

A lot of despair right now: Interview with an Israeli anarchist

Uri Gordon and Infolibre Thessaloniki

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Below, Freedom reproduces a transcript of a talk with Uri Gordon on the current situation in Palestine and Israel organised by Infolibre Thessaloniki.

Uri Gordon is an Israeli anarchist who organised, among others, with the Dissent! Network, Indymedia, People's Global Action and Anarchists Against the Wall. He is the author of Anarchy Alive!: Anti-Authoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory.

Freedom News mildly edited the following transcript.

Uri Gordon: Right now, the Gaza Strip is being starved, especially of fuel. I am still hopeful that there can be a ceasefire, de-escalation and a return of the hostages. Amongst the hostages are foreign nationals, including Americans, Germans, and other countries. Hopefully, those countries will do something to prevent any reckless ground assault that will result in the death of their own hostages, in addition to the suffering caused in Gaza already. The number of casualties in the Gaza Strip has far exceeded the number of Israelis killed on October 7th. There is a serious humanitarian crisis in the Strip, while sadly, in Israel, there is a mentality of revenge – many support this inhumane way of getting back at the whole population of Gaza.

Infolibre: *After the Hamas attack and the call for revenge from the Israeli state, there is a blackmail of “taking sides” (=Hamas or IDF). Has this blackmail prevailed everywhere? Both amongst Arabs-Palestinians and amongst Israelis? As far as Palestinians are concerned, what is the currency of this polarisation in the West Bank, in Israel and in Gaza? And what is the situation for the Israelis in Israel? How are they responding?*

Uri Gordon: This blackmail has now prevailed everywhere, both amongst Arab Palestinians and Israelis. Yet the war has polarised people. Israelis, despite the anger at their government and despite blaming it for what happened, those who only half-support or don't support Netanyahu are now giving free rein to their genocidal fantasies. On social media, there is talk of “erasing Gaza”, that “Palestinians are ISIS, they are Nazis”. There is a belligerent atmosphere amongst Israelis. [...] Israeli forces have arrested several hundred in the West Bank. The border with Lebanon is getting hotter; more fighters are being killed, which is all part of a broader scenario. There is a concern amongst Israelis that a ground assault will fall into a trap set by Hamas and supported by Hezbollah, that it would cost the lives of hundreds of soldiers and that it is very doubtful that it would lead to the rescue of the hostages. There have already been some directed attacks against the positions of Hamas leaders in addition to the much more widespread bombings of civilian areas in Gaza. But right now, talking about Palestinian citizens of Israel, I think there are fewer protests than before.

They are feeling the extreme anger of the Jewish population at Hamas and, by extension, at all Palestinians.

Infolibre: *In our country [Greece], the Jewish community was almost annihilated in the Second World War, and the remaining Jews have strong connections with the Israeli state. What about countries where there used to be progressive Israeli and Palestinian diaspora communities (e.g. the US) and they worked together? How are they dealing with the current situation?*

Uri Gordon: I don't know of any significant joint work being done by diasporic Jewish and Palestinian communities in the US. The communities are separated and scattered all over the US. There has been a demonstration of peace activists in Washington who demonstrated for a ceasefire, and I am sure there are actions on the micro level. Again, while there is on the ground a bi-national peace movement, it is small; you can find peace voices also amongst the families of the hostages, but all this is far from prominent.

Infolibre: *Are there joint antiwar initiatives by Palestinians and Israelis? We saw limited coverage and only a few images of antiwar demonstrators. What are their demands? How can we support them?*

Uri Gordon: There was a demo in Tel Aviv for the return of the hostages; it was relatively small. Then, a demo opposite the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv called for Netanyahu to quit. The father of a family who had been held hostage is now holding a permanent vigil in front of the building with some supporters and families. It has become a kind of protest camp.

Infolibre: *What about the internal situation in Israel, where Netanyahu was confronting a huge popular unrest? Is there any organised plan by people who stand against the war that can change the dynamics and possibly lead to the de-escalation of the current situation?*

Uri Gordon: In the centre-left and some other sections of society, there are all kinds of anger at the government. There is an awareness of the government's incompetence, of the fact that it is filled with criminals and has decimated all public services, wasting money on settlements and ultra-Orthodox institutions. So it is clear that when we come out of this, and there are elections, the Far Right will be done with. It's something like what we've seen in Poland recently. But before that happens, there will be a lot of suffering if this doesn't escalate into something even worse.

