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Guy Ben-Porat, Yagil Levy, Shlomo Mizrahi, Arye Naor, and Erez Tzfadia

Excerpt

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Introduction

Guy Ben-Porat

Turbulence seems like the proper word to describe Israel since 1980, and especially the two summers between which this book was written (2005 and 2006). In the summer of 2005, after thirty-eight years of occupation, Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip, demolished the Jewish settlements it had built, and returned to its pre-1967 borders. After months of tension, with various demonstrations and protests, the Israeli army and police moved in to evacuate the settlements, and the subsequent emotional clashes were shown worldwide. Israelis were expecting a quiet summer in 2006, with a new government, elected just four months previously, settling in. However, the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier on the Gaza border on June 25 and the inevitable Israeli retaliation were the prelude to yet more turmoil. Less than a month later, Hezbollah guerrillas on the Lebanese border attacked an Israeli patrol and kidnapped two soldiers. Israel's retaliatory air bombardments and Hezbollah's shelling of Northern Israel escalated into a ground war in Lebanon that ended after a month with a UN-brokered ceasefire. At the time of writing Israel is still painfully researching and debating the causes, management, and consequences of the so-called Second Lebanon War.

Significant changes in the past quarter-century have transformed Israel demographically, spatially, economically, and politically. To a large extent it has since the 1980s evolved into a state and society riddled with existential questions such as "What is Israel?"; "Who is an Israeli?"; and "What does it mean to be an Israeli?" The variety of answers these questions receive reflects the changing nature of Israeli society, its fragmentation into different groups, and its struggle to find definitive solutions to its problems. The turbulent twenty-five years

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discussed in this book have generated more open-ended questions than answers for Israel's future.

Israel entered the 1980s with two significant developments: an end to almost thirty years of Labor Party domination and the victory of the Likud in the elections of 1977; and a first peace agreement with Egypt (1979), based on withdrawal from territories captured in the war of 1967. Events, however, continued to unfold. A brief chronology of events could include spiraling inflation and a new economic plan (1981–85); a war in Lebanon (1982); a Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza (1987); massive immigration from the former Soviet Union (1990); a peace process with the Palestinians (1993); the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin (1995); the withdrawal from Lebanon (2000); the collapse of the peace process with the Palestinians (2000); the withdrawal from Gaza (2005); and the Second Lebanon War (2006).

Close to its sixtieth anniversary and with a population of almost seven million, Israel is still a state in the making, whose borders and boundaries remain to be determined amidst growing tensions and crises. These debates pertain not only to Israel's "external" borders vis-à-vis its neighboring states and Palestinians, but also to its "internal" debates over identity, belonging, and citizenship rights. Social scientists studying Israeli society have pointed to the contradictory developments of the past quarter-century. On the one hand, Israeli society and state have integrated globally and the economy has demonstrated significant growth that ranks it among the developed countries of the world. On the other hand, intensifying conflicts within Israel and between Israel and the Palestinians undermine its ability to govern effectively and its international status and, consequently, have held back its global integration. Accordingly, the State of Israel's democratic dispensation has for the last two decades been a source of concern for many Israelis who fear that intensifying social cleavages – national, ethnic, religious, ideological, and socio-economic – undermine social solidarity, overburden the political system, and impede the functioning of Israeli democracy to the dangerous point of "ungovernability."

Israel's tense relations with neighboring states – Syria and Lebanon – and its ongoing conflict with the Palestinians in the occupied territories absorb most of the society's political energies and, politically speaking, constitute the central dividing-line between hawks and doves. Not only is Israel debating its external borders and the related questions of "land for peace," it is also constantly reviewing its internal

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boundaries and its ability to balance its commitments of a “Jewish” and a “democratic” state. The definition of a “Jewish and democratic state” founded in Israel’s declaration of independence underscores, on the one hand, the debates over minorities’ rights and, on the other hand, those over church and state relations.

Thus, within Israel an Arab minority is demanding a secure place within the state, contesting its marginal political and economic status and the overarching definition of a “Jewish state.” These tensions have resulted in hostile verbal exchanges as well as violent clashes, culminating in 2000 when the police shot dead thirteen demonstrators. The religious–secular struggle is another source of concern, as the previous “status quo” was incompatible with the demographic, economic, and political changes. Officially, religious orthodoxy still holds the monopoly over significant aspects of life (for example, there is no civil marriage in Israel and Jews can be married only by the Orthodox rabbinate) and laws protect the status of the Sabbath. In practice, however, alternative marital arrangements and commercial interests are rapidly secularizing the public sphere and rendering old arrangements irrelevant.

