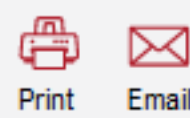
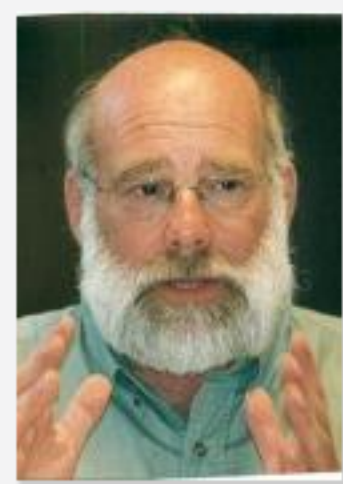


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“THE OCCUPATION IS ONLY GOING TO END WITH OUTSIDE PRESSURE” – AN INTERVIEW WITH JEFF HALPER



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The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions is well respected outside Israel, but barely known in Tel Aviv. Jeff Halper gives a critical perspective on the Israeli Left and the difficulties of strategically opposing the occupation from within.

Sitting outside a café on trendy Hillel Street in West Jerusalem – as off-duty Israeli soldiers, Orthodox Jewish families and beautiful young couples drift past – Jeff Halper is explaining the paradox of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), the NGO he co-founded in 1997 to fight Israel’s occupation over the Palestinians.

“We’re one of the best known Israeli organisations abroad,” says Halper, who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. “But we’re one of the least known Israeli organisations within Israel.”

Internationally, ICAHD’s stock has never been higher. In recent years it has spawned chapters in the UK, Finland, Norway and Australia. Two years ago it became a special consultant on the UN’s Economic and Social Council.

However, when ICAHD recently held its 10th annual summer building camp – where volunteers rebuild Palestinian homes that have been demolished by Israel – something was conspicuously missing: Israelis.

“We had internationals, we had Palestinians, but we had no Israelis, not even activists,” says Halper. “They just don’t come. It’s not on their agenda.”

ICAHD takes Israel’s policy of demolishing Palestinian homes as its main focus and “vehicle for resistance”. Some 27,000 Palestinian structures have been demolished in the occupied Palestinian territories since 1967, [according to ICAHD’s estimates](#). This year alone, 467 structures and 140 houses have been demolished, displacing 702 people.

Over the years, the organization has won the respect of many Palestinians – not easy for an Israeli group – by physically blocking Israeli bulldozers sent to demolish homes, and mobilizing hundreds of volunteers to rebuild them as acts of resistance.

ICAHD doesn’t limit itself to direct action, though. Its staff and activists produce analysis of the occupation, give tours of the Palestinian territories, and vigorously advocate on the international stage for Palestinian rights and a just peace.

But why are leftwing Israelis largely indifferent to ICAHD’s work? Halper has plenty to say on this. For starters, he notes, the Israeli left is not a coherent movement, but instead is made up of three “concentric circles” –each of which has its own confounding problems.

From Halper’s topography of the Israeli left, a picture emerges of the difficulties of strategically opposing the Israeli occupation from within.

The first circle is the “mainstream liberal Zionist left” – typified by Israeli Labour Party. This camp “fell asleep” after the failure of the Oslo process, says Halper. “They internalized (the then Israeli Prime Minister) Ehud Barak’s declaration that Israel had no partner for peace.” Since then they have been largely silent.

“[They] only woke up again last summer with the protests in Tel Aviv,” says Halper, referring to the domestic Israeli protests for social justice which continued this summer, making international headlines after one man [fatally set himself on fire](#).

Halper criticizes this movement for being solely concerned with “creating an equal situation within Israel”, without looking beyond its borders into the Palestinian territories. “They’ve completely erased the occupation as an issue,” he says. “It’s not finished, it’s not normalized; it’s just non-existent.”

The second circle is what Halper calls “the activist Zionist left”, typified by veteran Israeli NGOs such as Peace Now and Meretz, and more recently joined by groups such as Breaking the Silence, Rabbis for Human Rights and Gush Shalom.

“This group is still active against the occupation. The occupation for them *is* the issue. They are Zionist, so if there has to be a Jewish state, then there has to be a Palestinian state.” But this, for Halper, is where the problem with this camp lies.

