

Introduction

Hello everyone, hello Yael, welcome to *Eyes on Gaza*, our daily gathering that combines protest and learning. These are difficult and confusing days—days of holiday and mourning, of rest and destruction intermingled. Hanging over all of us is the possibility of a deal that might save lives and bring back some of the hostages, detainees, and displaced people to their homes, even as it reinforces the lack of a future that has become our new normal way of living. Amid all this, Gaza continues to bleed and burn. The West Bank buckles under the weight of violence and dispossession, and on social media a futile debate begins over the ownership of October 7th—who is allowed to mourn, for whom, and how.

In the midst of all this, we remain here, in a reduced format for the coming week, yet with our eyes open to continue the project of documentation, inquiry, resistance, and reflection that we have all taken upon ourselves. Today we are honored to host Yael Lerer, founder of Andalus Publishing, which has published Arabic literature translated into Hebrew. Yael was part of the founding core of the Balad party and also served as its spokesperson. She has lived in France for nearly ten years and is also a French citizen. In 2023 she ran for a seat in the French Parliament representing the eighth district, which includes French citizens living in Israel and Palestine, as well as other parts of the eastern Mediterranean. We invited Yael as someone deeply familiar with French and European politics to help us understand what, from here, appears to be a kind of duality in European and French political attitudes—on the one hand, condemnation of Israel’s actions and even recognition of a Palestinian state, alongside material support, primarily military, for Israel’s massacre in Gaza. To explain all this, Yael will speak for about eight minutes, and then we’ll open the discussion. As usual, you can post questions in the chat. Yael, thank you very much for joining us—the floor is yours.

Presentation

Thank you, truly, for the invitation. It’s an honor for me to be here with so many speakers and friends, and thank you to everyone who came. The question you’re asking, Ayelet, is one that drives me crazy. It drives me crazy because, for many years, based on my activism in Israel—not only within the frameworks you mentioned but also in many committees, protest movements, and thousands of demonstrations—I have believed that there is no chance for change from within Israel. I’ve thought that way for twenty years now, and I believe it even more strongly today. I didn’t move to France because of this, but it’s part of it—the realization that, no matter what we do, we cannot change Israeli society from within.

A year ago, I initiated—together with others who joined later—a call for international pressure on Israel, which has since been signed by over 4,000 Israeli citizens. The petition calls for every possible sanction against Israel to bring about an end to the war and a ceasefire, from the belief that this is in the interest of the public living between the river and the sea—Jews, Israelis, and Palestinians alike. It was surprising that so many Israelis signed such a call for sanctions, because usually anything related to BDS or boycotts came only from a few dozen very radical activists.

Suddenly, there was a large mass of Israeli citizens. This is also a position of power in the sense that it's harder to persecute us when we are so many. I was sure that once we published it, it would make a great echo, and the world would take action. None of that happened.

In preparation for today's meeting, I did some research. I'll speak about Europe in general but mainly about France, where I live. France is very important because, in my opinion, there are about five or six countries that could stop the genocide through direct pressure. These are, of course, the United States, Egypt and Jordan as well, Saudi Arabia, France, and perhaps also the United Kingdom. These countries have extremely strong ties with Israel, and they could impose truly severe sanctions—not as punishment, not talking about what should happen later, such as prosecuting war criminals or complying with international courts—but immediate, tangible pressure. For example: “Stop now—we're grounding all flights, we're imposing visa requirements on Israelis, and we'll maintain this until you stop.” Just like that. I really believe these countries bear a tremendous responsibility.

That responsibility is even greater. When Macron called for a ceasefire? On November 9th, 2023. On November 11th, he said there was no justification whatsoever for bombings Gaza. That was two years ago. A year ago, on October 5th, 2024, Macron called for an arms embargo on Israel. France itself, officially, does not export offensive weapons to Israel. But there are all sorts of small things—maybe we'll discuss them in the questions. There are activists tracking every bolt—which is great—every spare part some factory sends. And he said then—just a year ago—that it was impossible to call for a ceasefire and at the same time continue to ship weapons. He was referring to the Germans, Italians, and Americans, not just to France itself. And this drives me mad: they keep talking. If you check the websites, Twitter, and social media pages of many foreign ministries, especially the French Foreign Ministry or the consulate in Jerusalem, you will find condemnation after condemnation after condemnation, for every outpost, every demolition in Sheikh Jarrah. Yet, in practice, they do nothing.

I became French. I wasn't born French. France is a country of immigration—after living there a few years, one can become a citizen. But citizenship there carries a broad sense of responsibility. Now that I'm French, I have a double responsibility—my responsibility as an Israeli and my responsibility as a French citizen. And such duality drives me crazy. We constantly try to understand. Through the petition by the way we've created a network of activists—we've gathered groups that were already active in various places across Europe, in countries like Spain, Portugal, and Italy, where new groups of dissident Israelis have formed. So, we have a good window into what's happening elsewhere. Take, for example, Spain, which long ago called for an arms embargo and recognized a Palestinian state, and yet in practice it still allows the passage of weapons, either through Spanish airspace or ships stopping at Spanish ports. The embargo, in other words, hasn't really been implemented. And the question is, why? I'll outline a few ideas and expand during the questions.

In my view, the main problem in European thinking is the notion that Israel is separated [from its context], that there is “Israel” and, somewhere far away on some other island, there is something called “the occupation,” which we oppose. And once it will end, once we recognize a Palestinian state, there will be two states living side by side. But of course, between the river and the sea today

there is no border separating Israel and Palestine—not in terms of population, not geography, nothing. I assume people in this forum already know that.

The Israel they now condemn, the Israel they imagine, is a white, democratic—the Israel of “look what a democracy it is, though yes, there’s an occupation.” We’re talking about 19 years without “occupation,” since 1948. And within all that, there was always this desire to show how great it all is, to talk about the Israeli peace camp, to look at the peace demonstrations, to wait for the change that will come from within. And yes, when I’m invited to speak, they say that I am this “change from within.” But I come and say: no, I believe we need this help from outside. When I call for international pressure, it’s for our own good—for the sake of Israelis and Palestinians living here, against the government and Hamas together, both engaged in a campaign of self-destruction, of killing and annihilation. That is extremely, extremely hard to face. That, in my view, is the first issue.

I’ll add that, especially on the left, there’s a certain resistance to the very concept of international pressure and sanctions. I tell people: fortunately, France and Germany didn’t abandon you and say, “Work it out among yourselves.” Calling for international pressure and sanctions is seen as a form of imperialist intervention—and that’s another issue. And of course, there’s the question of “the Jews,” which Europe still hasn’t resolved, but that deserves its own discussion. I don’t know if you’ve held a talk on the IHRA’s working definition of antisemitism (<https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antisemitism>). I think that would be very interesting. I haven’t seen Amos Goldberg’s lecture (https://www.eyesongaza.net/en/_files/ugd/bfd9b2_3e4f83c56ccc4acd853310c1c3be67a9.pdf), perhaps it was on this subject. But that definition has an enormous influence in Europe—any criticism of Israel is categorized as antisemitism. That, too, makes activism very difficult. So, I think I’ve spoken too long already, and I’ll be happy to continue through the questions.