Demographically, Israel has been transformed since the 1990s by a mass immigration from the former Soviet Union, which added more than a million people to its existing population and was one of the factors behind the economic growth of the period. While this immigration has changed the Jewish–Arab balance and supposedly strengthened the Jewish character of the state, it also had a significant secularizing influence. The secular tradition and the fact that many of the immigrants were not Jewish added to the ongoing debate over the Jewish character of the state and further challenged existing norms and institutions. The immigrants’ ability to organize politically and to create their own services – media, entertainment, and education – prevented any possibility of quick assimilation or a “melting-pot.”

The rapid economic development of the past two decades offers new incentives and opportunities while feeding old tensions and creating new ones. As elsewhere, rapid growth accentuates the difference between society’s center and those on the peripheries, who are often left behind. The globalization of Israel is not only of cultural significance, relating to struggles over questions of traditions and identity; it also raises socio-economic questions and blurs the boundaries between public and private. The transformation of Israel towards a market economy and away from a welfare state underscores the debates over

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property rights, economic rights, and the mutual obligations of citizens and the state. Demands for privatization and tax cuts are matched by calls for the maintenance of the welfare state or requests by politically organized groups for funding of their particular services.

It is of little surprise that these developments amount to a governance crisis. In their seminal book published in 1989, two of Israel's leading scholars described it as an "overburdened polity";¹ this description seems even more relevant today. Surveys in recent years show not only heightened tension between groups that often amount to racism, but also a growing decline in the citizens' trust of government, the parliament, and the bureaucracy. This decline of trust does not translate simply into passivity and withdrawal but often also into independent initiatives that ignore existing laws or into attempts to appeal to different sources of authority, such as the Supreme Court. With government and parliament's inability or unwillingness to take decisions over controversial matters, more and more citizens are appealing to the courts. The Supreme Court's deliberations and decisions have turned it into a significant player, but have also subjected it to severe criticism by those who find it too liberal and, consequently, find its rulings illegitimate. Without a constitution, postponed since 1948 because of internal disagreements, Israel's unofficial arrangements can no longer govern the public sphere. Consequently, the vacuum of authority has led, among other things, to attempts to write a constitution.

These factors are the starting-point of this work, whose purpose is to introduce readers to the political, social, and economic developments in Israel since 1980. It is impossible to capture in one book all the events that have occurred, or the different perceptions and interpretations of these events. What we attempt to do, instead, is to provide readers with an overarching picture, with some "snapshots" of significant events, decisions, and developments. The chapters follow political, social, economic, demographic, and geographic changes, and link them into a coherent story of "Israel since 1980." The different angles and focal points of the chapters capture the various segments of Israeli society – national, ethnic, and religious groups – and their political perceptions and demands.

We begin the book with a description of the structure of Israeli society, its central cleavages, and their impact upon each other and

¹ Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, *Trouble in Utopia: the Overburdened Polity of Israel*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

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state and society at large. The ideological cleavage between so-called hawks and doves is only one of five or so that cut across Israeli society, described in chapter 1. The other dividing-lines include a Jewish–Arab cleavage, a religious–secular cleavage, an ethnic/cultural cleavage, and a class cleavage. All were previously successfully managed by the state by various methods of assimilation, co-optation, and coercion. But now these divisions appear beyond the state’s control and threaten its ability to govern effectively. Thus, Israel, like many other states, faces dilemmas that stem from a multinational and/or multicultural reality in which cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic minorities struggle for and against distinctive forms of recognition and accommodation and, consequently, create new challenges for the regime.

The cleavages described in the first chapter and the challenges they entail are demographically and geographically grounded. State policies in these domains, in turn, reflect the same challenges of “Jewish and democratic.” The second chapter takes issue with demographic concerns and spatial politics that underscore the “Jewish state.” First, the practical dimensions of the debate over the external boundaries of the state are explored through the settlement project. Since the 1980s the pace of settlement in the West Bank and Gaza, designed to make Israel’s presence permanent, gathered momentum and was established on the ground. Second, the immigration from the former Soviet Union, some 911,000 immigrants who arrived in Israel from late 1989 until the end of 2001, created new needs and demands for land and housing and changed the character of towns. Third, economic growth has brought with it new demands for houses in the suburbs instead of town apartments and contributed to the segregation of space established earlier, enforcing the cleavages. And, fourth, National Outline Plans that sought to balance economic demands with environmental concerns and promote the concentration of the population in four urban centers, with green belts between, were not implemented, owing to intensive activity by various interest groups and the general inability of the political system, described in the following chapter, to provide answers to the challenges presented.

