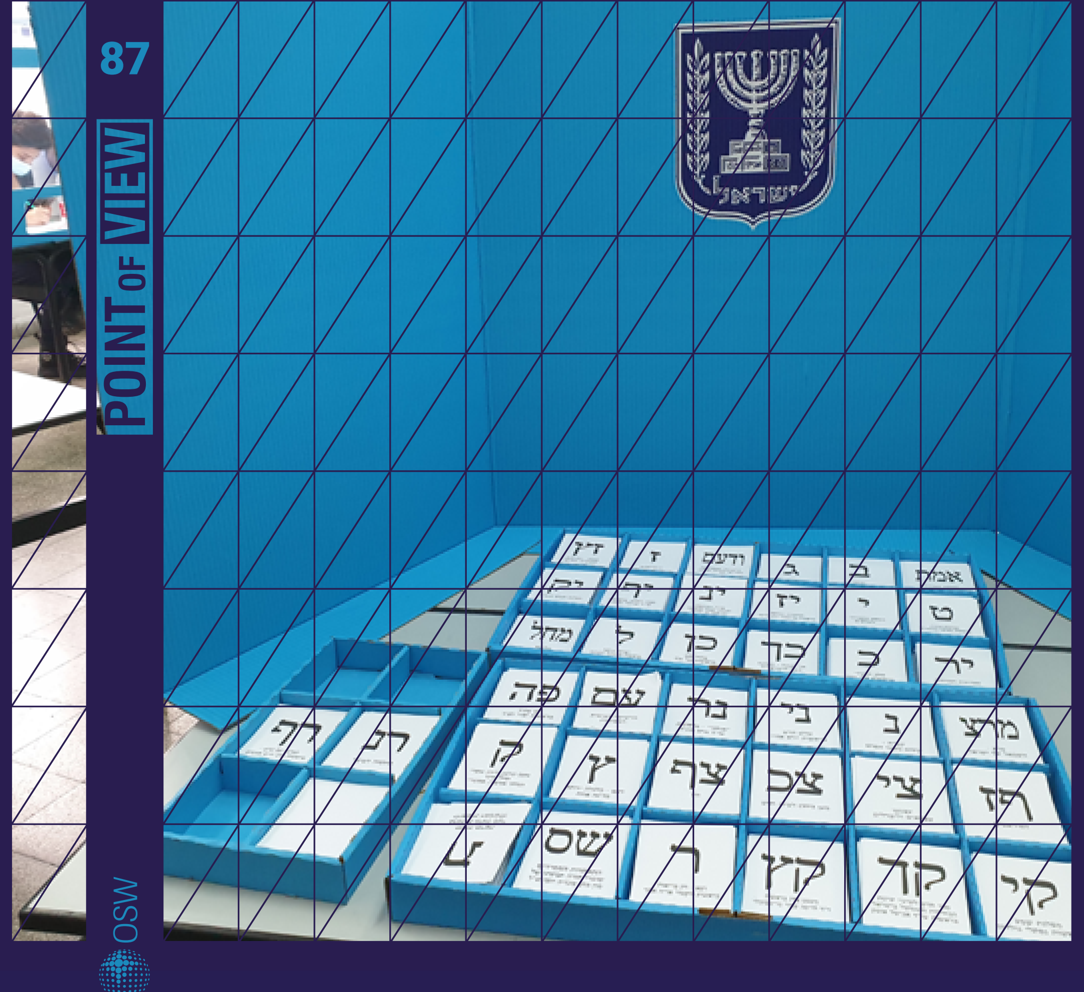
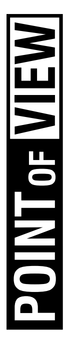


THE PARADOXES OF ISRAELI POLITICS
A SHORT COURSE

Marek Matusiak



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A SHORT COURSE

Marek Matusiak

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MAIN POINTS

- Israeli political life and, more broadly, the way the state operates, are often difficult to understand for the European observer. There are at least four reasons for this state of affairs. First, Israel's political scene includes many elements that do not exist outside it and for whom analogies are difficult to find. Second, institutional, constitutional and political similarities to European countries are often incomplete and sometimes even misleading. Third, the Israeli reality is characterised by a considerable number of paradoxes, within which phenomena irreconcilable from a European perspective coexist. Fourth, the country's politics routinely invokes contexts that are highly symbolically and emotionally charged, which paralyse the external observer with their gravity.

