

'It's Like George Floyd. We Have Our Knee on the Palestinians' Necks'

B'Tselem director-general Hagai El-Ad tells Haaretz why organizations like his have become the last form of Israeli resistance to the occupation, and how he copes with being branded a traitor



B'Tselem Director General Hagai El-Ad.Credit: Emil Salman

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In contrast to the growing suppression of any thought within Israeli society about the occupation, B'Tselem head Hagai El-Ad has become one of the most prominent and determined opponents of the current situation.

Like other human rights activists – such as Breaking the Silence Executive Director Avner Gvanyahu – El-Ad has also become a moving target for the right. This process reflects the deteriorating reality, but also the weakening of the political platform waging the fight against the occupation, with the torch being passed to nonpolitical organizations or to prominent figures within them.

It's no longer B'Tselem or “the left”; it's El-Ad who's become the target of a hate campaign that can only be interpreted as a contract being put on his head.

'If our values include Jewish supremacy over Palestinians – yes, I'm a traitor'

Hagai, this series of interviews deals with the question of whether the left has lost its struggle against the occupation.

“The short answer, I think, is no. The long answer: we lose ground every day, but it's not over. Human rights groups get up every morning, lose, and go on. That's the ethos of this struggle. I do believe there's a difference between B'Tselem and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, for example. The latter must exist forever. We – I wasn't there, but this is how I interpret the organization's history – were established 30 years ago with an ethos of

impermanence. We assumed that the Jewish public in Israel was not hearing enough, from a reliable local source, about what we were doing to the Palestinians in the occupied territories. We believed that if we founded B'Tselem and it performed this task, the occupation would end – thus ending B'Tselem's work. This theory has failed. I believe B'Tselem's insistence on finding ways in which we can disrupt the current situation is very optimistic."



Smoke rising from Rafah as Israeli airstrikes hit the Gaza Strip during Operation Protective Edge, August 1, 2014.Credit: Ahmed Ebu Saud / Anadolu Agency

El-Ad, 50, is an astrophysicist by training who became B'Tselem's director general just before the 2014 war in Gaza(aka Operation Protective Edge). Facing a reality of hatred directed at Arabs and the delegitimization of the left, he established a strong position – some would say a more radical one – that encouraged international pressure on Israel and a halt to cooperation with Israeli agencies such as the Israel Defense Forces and the military police's investigative unit.

He appeared before the UN Security Council twice – a move other left-wing groups such as Peace Now had refrained from taking – using that forum to condemn the crimes of the occupation and to explicitly call on international bodies to take action against Israel.

Why has the Israeli public not been convinced of the righteousness of your way, to the extent that you turned to other countries to try to make Israel change?

"Israelis don't want change. We have the rights, the superior position, the power. Overall, life is comfortable here, we hardly pay any price."

What price would Israelis have to pay in order to end the occupation?

"I think future economic costs could definitely be effective."

Do you think this will happen?

"I hope so. I'm more optimistic that this cost will come. In all the muddled conversations about annexation, what wasn't muddled was that more voices overseas – such as prominent American politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – are saying it's no longer possible to politely ask Israel to desist from doing certain things. A few years ago, this could have ended a politician's career."



Hagai El-Ad leaning against the West Bank separation barrier in Shoafat, 2017.Credit: Emil Salman

A few carrots for good behavior

It seems that not only is El-Ad not concerned by the annexation saga, he regrets that the issue sank beneath Israel's second coronavirus wave.

“One of the great risks at present is that the issue of annexation is taken off the table for reasons that suit Israel. Everyone who made waves in recent weeks will breathe a sigh of relief, perhaps giving Israel a carrot or two as a prize for good behavior, and we'll return to an enhanced normalization of the current situation,” he says.

“We didn't wait until they said they would annex parts of the West Bank in order to demand international action. We've been saying this since 2016, still saying such measures are necessary, regardless of what Israel may do in the future.”

What are these measures? I deliberately focus on practical issues. You're the one who says that appealing to morals doesn't help you shopping at the grocery store.

“I won't answer that. I'm an expert on what's happening in the territories, not on bilateral relations between the United States and Israel, or between Europe and Israel.”

How do you expect to be effective if you only go halfway?

“Do you really imagine there's someone sitting in Brussels and all he's lacking is a list from B'Tselem with the things that need to be done? They know much better than I do what leverage they have. What's needed is political decisions taken in Berlin, Paris, Brussels and Washington.”

Do you support the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement?

“We have no position regarding the BDS movement, and nor will we have one.”

Why not? This is a movement promoting a nonviolent struggle against Israel, with rhetoric that's quite similar to yours. It would be natural for you to cooperate with it.

“We’re focusing our efforts on pressuring international players such as governments, which have the responsibility of safeguarding human rights – and certainly not collaborating with their violation. We obviously believe that all the legislative efforts against BDS here and overseas are unreasonable, but we won’t tell individuals what to do.”

I sense that you’re finding a diplomatic way of not touching that hot potato. You seem worried about supporting a movement that speaks like you but is reviled by the Israeli public.

“I think there’s a misconception about us. We’re not a party or a mass movement. B’Tselem is not a movement or a party aimed at ending the occupation; we’re a human rights organization. Look at our record. Saying it’s a cowardly group is not based on the reality.”

According to El-Ad, the questions or demands made of organizations such as his stem from the political vacuum that’s been created. “Who are the ones who really insist on sounding an unflattering voice against the occupation? It’s Breaking the Silence and B’Tselem,” he explains. “I think we’re asked these questions because Israeli politics is so anemic and in such disrepair, and there’s no political opposition here to the occupation.”

Was there ever such opposition?

“I think so. In the earlier phases of some parties. People from Meretz, for example.”