Indeed, the political system, discussed in the third chapter, also reflects the tensions described above and, consequently, displays instability and a crisis of governance. Between 1977 and 2006 Israel has had thirteen coalition governments, with an average of less than three years for each. In other words, the country is living through a permanent crisis of governability that is influenced by the difficulties in

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resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and in determining the future of the occupied territories and the evolution of the other cleavages described in chapter 1. Attempts to reform the political system, as the chapter shows, have largely failed to curb the fragmentation and bring stability. As mentioned above, with the paralysis of the political system, the judicial system became more significant. But, against the empowerment and growing involvement of the Supreme Court in issues considered “political,” a growing opposition within parliament and from various groups has threatened to limit the court’s power.

Israel’s economic development since 1980, described in the fourth chapter, is also dramatic in its shift from state dominance to a market economy. Between 1974 and 1985 Israel experienced its worst economic period, described by economists as the “lost years.” In 1985, when the economic crises came to pose a real threat to the state’s fundamental legitimacy and economic viability, an emergency economic stabilization plan was initiated, which led to a dramatic reduction in inflation and in the public sector’s budgetary deficit. The significance of the economic plan was not only in the successful reduction of inflation but also in the structural transformation of the Israeli economy, away from its protectionist and state-centered formation to a more neo-liberal type of economy. By the 1990s the Israeli economy was both liberalized, in terms of a shift to market economics, and on course to becoming globalized, integrated in the world economy. The process of “becoming capitalist” was accompanied, as elsewhere, with growing inequality and severe social problems that added to the tensions described in the first chapter.

The military, a central institution of Israeli society, is also influenced by the social, political, and economic developments discussed in the previous chapters. Israelis have long viewed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as more than simply the military; in popular mythology, the IDF is “the people’s army,” a crucial institution for both the defense of the state and the self-image of the nation. But, as chapter 5 explains, the army not only met with a succession of crises after the 1973 war that diluted its resources and reduced its political support, it also became entangled in the political debate and influenced by the evolving cleavages. The war in Lebanon in 1982 shattered the consensus over the military’s role and, for the first time in Israel’s history, there were protests against the war and even refusals by reservists to take part in it. This has been exacerbated since the Intifada that began in December

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1987, when the military presence of Israel in the occupied territories became a major political debate.

Other important developments have been the penetration of cultural and economic globalization into Israeli society, the structural changes in the economy in the spirit of the neoliberal doctrine, and the development of a consumerist society. These changes not only led to a cutback in military spending but also made the military less attractive for the elites who had previously enjoyed the status military service afforded. This “motivation crisis” has made military service more dependent upon concrete material benefits and led to a bargaining process between the military and those who share the burden. Also, the military remained attractive for marginal groups that perceived it as a significant sphere in which to construct new opportunities for social mobility and legitimately attain various civil rights. Its gradual abandonment by social elites, therefore, made the army more representative of the peripheries but possibly more distant from the elites and from the global-liberal civil agenda.

The inability of the political institutions to provide answers to the growing problems has led to new modes of political action. The governance crisis described in chapter 3 underscores the developments of interest groups and an “alternative politics” that bypasses the official institutions and, consequently, renders them ineffective. Chapter 6 engages with Israeli political culture and its evolution since 1980 in relation to the processes and events described in the previous chapters. During the 1950s and 1960s, Israel’s political, administrative, and economic systems were highly centralized; this centralism prevented the development of alternative power centers such as interest groups and significantly slowed the development of a civil society based on liberal values. While political participation through voting during these decades was very intense, other forms of political participation hardly existed. A significant change in the development of Israeli political culture came in 1967 with the Six Day War. It gave rise to nationalistic and religious feelings that were translated into the attempts to establish illegal settlements in the West Bank that would de facto annex the territories occupied in the war. These events expressed the beginning of alternative politics in Israeli society, which had been suspended for two decades, and signaled the governance crisis that unfolded from the 1980s onward. The inability of the government to produce efficient and stable public policy triggered the evolution of alternative politics. As the public gradually gave up legal influence channels, semi-legal

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and illegal private activities to provide public services spread in many areas of life. The 1980s were characterized by a significant growth of “gray-market economy,” “gray-market medicine,” “gray-market education,” and pirate cable networks.