- Among the striking differences between Israel and European countries is the role that the categories of ethnicity, origin and religion play in Israel's social and political life. Consequently, the divisions created against their background are – from an external perspective – difficult to perceive. Misleading similarities, in turn, involve even such basic concepts as "territory", "borders", "population" or "constitution". In the case of most European countries, they are unambiguous, whereas in Israel they are fluid and/or subject to interpretation.

- Among the Israeli paradoxes, particularly notable is the gap between Israel's high level of economic development, strong international standing and clear continuity of policies in many areas on the one hand, and the clearly makeshift nature of a number of legal-political arrangements and frequent political crises on the other hand. There is also a clear contrast between Israel's democratic state system and the rule of law and ethnic nationalism that permeates its political life, as well as its decades-long occupation of the Palestinian territories.

- The common denominator of many of the above-described features of Israeli reality is the ideological tensions inherent in Jewish statehood from its very beginning. Israel is, on the one hand, a "normal", "completed", modern state entity with clearly defined borders and laws, but on the other hand – a living national project in a state of constant creation whose basic parameters have still not been conclusively defined. This is one of the reasons why the country is simultaneously moving in many directions, which are difficult to reconcile or even outright contradictory. It wants to be an ethnically Jewish nation-state while at the same time ensuring equality for all citizens. It desires peace and an end to the conflict with the Palestinians, yet simultaneously it keeps expanding settlements in the West Bank. It sees itself as part of a global community of democracies and at the same time it defends its ethnic, civilisational and political uniqueness and its right to unilaterally define its own territorial ambitions or foreign and security policies.

- These tensions are reflected in political life, which is clouded by fundamental identity dilemmas about what kind of state Israel is and wants to be, alongside universal issues such as the cost of living, housing prices, pension levels, the state of infrastructure or the quality of public services. These dilemmas are brought into sharpest focus in its legal self-definition, stating that it is a state that is "Jewish and democratic". At the end of the day, many of its great and small political disputes boil down to questions about what these concepts mean, what their coexistence is supposed to look like (and is it possible?), as well as which of them takes precedence – in the case of conflict – and who should decide about it.

- Ideological dividing lines and party programmes are largely formed on the basis of different configurations of answers to these questions. It is the multiplicity of these arrangements – alongside the extraordinary social diversity – that determines the complexity of Israel's political landscape. However, this complexity is confined within

a specific spectrum. The country's scene is overwhelmingly made up of Zionist groups, i.e. those that want to maintain the Jewish character of the state, not only in terms of its culture, language or symbolism, but also – crucially – in terms of its ethnicity. The divisions into the right, the left and the centre run "beneath" this position so to speak. It is also worth mentioning that there has been a very clear rightward shift in political sentiments and public discourse over the past 20 years. As a result, the diversity of the domestic party scene is largely a collage of different shades of nationalism – secular and religious, radical and moderate, conservative and liberal, territorially expansive and restrained, and so on.

- Such a narrow political spectrum and a strong national identity mean that – despite the enormous mosaic of worldviews, fierce disputes and the fragility of governments – there is still much potential for creative consensus in many sensitive areas, even among parties that are ideologically very different. This is particularly the case on security issues and the main tenets of foreign, economic and historical policies, but also on the issue of the ethnically Jewish character of Israel. This consensus – probably more easily perceptible from the outside than from the inside – makes it possible, in spite of many difficulties, to maintain a stable course even under conditions of strong polarisation and protracted crisis. One exception against this backdrop is the problem of the relationship between the state and religion, which already sharply divides the political scene, including its right-wing part. It will become increasingly important in the coming decades with the rapid demographic growth of the most religious sections of society. It is around this issue that the country's political life may converge in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Israel is an example of evident economic success and regional power. It is also one of the global hi-tech centres. In the field of foreign and security policy, the country not only steadily advances its goals, but also punches well above its weight on the international stage when compared to its demographic or economic potential.

At the same time, however, the country's political life gives the impression of being constantly in crisis or on the verge of it. Early elections, fragmented parliaments, short-lived coalitions, ephemeral factions, a plethora of leaders, criminal scandals and makeshift legal arrangements are the norm, all against the backdrop of an almost permanent election campaign that continues to yield fresh impulses for change.