Palestinian men looking on as an Israeli airstrike hits a house in Gaza City, August 23, 2014. Credit: ROBERTO SCHMIDT / AFP

And today there isn’t?

“I’m not sure. I don’t know what state that party’s in.”

Human rights organizations, including B’Tselem, have ultimately failed to advance the struggle against the occupation. You also believe that not only is the situation not improving, it’s deteriorating.

“I’d be very happy if B’Tselem could end the occupation, but I don’t believe that, ultimately, this is realistic. The government of Israel is the one that will end the occupation. We must

maintain a moral stance and a fact-based position, continuing to make the noises we'll keep making forever.”

Some argue that your position inviting external pressure on Israel distances you from most of the public.

“If someone has a better idea on how to end the occupation, I'd be happy to embrace it. It's an urgent task, which has been waiting for years already, and this is the practical, moral and nonviolent way we've identified to achieve it.”

Another reason El-Ad isn't alarmed by the declarations of annexation is that he thinks it's already here, with some of the people warning against it already, in fact, having accepted its principles.

“The truth is we annexed the territories a long time ago, and the vast majority of Jews in Israel live in peace with that,” he says. “I think about us and the Palestinians, and see the picture of George Floyd in my mind. We have our knee on their necks while holding an argument with ourselves on how we wish to continue doing so.”

Is the two-state solution dead?

“I think this is mainly a distraction from what things are really like. Everyone is in favor of a two-state solution, but what do people mean by that? There have been negotiations for 20-odd years, right? But what's happened to the reality in the meantime? We've more than tripled the number of settlers, creating more and more facts on the ground. In the meantime, we've had a few more 'rounds' in Gaza, killing a few thousand Palestinians. We have our foot on their throat, arguing among ourselves about how to do so.”

He adds that the statements released by the Commanders for Israel's Security movement “don't say we must stop oppressing the Palestinian people, that this is intolerable, that this is immoral. Their ads tell the Jewish public that we don't need this headache. We control the entire area and do what we want there, going in and out of Ramallah at will; the Palestinian Authority is in charge of things for us, and we don't pay a price for all of this. So why do we need annexation?”

“It's also intolerable that this movement is presented as left-wing. I think that's a big lie. They accept the fact that Jews manage the affairs of Palestinians; they want this, but don't say so explicitly as they are ostensibly liberals.”



Palestinian labourers lining up to enter Israel through the Mitar checkpoint in the West Bank city of Hebron, June 28, 2020. Credit: AFP

What they do to traitors

From time to time, when El-Ad does or says something particularly pointed – such as appearing at the UN, or when the right brands him as “the enemy within” who can be exploited for political purposes – he has to contend with the less pleasant side of being a household name.

What comes your way at times like this?

“All kinds of unnecessary comments. ‘Come photograph me,’ referring to our cameras. Or calling me a traitor.”

And when they call you a traitor, what emotional impact does that have?

“The greatest problem I have with it is the legitimization of violence. We all know what you’re supposed to do with traitors. It’s not just vilification; you hang them from a lamppost.”

Besides death threats, what do you feel when people say you’re loyal to someone else, not to your people. Or when you’re accused of deception, of disengagement?

“If the values we’re talking about include Jewish supremacy over Palestinians – yes, I’m a traitor to that sentiment. And if what I betray is the continued acceptance of oppression as something normal and reasonable, then yes, I betray that. There’s a set of values here that I’m proud of betraying.”

The self-control attributed to you, the fact that you’re not stressed by dramatic steps or lose your cool when attacked on all fronts – that requires a certain detachment.

“My activities are really not about keeping cool. They stem from a very emotional connection to what’s happening here, to what we’re doing and to the significance of these things. You know, my voice broke when we talked earlier about Operation Protective Edge – not for the

first time, probably not the last either. I believe one of the tragedies that befell human rights is that the issue became very alienating. It's perceived as something for experts, for lawyers."

You probably know the cliché that leftists love humanity but hate people. I think this is the popular sentiment regarding your organization.

"OK. I'm talking about areas in which things are more under our control: how we formulate things, how we think. I think the exaggerated use of legalistic terms when talking about human rights has contributed to this alienation.

"Injustice is something people know how to recognize instinctively. We know what happens when someone is shot by a sniper on the Gaza border from a distance of 300 meters, and then this person is not allowed out of Gaza for medical treatment, causing him to lose his leg and remain disabled for life."

Does the distress of Israelis also evoke such emotions for you? Or is Palestinian suffering so great that it's incomparable?

"You can be emotional about things without comparing them. I was very emotional during the [social justice] protests in 2011. You took part in a demonstration and there was much optimism there, a lot of energy. Or the Pride Parade in Jerusalem that started when I was chairman of the Open House [an LGBT organization]. That was scary but exciting."

Was there a moment you felt afraid in your current position?

"Operation Protective Edge scared me. We killed 500 Palestinian children in Gaza, and people in Israel live in peace with it. If you'd asked me a few years before if such a thing could happen here without the ground shaking, I would have said you were exaggerating, too pessimistic. It's horrific, because what does this say about what could happen in the future?"

Will the occupation ever end?

"I hope so. It's very hard to imagine it, but it's also hard to imagine this situation continuing for another 50 years, because I know how much horror this will entail.

"A decade ago, Joe Biden, who was U.S. vice president at the time, said in Tel Aviv that the status quo was unsustainable. Since then, it appears to have been quite sustainable – perhaps continuing for many more years. The level of sophistication reached by Israel in controlling Palestinians without paying a price is very high. A member of a South African delegation that visited when I was part of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel said that if the Afrikaners had treated Black people the way Israelis treated Palestinians, the apartheid regime would still be with us to this day."