



“Not nice boys”: how the Black Panthers shook up Israeli society

Asaf Elia-Shalev's recent book reveals the startling impact of the Black Panther movement on Israel after the Six-Day War. **Keith Kahn-Harris** speaks to the author about the legacy of these unlikely activists

One of the most important recent additions to the English-speaking Jewish lexicon is the word 'Ashkenormative', meaning the privileging of Ashkenazi Judaism as if it were the 'normal' Judaism. Despite the fact that it was Sephardi Jews who founded what is considered the 'modern' British Jewish community, it is only recently that British Jews who are not Ashkenazi have had much success in eroding assumptions that Judaism means herring and gefilte fish.

In Israel, the process of challenging Ashkenazi hegemony goes back much further. As in the UK, a non-Ashkenazi presence in the land of Israel goes back centuries. However, hundreds of thousands of Jews with backgrounds that were Mizrahi (Middle Eastern) and Sephardi (ancestry going back to the Iberian peninsula) emigrated to Israel from Muslim countries – often following persecution and expulsion – in the years following Israel's independence in 1948. These waves of immigrants irrevocably changed the demographic and social character of the Jewish state.

DISCRIMINATION

These newcomers arrived in a state that had been built largely by Ashkenazi Jews who had, mostly, never questioned the racial and colonial assumptions of the European cultures in which they had been raised. It wasn't just that many Mizrahi immigrants languished in camps in Israel's periphery for years; they were also often treated as 'uncivilised', criminal and fit only for manual work. As the former Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion said in 1950: "We must educate the young man who has come here from these countries to sit properly on a chair in his home, to take a shower, not steal, not capture an Arab teenager and rape her and murder her..."

Asaf Elia-Shalev includes this shocking quote near the start of his recent book, *Israel's Black Panthers*, which tells the story of the Mizrahi resistance movement, modelled on the US Black Panthers, that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

"I was a student at UC Berkeley and became interested in radical politics," he says, speaking to me from his home in Los Angeles. "I wrote a paper about

the American Black Panthers, who were founded nearby in Oakland, and came across a reference to the Israeli Black Panthers. It said they were fighting for the rights of Mizrahi Jews in Israel. I thought, 'Wow, what is this all about?'"

The Israeli-American journalist, who is Iraqi on one side and Bulgarian Sephardi on the other, also has an affinity with Arab culture and has a lot of Arab friends: "I needed to understand [that connection between us] better."

The story of Israel's Black Panthers is rooted in Musrara, a neighbourhood next to Jerusalem's Old City that abutted the no man's land that divided the city with a wall from 1948 to 1967. Settled mainly by Moroccan Jews, Musrara was poor and neglected, with few opportunities for social advancement; it rapidly became associated with crime, and police harassment was frequent. Yet it was also the site of surreptitious shouted communication across the dividing wall, with Musrarans sometimes finding more in common with their Arab-speaking 'neighbours' than their Ashkenazi fellow Jews.

Clockwise from left: Rafi Marciano speaking at Jerusalem City Hall, March 1971; the middle banner reads 'Golda teach us Yiddish', Tel Aviv, May 1971; Reuven Abergel in Jerusalem, August 1971. The banner reads, 'Golda, Golda, Fly Away, Everyone is Sick of You'



"The group was subject to intensive police surveillance"

police informant. Activists invariably had minor criminal records that, at the time, prevented them from joining the military, excluding them from Israel's most important institution for social advancement. There were fears that the Panthers were aligned with the radical anti-Zionists of Matzpen (the revolutionary socialist organisation) and the global pro-Palestinian 'new left'. The group was patronised as much as it was feared. In April 1971, then-president Golda Meir dismissed the Panthers as "not nice boys".

Yet the violence on the 'Night of the Panthers' did end up bringing Meir to the table to meet some of them. Even if those meetings were marked by mutual incomprehension and Meir's denial of systematic discrimination against Mizrahim, they did raise the issue high up on the national agenda, breaking a silence that had prevailed in the first decades of Israel's existence. Following this meeting, a national commission made some useful recommendations and one major demand was acceded to fairly quickly, enabling those who had minor criminal records to join the army.

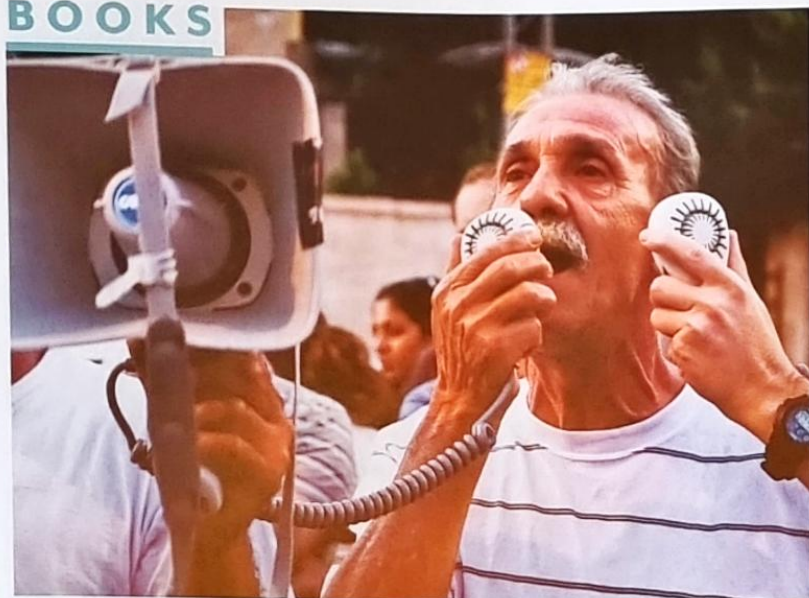
The high watermark of the Panther movement was in 1973, when activists began to enter mainstream politics and took steps towards electoral respectability.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