This divergence, as well as the huge diversity and peculiarity of Israeli politics, can make it seem difficult to comprehend to the outside observer. The exoticism, contrasts and paradoxes attract attention, but at the same time mean it is hard to relate Israeli circumstances to any external context and thus to interpret, classify, compare or evaluate them.

The aim of this study is to present as comprehensive an overview of the title question as possible. The text outlines the framework in which Israeli politics plays out, its rules of engagement and the main players. It concludes by trying to answer questions such as how the clearly visible continuity and effectiveness of state policy is possible at all, and what direction the state is heading in this area.

To do so, it is not enough to analyse factions, leaders, programmes and ideological genealogies. A study focused solely on this would quickly become outdated in any case. Also, to capture the dynamics of the phenomenon in question, something more is needed than a legal and constitutional approach, focused on the laws in force, institutions and relations between the branches of government. This paper therefore necessarily

contains elements of both perspectives, which will, however, serve primarily as an extended introduction to the presentation of cross-cutting issues – the challenges, dilemmas and divisions around which contemporary Israeli political life revolves.

The text consists of three parts. The first describes the specifics of Israel and the contexts to be considered when debating this country's politics. The second presents the institutional framework of its political life and outlines the history of the political scene. The third focuses on cross-cutting questions.

I. A *SUI GENERIS* STATE?

Many of the issues concerning the State of Israel have no parallel in the present or in the past. Religion, history, morality, international law, security – in each of these perspectives the country appears to fall outside the standard categories and classifications. In addition, all of these dimensions intersect and it is often difficult to consider one without referring to the others.

Moreover, many issues that directly or indirectly affect Israel carry huge symbolic and emotional weight. This fuels external interest in this country and raises the temperature of discussions about it. In this context, it suffices to mention the importance of Holocaust remembrance for the modern Western world, the identity dimension of the Palestinian cause for the Muslim world, or the control over the holy sites of major religions.

Finally: despite its small size, the country is so complex that almost any thesis can be put forward about it and at least anecdotal evidence found to support it.

This multidimensional distinctiveness of Israel raises a number of challenges in the context of describing the country's political system. These primarily involve, on the one hand, capturing and respecting the specificity of this state, and on the other hand, describing it in universal terms, i.e. those that are taken into account when analysing, comparing and assessing other countries, rather than those that Israeli society itself sets, in which it describes and presents itself to the world.

On the practical level, this generates various problems. Firstly, it is difficult to talk about Israeli political life using only the standard conceptual grid applied, for example, to European countries. Democracy, the rule of law, the tripartite division of power, freedom of speech, civil rights, the existence of parties, the division into the right, the left and the centre, etc. – all this brings the country closer to the Western world.

At the same time, however, for virtually every single one of these terms, an elaborate footnote should be added to highlight the differences between how a given element functions in Israel and, say, in Europe. Even such basic and seemingly unambiguous concepts as "territory", "borders" or "population" require additional commentary in Israel's case. In addition, the discussion on the Israeli political system requires the introduction of a list of phenomena, facts and concepts specific to that system, which is unusually extensive compared to other contemporary democracies and without which this reality would remain incomprehensible.

Secondly, Israel's immersion in emotionally charged, globally absorbing contexts and their interconnectedness make it difficult to focus on one issue without the risk of the argument spilling over into others.

Thirdly, the distinctiveness of the Israeli case is politically instrumentalised. It is used both ways – both against the state and in its interests. For example, between 2015 and 2022, the UN General Assembly condemned Israel over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in as many as 125 resolutions, thus de facto singling it out as the main perpetrator of human rights violations in the world. In the same period, it denounced Russia fifteen times, Syria – nine, North Korea – seven, Iran – six, and China, Cuba, Libya or Venezuela – not even once. This disproportion undoubtedly reveals a prejudice against the Jewish state and its deliberate stigmatisation.

