

Yair Golan Is Not the First Retired Israeli General to Become a Peacenik, Nor Will He be the Last

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Yair Golan is not the first retired Israeli general to become a peacenik, nor will he be the last. This has become a pattern among Israel’s generals, a pattern set by generals, like Matti Peled and Motta Gur, regarded by Israelis as heroes during their military careers.

As a former deputy military chief and commander in the West Bank defending Israeli colonies, Golan is now a Knesset member for the dovish Meretz party, which favours Palestinian statehood, and speaks out against colonist attacks on Palestinians. He recently referred to violent colonists as “subhuman,” eliciting sharp criticism from colleagues in the right-leaning coalition and complaints from other quarters. Frankness is nothing new. As deputy military chief, he voiced concerns that Israel was becoming fascist and compared it to Nazi Germany. This is also not a new approach as such terms were adopted decades ago by Israeli scientist and dedicated human rights activist, Israel Shahak, a survivor of Nazi death camps in Poland.

In an interview with the Associated Press Golan stated, “You can’t have a free and democratic state so long as we are controlling people who don’t want to be controlled by us. What kind of democracy are we building here long term?”

He argued that separating from the Palestinians is the only way Israel can remain democratic and based on Jewish values. This is also old hat. Even former Likud Prime

Minister Ehud Olmert in 2007 urged Israel to negotiate a separation deal with the Palestinians in order to avoid becoming an “apartheid” state like South Africa.

While serving in the West Bank, Golan focused on combatting Palestinians resisting the occupation and continues to argue that most of the 650,000 colonists living illegally in the occupied territories are law-abiding. His favourable view of the colonists whose presence prevents the emergence of a viable Palestinian state contradicts his contention that Israelis and Palestinians should live separately.

Breaking the Silence, a group of former Israeli soldiers who oppose Israel’s occupation policies, responded to his stance by saying, “Yair Golan knows full well what settler violence looks like and what our violent control over the Palestinian people looks like. That is why his criticism is valuable, but it is not enough.” Indeed, fine words have never been enough to halt the late 19th century Zionist project of colonising the whole of Palestine and any other territory conquered by Israel.

The most high-profile general to break with Israel’s policy of ethnically cleansing or ruling Palestinians was Matti Peled who fought in Israel’s 1948-1949, 1956 and 1967 wars. Having played a role in the conquest of Palestine, Peled served as governor of conquered Gaza for six months after the tripartite Israeli, British and French aggression against Egypt. Unable to speak Arabic and having no knowledge of Palestinian history and customs, Peled found himself at a loss to deal with the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the strip until US President Dwight Eisenhower ended the occupation in 1957. He was the last US president who dared to tackle Israel and its US friends and allies.

Peled was among the hawkish generals who pressed Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol to wage a preemptive attack against Egypt in the spring of 1967. This led to the seizure of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza and the strategic colonisation of these areas to deny Palestinians their state.

He retired from the military in 1968 and continued to study Arabic which he had begun while in the army. He co-founded the Arabic Literature department at Tel Aviv University, was recognised as a scholar in this field, and gradually drifted left-wards.

In 1975, Peled helped establish the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace and in 1977 became a founder of the Left Camp. In 1982, Peled supported reserve army officers who refused to fight in Israel’s war on Lebanon which galvanised the Israeli peace camp and led to the creation of the Jewish, Palestinian Progressive List for Peace. Peled was elected a Knesset member in 1984 and helped form the Gush Shalom, peace bloc, which played a key role in the period following the 1982 Israeli war in Lebanon and led to the Norwegian-brokered negotiations with the Palestinians in 1992-93.

Paratrooper general Mordechai “Motta” Gur became another hard-line military man to oppose Israeli policies after retirement. He did not become a peacenik like Peled but, like him, took a stand against the 1982 campaign in Lebanon at a time the Israeli peace camp was strongly supported by military officers and frontline soldiers as well as centrist and leftist civilians. The peace option survived for more than a decade.

Gur joined the Zionist underground army in 1946, fought in the 1948-49 war of establishment and the 1956 war in Sinai. He commanded the 55th Paratroopers Brigade which seized East Jerusalem in 1967, served in Gaza and the northern front with Syria and

commanded the 1978 Israeli occupation of portions of southern Lebanon. He was appointed lieutenant general and in 1974 became army chief-of-staff. After leaving the military, he was elected to the Knesset as a Labour party member, served as minister of health and on the Knesset's foreign affairs committee. After Labour, under former General Yitzak Rabin, who was not a peacenik, won the 1992 election on a peace platform, Gur was appointed defence minister and worked closely with Rabin who was under popular pressure to pursue accords with both Palestinians and Syrians.

Spurred to end the conflict with the Palestinians by the First Intifada (1987-1993) Foreign Minister Shimon Peres' deputy Yossi Beilin supervised the Israeli team negotiating a secret peace deal with the Palestinians in Norway.

In September 1993, Rabin and Palestinian Liberation Organisation chairman Yasser Arafat agreed to the Oslo Accord which was meant to lead to the creation of a Palestinian state but failed due to Rabin's refusal to halt Israeli colonisation and negotiate on Palestinian refugees, Israeli colonies, Jerusalem and other key issues. He was murdered in November 1995 by an Israeli extremist who believed, wrongly, Rabin was in the process of handing over occupied territory to the Palestinians.

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