“They all support the two state solution. The problem with that, of course, is that it’s gone.” This is a point that Halper has been making for many years now. In 2003, he [presented a paper](#) at the UN called ‘One State: Preparing for a Post-Road Map Struggle Against Apartheid’. “So they’re caught. They’re depressed. Because the only solution they can envisage is gone – or, in their terms, going.” Halper pauses, wryly adding: “It’s never gone – it’s always ‘going’.”

“These groups are not going to get too much into the politics, because they can’t go there. So these groups are drifting away, because they can’t deal with the reality.”

The third circle – where Halper places his own organization – has many names. “You could call it non-Zionist, anti-Zionist, post-Zionist...”, says Halper. “This group says, forget Zionism: we’re Israelis. We’re not defined by ideology.”

“Because these groups are not Zionist they can think outside the box. They can think in terms of, ‘Okay, so now what?’ They can talk about all kinds of possibilities – one state, bi-national state, a confederation, etc... but for the left groups that are still Zionist, there is no ‘now what?’”

But meanwhile these groups have their own problems, says Halper. “Because it is essentially a collection of activists – pure activists – they have no impact on policy. In my view, you can only be useful if you effect policy – if you have a strategy.”

“These activist groups have no political programme,” he continues. “One week they’re at [Sheikh Jarrah](#) [a Palestinian neighbourhood in East Jerusalem whose residents are struggling against eviction and demolitions], then they’re in the south Hebron hills giving food to the Bedouin communities, then the next minute, boom, they’re in Tel Aviv [protesting against the government](#). There’s no strategy.”

Halper believes this is one reason why few Israelis are showing up on ICAHD’s rebuilding camps. “Israeli activists are very reactive. Home demolitions, for example, are not on their agenda. If one happens, sure, they’ll be there. But it has to be immediate, it has to be happening right now. They are not interested on a strategic level. So we are very separate from the activist community, sadly.”

Relatedly, Halper notes: “There are just a lot of actions going on – against the wall, about olive trees, in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan, etc – and not enough activists to go around. It’s true the young activists work less with organizations today than in protest groups, but I would say there are just a lot more actions going on”.

For these reasons, Halper sees ICAHD as something of a lone-rider on the critical, post-Zionist Israeli left.

“There are no other strategic players in the third camp – the only other one you could say is the Alternative Information Centre. Otherwise we have no partners – not in terms of ideology, where we have plenty in common, but in terms of being strategic in our work.”

Halper cites two problems with the activist groups as currently operating in Israel. “One is a general one – not limited just to Israel – whereby the left doesn’t believe it can be a political actor. It believes it’s marginalized, powerless – it can protest, but it can’t change policy, that’s the belief. So this is a self-limiting element on the left.”

“That’s something I’ve never accepted. ICAHD, small and radical as we are, is I think still a political actor.”

The second problem is that some activists groups are exclusively wedded to a model of anarchistic practice based on popular resistance, but which doesn’t engage in the political process. “Today, activists in Israel are active, but they’re not engaged. If you simply see yourself as an activist, that’s just one part – you’re not going to change the world through popular resistance alone.”

Another problem that Halper sees with this group is that, currently, there is very little cooperation with Palestinian counterparts. This is mainly because Palestinian NGOs have pulled back on the grounds of [anti-normalization](#), leaving Israeli groups floundering.

Given his views on the Israeli left, you might think Halper sees no reason to carry on. However, the opposite is true. “The occupation is only going to end with outside pressure,” he says, “so why waste time trying to get through to Israeli society?”

Halper has his sights set on the global left. With ICAHD, he’s developing an international network of peace groups, with the ambitious aim of creating a global forum for leftwing activist actors. So far, the group’s founders include a museum in South Africa, the Palestinian peace centre [Beit Arabiya](#), and an activist squat in Poland. [\[This international collaboration could be one way to bring about what Halper calls ‘Global Palestine’, which is also the title of the book he is writing\]](#)

Despite this, Halper remains keenly aware of the precarious position the Israeli left is in without Palestinian direction. “As Israeli groups, we are the junior partners. Without the leadership of Palestinian groups, we’re stuck.”

Gazing down Hillel Street, past the soldiers, families and young couples, the scenes of ordinary Israeli life, Halper concludes: “Besides being activists, the critical Israeli left doesn’t know where to go. We can’t liberate the Palestinians by ourselves.”

Author: Chris Cox

Interview was published at <http://www.opendemocracy.net>

Tag: [Jeff Halper](#) [ICAHD](#) [Occupation](#) [Resistance](#)