At the same time, however, the impression of Israel's uniqueness is deliberately sustained and fuelled by its advocates, with the assessment of its policies according to universal criteria purposely made more difficult. As they argue, "Israel cannot be compared to any other state".[1]

[1] For example, the award-winning albeit controversial journalist and columnist Gideon Levy writes: "The key phrase for Israelis is 'you can't compare'. You can't compare Israel to any other country. This is the terrible exemption we've given ourselves from humanity, compassion, solidarity and heeding of international law and the international community. Israel is something different. The whole world can and must absorb refugees, just not Israel. Why? Because you can't compare. Because Israel is a special case. The keywords here are Holocaust, chosen

This approach puts it in the position of a special subject of international relations, which requires separate treatment, or at least taking into consideration a long list of special circumstances each time. Elements of this attitude can be seen, for example, in the communication of the Israeli authorities with the Western world. On the one hand, they refer to a community of values and point out that Israel is "the only democracy in the Middle East"[2], on the other hand they emphasise that due to its regional environment and Jewish character, it cannot function as a democracy like those in Western Europe, for example. Thus, it has its own unique features which, in their opinion, make it incomparable to other democratic systems that do not have these characteristics, and it cannot be measured by the same yardstick.

The remainder of this chapter attempts to deal with the difficulties outlined above and has two objectives: to present the basic concepts, facts and contexts that are the necessary starting point for analysing Israel's political life, and to look at the features that contribute to the impression of this country's uniqueness. In practice, an arbitrary and non-exhaustive overview of phenomena and issues belonging to different thematic and temporal orders has been carried out here. It takes into account issues that are both objective (territory, population, demography, religion, etc.) and subjective (what the inhabitants of Israel think of themselves, their country and the world, and how it is perceived from outside). This juxtaposition will allow some of the contextual issues to be left out of the main argument, thereby keeping it shorter, simpler and focused on the core topic – contemporary Israeli political life.

people and threat of extermination". See G. Levy, 'The State of Israel Above All', Haaretz, 16 March 2022, haaretz.com.

[2] For example, in October 2021, during a meeting with Chancellor Angela Merkel, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett stated: "The State of Israel is a lighthouse in a stormy sea, the only democracy in a region blighted by extremism, which deals with enemies on all sides, and which deserves the support of the world, especially the support of the democratic countries". See 'PM Bennett and German Chancellor Merkel hold joint press conference', Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 10 October 2021, gov.il.

Territory

The classic definition by Georg Jellinek says that a state consists of three elements: power, territory and population. But even here we encounter two difficulties.

The international community recognises Israel within its 1949 borders. Other areas over which this state exercises control, such as East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the West Bank, are – from the perspective of most of the world – occupied territories as a result of the 1967 war. Another issue is the status of the Gaza Strip – Israel has withdrawn troops and settlers from there, yet maintains a blockade of most of its land borders, as well as its air and sea space, and also oversees the supply of electricity to the strip, the telephone network, the currency, the issuing of identification cards and exit permits.

From the point of view of the Jewish State itself, its territory is defined by the 1949 borders extended by the unilaterally annexed Golan Heights and East Jerusalem. From its perspective, the West Bank ("Judea and Samaria" in Israeli terminology) is not an occupied area, but a disputed territory with an unresolved status over which the authorities in Jerusalem exercise general military and partly administrative control. Its ownership is expected to be finally determined in the course of future negotiations.

At the same time, more than 130 settlements and over 140 outposts scattered across the West Bank are home to a total of some 500,000 Israeli citizens, or 5.5% of the country's population (7% of the Jewish population). These settlements vary considerably in size, legal status and distance from the formal state border. However, the vast majority of settlers (about 70%) live in settlements close to the border and on the Israeli side of the so-called security wall.

Even though these settlements have not been formally annexed, they are de facto enclaves of the Jewish State.[3] Integrated with it infrastructurally, they remain under the protection of its armed forces, Knesset elections are held on these territories and the material living conditions of the settlers do not differ from those of the other citizens. Moreover, these areas will remain with Israel in any realistic variant for the settlement of the conflict.[4] Hence, from the practical point of view, they already function as if they were part of it.

Israel's state territory is therefore defined differently by the international community and Israeli authorities, and its actual borders even run along different lines.

Population

Israel has a population of 9.2 million: 7 million (74%) Jews and almost 2 million (21%) Arabs.[5] Among the second group, 1.6 million are citizens of the country and 350,000 are permanent residents of annexed East Jerusalem. The latter are free to reside in the country, move around and take up employment, but not to vote, and their residency rights can be revoked under certain conditions.