The purpose of this book is to provide readers with a comprehensive overview of the Israeli state and society since 1980 and the interrelated political, social, economic, and geographical changes. The six chapters, written by five different authors, provide a multi-perspective look at Israeli society, and at times overlap on central issues and developments to capture those perspectives. No attempt was made to establish agreement between authors who, naturally, differ both in their methodological approach and in their political views of Israeli society, so each chapter reflects only the opinions of its author. But, in spite of the differences, the authors do share a concern for state, society, and the democratic regime. These combined apprehensions, we hope, provide a convincing account of Israel since 1980 and the challenges that lie ahead. We will return to those themes in the concluding chapter.

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**Israeli Society: Diversity, Tensions,
and Governance**

Guy Ben-Porat

In their seminal book published in 1989, *Trouble in Utopia*, Dan Horowitz and Moshe Lissak, two of Israel's leading scholars, described Israel as an "overburdened polity." According to them social conflicts and the frustrations of marginal groups have increased to a point where Israeli democracy is in critical danger of "ungovernability," making it difficult for the system to mobilize material resources and collective normative commitments. While scholars of the Israeli state and society dispute the reasons for societal breakup, as well as its consequences and remedies, there is an overall consensus that relations between national, ethnic, religious, ideological, and cultural groups have become overtly politicized. Israeli society since 1980 has come to accept not only its plurality but also the fact that the existing formal and informal institutions can no longer contain the tensions between groups, but has yet to find agreement on new institutions. The different perceptions of common good and demands for equality and for recognition burden state and society with significant challenges. The contemporary study of Israel, therefore, must first and foremost account for the significant societal changes and their implications for politics and governance.

Israeli society is divided across national, religious, ideological, and ethnic lines; these divisions display not only internal dynamism but also a dynamic relation between them as they constantly affect each other. As a national movement, Zionism has sought to unite all Jews under the umbrella of nation- and state-building projects. The Labor Party (formerly Mapai) became the leading force in the Zionist movement and in early statehood. It combined a socialist rhetoric, a collectivist ethos, a secular interpretation of Zionism, and a largely pragmatic attitude toward settlement and foreign policy. The disputes within the Zionist movement, between secular and religious and between

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socialists/collectivists and supporters of a free market economy, were largely secondary to the nation- and state-building project, and the dominant Labor Party was largely able to control the disputes. Thus, while ideological differences were significant, the vast majority of parties chose to remain part of the political system, even in the pre-statehood period when opportunities to prevent their withdrawal were limited.

The early period of statehood remained dominated by the collectivist ethos that overshadowed the existing and evolving cleavages. Israel is a country that places high demands on its citizens, most notably a mandatory military service of three years for men and two for women. The demands and privileges, however, are unequally distributed and are part of Israel's stratified citizenship. The larger burden of army service was held by Jewish men and, consequently, accorded them a dominant status in a society that judged citizenship according to their contribution to the common good. The stratification, however, was not only between Jews and non-Jews (some non-Jews, such as the Druze, serve in the military) and men and women, but also among Jewish men. In the early years of statehood the army was dominated by veteran Ashkenazi and secular groups, and it was the entry of new groups – religious, Mizrachim, and immigrants from the FSU – as well as demands for gender equality and the penetration of the privatization ethos that marked the beginning of changes in Israeli society.

The divisions within Israeli society became apparent from the early 1970s. The waning of the Labor Party's dominance in the wake of the Yom Kippur War (1973) and the growing discontent of groups hitherto marginalized in Israeli society undermined the status quo. The change was reflected first and foremost in voting patterns: in the 1977 elections the Labor Party was ousted after twenty-nine years in power. The debate over the future of the territories occupied in the 1967 war (the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula) unfolded into a bitter divide that not only cut across Israeli society but also posed a challenge to the legitimacy of the democratic regime. The question of the territories (the "land versus peace" debate) continues to occupy Israeli politics and has been the central issue of most elections and political debates in the past quarter-century. However, this ideological split between so-called hawks and doves is only one of five or so cleavages that cut across Israeli society. The other dividing-lines include Jewish–Arab; religious–secular; ethnic/cultural; and class cleavages. All were previously managed by the state by various methods