Infolibre: *How does the current situation affect the army objectors and court cases of Israeli anarchists on trial for solidarity actions for Palestinians (e.g. Jonathan Pollock)?*

Uri Gordon: I don't think there has been any direct effect on army objectors in Israel and court cases of people like Jonathan Pollock. Again, the objectors are just a few individuals at the moment. These are not prominent issues in the public sphere or in Israeli media. The levels of army refusal are

much lower today than they were maybe twenty or fifteen years ago.

Infolibre: *There is a ton of fake news being produced about the war. We have the feeling that 972 mag is a good source of information. Do you agree? Any other sources?-Which is the primary information that people from Israel have access to? Can they find out about the casualties in the Gaza Strip?*

Uri Gordon: 972 mag is a pretty good source of information. You get reports from Oren Ziv, Ruwaida Kamal and other Jewish and Palestinian writers. They have people in Gaza, and you can see what's going on in the West Bank on their website (61 Palestinians killed there in the past week). I also look at Reuters, IP, and Al Jazeera for everyday developments.

Infolibre: *Are you afraid that the current developments are part of a broader framework of interstate conflicts and regional geopolitical antagonism? Which countries have shown interest in the escalation of the conflict to profit from the war? Are there any countries against the mass killings?*

Uri Gordon: It falls into what we know as the current aches of power in the world. All this is related to the tensions between the US and Iran, and Iran's links to Russia. Internationally speaking, the Hamas attack can also be seen to function as sabotage of the US-Israel-Saudi triangle that Biden has been trying to develop in the last months – it looks like the Hamas succeeded in doing that- and yes, Iran probably feels emboldened now. It is crucial that this doesn't escalate into a wider conflict involving Lebanon, the US, Iran, Russia, and, of course, if there is further massive loss of life in Gaza, if there is some settler outrage in the West, all of this will contribute to an escalation. Let's see if the superpowers, together with Egypt and Jordan, will intervene to broker an immediate ceasefire to prevent further death and destruction in Gaza, and stop the conflict from escalating into a war with Israel and Lebanon. But we are on the brink of an explosive situation that could escalate. Because of the scale of the conflict, almost everyone knows someone affected – killed, injured, having lost someone.

Q & A with the audience

Q: *Can we speak of any significant contacts in Gaza, Israel, and the West Bank between Jews and Palestinians that show a way forward?*

Uri Gordon: Nothing passes across Gaza. There are exceptions. I know personally that one of the women who Hamas took hostage was in direct contact with women in Gaza. Some individuals have cross-border connections created years ago, and there haven't been any opportunities for individual meetings. There are, of course, Israeli solidarity activists in the West Bank, like the Rabbis for Human Rights, people who used to be involved with the Anarchists Against the Wall and other solidarity initiatives, especially in the eastern part of the West Bank where there have been a lot of settler incursions into pastoral lands, and attacks on Palestinian shanties as well. But it is a tiny

movement. What used to be, until about 15 or 20 years ago, an impressive, consistent, daily direct-action movement in the West Bank is not really there anymore. Now, it's all rather about documentation, but the settlers and the (IDF) army have gotten away with their ethnic cleansing in the West Bank.

The only alternative is a binational Arab-Jewish movement. But there is a lot of despair right now, and there is a sense that almost nobody wants to listen to the other. Yet one thing worth mentioning is spontaneous mutual aid springing up where the government is not there. The State is not fulfilling its function anywhere. The response to the Hamas attack was an absolute Israeli fiasco in terms of intelligence; it took 8 hours for the army to respond, people were completely abandoned, the whole thing was a total mess, and people were scared. So the people themselves organised and set up kindergartens and helped each other. That was something very anarchistic. I am not saying the people are anarchists, but here are the seeds of mutual aid, which is something to be positive about. I think there is an absolute loss of legitimacy of the Netanyahu government – he is not taking any responsibility, and they continue with lies and fake news – the government will pay the price.

Q: What has happened to the unrest and the protests against Netanyahu over the last few months?