At the same time, as mentioned, almost half a million Jewish citizens live in settlements in the West Bank, where they are de facto under Israel's sovereign authority, although de jure – outside its territory. The authorities in Jerusalem also exert a far-reaching influence on the lives of more than 3 million Palestinians living in the West Bank and 2 million in Gaza.

[3] Israeli legislation does not officially cover the West Bank, but according to the accepted interpretation it applies to Israeli citizens residing there on a personal rather than territorial basis. As a result, the legal environment in which settlers operate is almost indistinguishable from the one that applies to citizens in the official state territory. See e.g. L. Daniele, *Enforcing Illegality: Israel's Military Justice in the West Bank*, Questions of International Law, 30 November 2017, qil-qdi.org.

[4] See in more detail K. Zielińska, *Israel's Palestinian challenges. The state's identity, a leadership crisis and the "new" Middle East*, OSW, Warsaw 2021, osw.waw.pl.

[5] N. Haddad Haj-Yahya et al, 'Statistical Report on Arab Society in Israel: 2021', The Israel Democracy Institute, 17 March 2022, en.idi.org.il.

Israel also maintains ties with the Jewish diaspora scattered around the world (e.g. through specialised ministries). The attitude of this diaspora towards the Israeli state varies, but a significant part feels a bond with it and wants to participate in its life even without citizenship. This is reflected, for example, in donations to various causes and the maintenance of close contacts, and among young people – in such things as participation in temporary residence programmes or voluntary military service. Private and professional life is also often split between the country of origin and Israel.[6] These links do not remove the basic distinction between citizens and non-citizens, but it is less acute towards the diaspora than with regard to other foreigners. This is partly due to the structure of the so-called Right of Return, which opens the path to citizenship to anyone who can prove the Jewish origin of at least one of their grandparents. The Jewish Agency website even states that "all Jews, no matter where they were born, are Israeli citizens by right".[7]

Social diversity…

Israeli society is characterised by an unusual ethnic, religious, cultural and worldview diversity for a relatively small country. The Jewish majority, which accounts for about 75% of the population, consists of people with roots in almost all countries in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Despite the shared Israeli identity, origin plays an important role, as can be seen on the example of the special place currently occupied by immigrants from the former USSR[8] or Ethiopia. The distinction between those who came from Europe – Ashkenazi – and those from North Africa and the Middle East – Sephardic or Mizrachi – also remains invariably important.

[6] *Vide* the saying of American Jews "It's not quite galut if you commute", which roughly means that if you regularly come to Israel, it's like you don't quite live in exile.

[7] See *Aliyah*, The Jewish Agency for Israel, jewishagency.org.

[8] See M. Matusiak, *The 'Russian street'. The place and significance of immigrants from the former USSR in Israel*, OSW, Warsaw 2021, osw.waw.pl.

The Arabs, who make up about 20% of the population, are divided into Muslims, Christians and Druze. They also include the Bedouins living in the Negev desert. The remaining 5% of society consists of “others” – including foreign spouses of Israelis, but also historical minorities such as Samaritans, Armenians and Circassians.

In terms of the attitude to religion, the Jewish majority is divided into secular (about 45%), traditionalist (about 33%), religious (about 12%) and ultra-religious (about 10%) groups.[9] Within each of these communities – especially the latter two – there are many more subgroups, usually with deeply entrenched identities.

As a result, the society is marked on the one hand (in its Jewish part) by a strong all-Israeli collective identification, and on the other hand, it is divided into myriad subcategories. Their representatives recognise each other by their behaviour, attire, headgear, hairstyle, beard, skin colour and place of residence. This diversity translates into huge contrasts in lifestyle. In extreme cases, almost entirely separate realities are created this way, which never or hardly ever come into contact with the world of the other citizens (this is primarily the case with the Jewish ultra-Orthodox and the Arabs living in larger clusters).