The story of the Panthers is not an easy one to tell and Elia-Shalev's book manages to do justice to a movement that was fluid, chaotic and struggling to develop an organisational structure. The group had a core set of demands – for education, welfare, housing and integration – but lacked a fully worked-through philosophy or manifesto. As with other radical movements of that period, the Panthers were male dominated and had significant blind spots regarding how Israeli racism was also gendered. Its leaders sometimes jostled for power and publicity, but they had little experience in

political activity and had to work things out from scratch. Their actions were mostly confined to demonstrations, protests and pamphlets. On paper they didn't amount to much, although during the 'Night of the Panthers' on 18 May 1971, there were thousands of protesters in the centre of Jerusalem, clashes with police and scores of arrests. Yet the impact of the Panthers on Israeli society and politics was far more profound than this suggests.

The Ashkenazi elite were deeply disturbed by the Panthers. The group was subject to intensive police surveillance and one of its principal leaders was a



Clockwise from top left: Reuven Abergel at a protest in 2012; Moroccan woman cooking at a refugee camp in Israel, 1952; Moroccan women at a camp, 1958



However, the Yom Kippur War in October of that year brought an end to a brief period of internal Israeli self-questioning.

In the December 1973 election, the Panthers, split between two factions, failed to gain any seats. As Elia-Shalev puts it in the book, "Rather than learning a lesson and consolidating, the Panthers ended up doing the opposite. They scattered and spread out, making new political alliances and running for office as part of four different party lists."

A LEGACY ON LEFT AND RIGHT

Ironically, one of the Panthers' main legacies was their contribution to Mizrahi self-assertion and empowerment that led to the 'mahapach', the 'revolution' of the 1977 election that ended Labor Zionist rule and brought Likud to power. To this day, Mizrahim tend to vote for right-wing parties: in the 1980s, the first Mizrahi party to gain real electoral success, Shas, was right-wing religiously as well as politically.

It is likely that the ingrained racism that accompanied the statist socialism of the Labor Zionists who politically dominated Israel's first decades created lasting suspicion of left-wing politics

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among Mizrahim. It didn't help that some on the left saw – and continue to see – Mizrahi support for Likud as a sign of their continuing 'backwardness'. As Elia-Shalev points out: "...Bernard Avishai, a contributor to *The New Yorker* and other prestigious publications, provided an example of this thinking in a 1981 essay about Israel's changing political landscape, writing that '[Mizrahim] refused to shed their cultural traditions and warm-hearted patriarchal families for the sake of Labor Zionist theories they could barely understand'."

But as Elia-Shalev's book reminds us, it was never pre-ordained that Mizrahi politics had to be right-wing. Many Panthers did not welcome the mahapach and some continued to shun Likud and Shas. The Panthers were some of the first Israelis to talk to Palestinian leaders such as Yasser Arafat, to criticise settlements

and to insist on their place in global social movements (including sharing platforms with the original US Black Panthers).

I put it to Elia-Shalev that the Israel depicted in the book seems like a lost world. "Part of the project was to capture this lost world, especially the stories of discrimination and the perseverance of Mizrahi Israelis. But what I really wanted to recreate was the world of Jerusalem after 1967 and the feeling that anything was possible. You had boundaries coming down, and a remixing of the city [as Jews and Arabs mingled more freely following the unification of the city]. There were a lot of reasons to be hopeful," says the author.

Hope is in short supply in Israel right now. Anti-Mizrahi racism still exists, says Elia-Shalev, as well as inequality among the Mizrahi community. Politically, there are a small number of Mizrahim still on the left, but they find it difficult to have a voice within a left-wing still dominated by the Ashkenazi. Some Mizrahim were present in the mass protests in 2023 against Netanyahu's proposed judicial reforms. Yet things are never simple. "The Supreme Court has become a symbol of Israeli democracy, but it is one of the most Ashkenazi institutions in Israel," he says.

It is the liminality of Mizrahi Jews that, for Elia-Shalev, offers possibilities to destabilise 'stuck' narratives on Israel-Palestine. "People talk about Israel and Palestine as a binary of Jew versus Arab and it is much more complicated," he explains. "There was this massive group who were uncomfortably close to being Arabs in the eyes of the Ashkenazi leadership and were relegated to a lower status. That affected the dynamics of that region."

To read Israel's Black Panthers in 2024 is to be reminded that the future is not pre-ordained. "The 7 October attack scrambled everything. A parallel is 1973's Yom Kippur War, which largely killed off the Panthers. The war was a national calamity that shook everyone. Israelis weren't interested in talking about domestic issues. They emphasised unity. Eventually the war led to the downfall of the Labor Party."

"That's been true after 7 October – the protests against the judicial reforms disappeared for a long time following the attacks. But it's going to be hard for Likud to continue dominating Israeli politics. I don't know what's going to replace it, but I have a feeling that Likud's days are numbered as the ruling party." ■

Israel's Black Panthers: The Radicals who Punctured a Nation's Founding Myth by Asaf Elia-Shalev, University of California, 2024.

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