Uri Gordon: Demos are suspended for now, but the anger is still there. People called for military reserve duty continue to live through the way; they also continue to be very angry at the government and Netanyahu. It is not that they suddenly understand Palestinian human rights or that a ground assault would be a total disaster. It's hard to tap into "public opinion" right now; it depends on which corner of the media you are looking at, but it seems that there will be a massive backlash against the Far Right.

Q: Gaza was already an open prison. What about now?

Uri Gordon: The situation is dire. Israel has cut off fuel supplies needed to run hospitals and water desalination works. There are food shortages, thousands of people have been killed, and entire neighbourhoods have been flattened. The Far Right is spewing fantasies of flattening Gaza and sending them all to Egypt... let's hope it won't happen. Let's hope there is a ceasefire and no further escalation and exchange of hostages before the Israeli army proceeds to commit atrocious crimes in even more extreme ways.

There has been massive displacement. Hundreds of thousands of people have already moved to Gaza's South. As far as I know, there are still 100,000 in the city of Gaza, so there is potential for more loss of life and civilian casualties. At least, I hear some food supplies are being transported to the Strip through the Egyptian border.

Q: You said the Far Right will pay the price. What about the political currency of Hamas right now? What will be the political future of the Gaza

Strip in the case of a ceasefire?

Uri Gordon: We have to remember it has always been an explicit policy of the Israeli government to maintain Hamas in Gaza, to continue passing money to Hamas in Gaza, to maintain the split between Hamas and Fatah, and to prevent any Palestinian unity and the establishment of any kind of Palestinian state. Netanyahu is on record having said in government meetings that whoever wants to prevent the formation of a Palestinian state has to maintain Hamas and strengthen Hamas. I think the idea that Hamas can just be wiped out for some other regime to be installed in Gaza is impossible without some comprehensive, internationally brokered peace settlement, or at least a longer-term settlement. But I don't know of any superpower with the ability or the interest to impose it right now.

I have no sympathy for Hamas, a theocratic organisation that has no qualms about attacking civilians. It is by no means worthy of any kind of support. Their inability to differentiate between civilians and armed gangs that rule over them, whether recognised by the state or not, is a fundamental problem that international public opinion is concerned about.

Whether there can be some long-term political solution goes against the grain of the direction of the Israeli government. I don't know what to tell you. In all likelihood, you will still have Hamas in Gaza in some form, whether there is a ceasefire or an escalation. Unless this all ends in Armageddon.

Q: Is there any force in Israel that can ensure that the prospect of cleansing diminishes?

It's hard to say anything concrete as I am not on the ground. I don't think there will be an order for the army to just enter and flatten the place. They might send soldiers in, but in a limited way – which will still be a disaster. Two ex-chiefs of staff of the centrist party have entered the government. So, there is a restraining force there, but it is tough to predict anything in operational terms.

Q: Protests as we speak?

Uri Gordon: At this moment, there aren't a lot of protests. There are rocket sirens, a lot of horror and apprehension of what might be coming, and a desire for all this to end.

Mainstream common sense is much more right-wing than before, but there is also a lot of anger in Jewish society. There is, as I said, mutual aid and a common bond. The current government is right-wing on many levels. They have privatised and imposed wild neoliberal measures everywhere, which is also a reason for the backlash they will face soon.

Q: Palestinians are not allowed to pass into Egypt. What does this mean?

Uri Gordon: Evacuation into Egypt is what Israelis would want. Jor-

dan accepting more refugees and emptying Gaza would be successful ethnic cleansing because it wouldn't be temporary. Egypt refuses to accept refugees because the Palestinians would never be allowed back.

Q: *Is there any political force that could overthrow the apartheid regime?*

Uri Gordon: No. A centre-left government would still be Zionist, even if it might move in some progressive direction, do a prisoner exchange, accept negotiations, PA elections and some two-state solution or a confederation - that would all have to be internationally brokered by the superpowers. I don't see how a government would not be a Zionist one. But there is now such a rift between the settler ultra-Orthodox and the centrist secular public that the centrist political forces have no appetite for being kept hostages of the settlers, to be constantly hijacked by the settlers' willingness to keep the settlements going and putting so much effort money and forces into them.

But it's hard to predict what will happen, not before the US elections, in any case. If Trump is back, it will be an even greater disaster. The war in Ukraine is still going on, right? It might all go nuclear before any of that is relevant. The result I'll be satisfied with is no nuclear war this year.

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