...and its political significance

The diversity of society is also reflected in the relatively constant electoral preferences of individual groups. Their political orientation is determined by different configurations of factors related to ethnicity, origin, religiosity, place of residence and economic circumstances. As a result, even residents of towns and cities that are located close to each other sometimes vote in very different ways. And so, for example, Tel Aviv mostly supports the centre and the left, Haifa – the centre and

[9] *Persons aged 20 and over, by religiosity and by selected characteristics*, Central Bureau of Statistics, 31 August 2021, cbs.gov.il.

the right, Jerusalem – the right and the ultra-Orthodox parties, peripheral cities – the right, West Bank settlements – religious nationalists or the ultra-Orthodox (depending on the type of settlement), kibbutzim – the centre and the left, Arab cities – the Arab list.[10]

The strong correlation between voter behaviour of a given group and its objectively identifiable characteristics means that the balance of power on the political scene remains relatively constant. Therefore, campaigns are primarily aimed at mobilising the parties' own electorates and winning as many votes as possible among the relatively small percentage of those undecided, with potential shifts occurring mainly between different factions within large political blocs (the right and the centre-left) rather than between blocs.

An emergence, increase in numbers or empowerment of a group in society has usually contributed significantly to political change in the country. For example, the rise of Jewish immigrants from Middle Eastern countries was partly behind the landmark victory of the nationalist Likud in the 1970s (see further below), while the consolidation of the right's dominance in the last two decades was facilitated by a massive influx of immigrants from the former USSR. In turn, the fact that religious families greatly outnumber secular ones in terms of fertility rates translates into a growing prominence of ultra-Orthodox and religious-nationalist parties.

Consensus on fundamental issues

Irrespective of the sharp disagreements and political divisions that will be outlined later on in this paper, there is, in fact, an elementary consensus among the Zionist factions, and more broadly in society, on some particularly sensitive issues for the country. This applies in particular

[10] See O. Kenig, 'Voting Patterns in Knesset Elections 2021 vs. 2020', The Israel Democracy Institute, 21 April 2021, en.idi.org.il.

to the basic tenets of foreign, economic and historical policies and the primacy of security issues, but also to the ethnically Jewish character of the state. This consensus – probably more readily perceived from the outside than from the inside – makes it possible, despite many difficulties, to maintain a stable course even in conditions of acute polarisation and protracted political crisis. As Prime Minister Ya'ir Lapid stated in his first speech after taking office: "The deep Israeli truth is that on most of the truly important topics – we believe in the same things".[11]

Many factors contribute to the fact that this minimal coherence – particularly in foreign and security policy – is maintained, such as a strong national identity and a deeply felt community of destiny, including unity when faced with danger. It is also certainly fostered by universal military service and the traditional presence of many former officers in the power elites. This coherence also derives from the imperative which permeated Israeli politics in the first decades after independence and mandated the subordination of individual interests to the needs of the state (Hebrew: *mamlakhtiyut*).

Religion

Among Israel's legal regulations, relatively few originate directly from the principles of Judaism.[12] At the same time, however, under an unwritten political contract, a number of areas remain in the remit of religious institutions, such as the Chief Rabbinate and the rabbinical courts under its authority. With regard to the Jewish population, they have exclusive control over the granting of marriages and divorces, cemeteries and burial ceremonies, the granting of kosher certificates or the process of conversion to Judaism. Elements of this contract also include the absence

[11] See 'Lapid speech: We must stop the flow of extremism from politics to streets', The Times of Israel, 2 July 2022, timesofisrael.com.

[12] E.g. the Pig-Raising Prohibition Law of 1962, the Chametz Law of 1986, the Meat and its Products Law of 1994.

(in most of the country) of public transport on the Sabbath and restrictions on commercial and service activities during this time.

The ultra-Orthodox Jewish community enjoys far-reaching autonomy, including numerous exemptions from the secular legal order. The religious schools that form the backbone of this group, which educate some 150,000 boys and men,[13] are financed by the state, but they remain fully independent from the education system and do not teach any secular subjects. Those who attend these facilities are also effectively exempt from military conscription.

Security

Since declaring its independence, the State of Israel has fought wars of varying scale and intensity in 1948–1949, 1956, 1967–1970, 1973, 1982–2000 and 2006. In total, several thousand Israeli soldiers have been killed in those wars. In addition, it has carried out a number of armed operations in the Gaza Strip (e.g. in 2009, 2012, 2014 and 2021) and experienced two Palestinian uprisings, known as intifadas (1987–1993, 2000–2005). Some 1,200 civilians and officers were killed on its side in those uprisings.

