – and for much of the public.

This ethno-nationalist consensus considers members of the Jewish and ethnic Turkish majorities who do join forces with the oppressed minorities as traitors.

In Israel, the leftist Hadash is a historic Jewish-Arab party, even though the majority by far of the voters are Palestinian. When right-wing parties tried to get the Palestinian nationalist Balad party banned earlier this month, they also targeted Hadash's outspoken Jewish activist, Ofer Cassif. Both bans were overturned by Israel's Supreme Court.

The Jewish constituency in Hadash (running on a joint ticket with Ahmad Tibi's Ta'al party) often is ignored by Israeli pundits, and even those among the Zionist left, who simply brush off Hadash as an "Arab" party. They're the same Jewish leftists who remained silent when Hadash's center in Tel Aviv

was recently raided by right-wing activists. Ironically, the Israeli police ended up arresting a Hadash activist, and not those attacking the political gathering.

They're the same Jewish leftists who were so repulsed by Netanyahu's newfound love for the successors of the Jewish supremacist rabbi Meir Kahane, but did not utter a word at the banning of Cassif. While most of the Zionist left just ignores the small minority of Jews standing in political solidarity with Arabs, the right wing in Israel actively denounces them as traitors.

There's an easy comparison in Turkey, where Erdogan recently mocked the HDP co-chair, Sezai Temelli, who is not Kurdish, after he said he thought the HDP would sweep the vote in Kurdistan (southeastern Turkey). Erdogan's response? "Look at the man, he is not even a Kurd," adding that if he really loves Kurdistan, "there is a Kurdistan in Northern Iraq. So he can go the hell there."

Sounds familiar? It is the exact mirror image of the common Israeli anti-leftist trope: If you love Palestinians so much, go live in Gaza under Hamas.

Few dissidents from the Israeli Jewish left are willing to join the Palestinian minority in a unified party. But in Turkey, the HDP has found far more success in bringing over ethnic Turkish voters.

In fact, the HDP is a coalition of leftist Turkish parties that joined together with a Kurdish majority. That alliance has fueled electoral success in three national elections since 2015, crossing the 10% threshold implemented decades ago to keep Kurdish nationalists out of parliament.

This unique precedence of unity within a political party between Turkish leftists and a Kurdish majority not surprisingly inspired Ayman Odeh, the head of Hadash, who in 2015 was often compared to the HDP's now imprisoned leader, Selahattin Demirtas, as an example of how to create a innovative political reality. The HDP also has caught the attention of the growing Jewish-Arab protest group Omdim BeYahad (Standing Together), which focuses, like the HDP, on civil rights struggles that build bridges between Jewish and Arab activists.

In fact, the Israeli Jewish left could learn a lot from the HDP. Fearing it won't cross the electoral threshold, the leftist Meretz party worked day and night to run together with Israel's Labor party – and failed. Why didn't Meretz look to

Hadash or the Arab lists for a joint list? That kind of coalition building would have shaken up the Israeli political system and created a serious leftist movement to challenge Israel's growing fascism.

For most Israelis, comparing what they consider to be a perfectly well-functioning democracy with the authoritarianism of Erdogan's Turkey is ludicrous.

How does Israel resemble a country where the Kurdish political leadership is behind bars, which jails its journalists and has suffocated any real opposition voices? It's all a far cry from what is happening in Turkey...Or is it?

We can't speak about Turkey's treatment of Kurds without speaking of Israel's treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, those under almost 52 years of occupation. Do we need reminding that Gaza's Palestinians are regularly shot on the border while protesting? How many Palestinian civilians have died as result of airstrikes?

Have Israelis forgotten that the Palestinian politician Khalida Jarrar was held for two years in Israeli administrative detention with no charges being brought against her? And, what about the hundreds of Palestinians held and judged by a military, not civil, justice system? How many more minors, like Ahd Tamimi was, are behind bars?

The truth be told, both Turkey and Israel, whose own propaganda marketed them for years as the only democracies in the wider Middle East, have maintained control of their ethnic minorities through a system of political and actual violence.

And, while Kurds can integrate into the Turkish political world if they forfeit parts of their identity, that's not an option for the Palestinians citizens of Israel. Does that make the Turkish system better than Israel's?

Consider the flip side: Is Israel, which maintains a façade of democratic equality but rules over 2.5 million people with no right to vote in its elections, better than a country that regularly jails its political dissidents?

Turkey and Israel can find plenty of mud to throw at one another, but the unseemly contest ends up exposing their own oppressive systems. In this war of words, no one comes out clean.

And everyone loses. The Kurds and Israel's Palestinian citizens struggle night and day for even basic rights with impoverished political capital. But perhaps the bigger losers in this gaming of democracy are Israel's Jews and the Turks, who fail to see that the only path to a true democracy requires solidarity with and support for the ethnic minorities among them.

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