Israel's direct military opponents over the years have included Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, the Palestine Liberation Organisation, Hezbollah and Hamas. Meanwhile, a proxy war has been waged against it for decades by the Islamic Republic of Iran, which does not recognise the "Zionist regime's" right to exist and openly seeks its destruction through the states and organisations it supports.

These facts show that in its 74 years of existence, Israel has regularly faced very serious military threats and its population is exposed to the

[13] G. Malach, L. Cahaner, 'An Increase Among Ultra-Orthodox Men Enrollment in Higher Education and Yeshivas', The Israel Democracy Institute, 30 December 2021, en.idi.org.il.

risk of terrorist attacks and rocket fire. As a result of these circumstances, both the state and society live under a sense of constant and potentially mortal danger (reinforced by the memory of the Holocaust and intertwined with its remembrance).

The consequences of this state of affairs include the state of emergency that has been maintained since 1948, the central place of security issues in the functioning of the state and the subordination of many spheres of life to them, enormous public trust in the army as an institution, universal military service, and special restrictions in public spaces.

However, the widely used reference to "security considerations" also makes it possible to routinely justify, for example, any moves concerning Palestine and its population. Polemics against an argument framed in such terms is difficult – firstly because it usually refers to classified knowledge, and secondly because of the broad internal consensus that defining threats and choosing methods to combat them are the exclusive prerogative of the state, which does not have to explain its actions to anyone.

Zionism

Israel is the embodiment of the Zionist idea, or the national emancipation of the Jews through the creation of their own nation-state in Palestine.

Formed in the late 19th century, the political Zionist movement was from the outset extremely diverse ideologically. It included the left, which advocated building a socialist state, the centre, supporters of religion-based statehood, and also the nationalist right. The legacy of these currents still influences the shape of the local political party scene today.

From the beginning, there were also at least two justifications within the movement for the need to have their own statehood. According to the first approach – temporal and pragmatic – their own country was

primarily supposed to provide the Jews with a refuge from rising anti--Semitism and to be an instrument of national empowerment. The other approach – rooted in Judaism – assumed in turn that the return of the Jews to Palestine was part of some higher order in a religious or historiosophical sense.[14] For the national-religious parties, it was a condition for redemption and the coming of the Messiah. For secular nationalist factions, on the other hand, it marked the end of an era of dispersion and the re-establishment of Jewish rule in the Land of Israel, and thus the restoration of the legitimate world order, disrupted after the fall of the Second Temple in the 1st century AD, and the re-emergence of the Jews in the arena of history as a nation that is its subject rather than object.

Since its inception, the movement has been dominated by a secular and pragmatic current, but in practice the two approaches mentioned above have not always been distinctly different. Even today, they coexist and intermingle to some extent. Even in the writings of First Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, who hailed from the socialist national left, we can also find threads indicating that in his understanding the mission of the Jewish state goes beyond the temporal.

Historically, the adjective "Zionist'" referred to the struggle for the establishment of a state, while nowadays it is associated with efforts to defend it, develop and preserve its Jewish character in the spheres of culture, language or symbolism, and crucially – in the ethnic dimension. This definition is the common denominator of almost all public discourse in Israel. This also applies to the political scene – the divisions between the right, the left and the centre occur within the Zionist spectrum, and at least some of the contemporary factions derive directly from the historical currents of the movement.

14 See e.g. M. Seidler, 'Zionism's Conflicting Founding Designs and their Ideological Impact', *Israel Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3, 2012, pp. 176–190, per: jstor.org.

Outside this category are Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox parties that participate in political life but keep their distance from the state for religious reasons (the so-called non-Zionism). But most notably, the category does not include Arab parties which, despite their diverse ideological profile, mostly disapprove of defining Israel as a Jewish state and demand full practical and symbolic equality for all citizens (anti-Zionism). At the fringes of this spectrum, in turn, are left-wing organisations and parties (mostly of marginal importance) which, though formed by Jewish Israelis, refer to the transnational civic category and are therefore regarded as an extreme, post-national left (post-Zionism).

Eretz Israel

From the point of view of the Jewish national idea, settlement in Palestine and the subsequent establishment of a state marked the end of exile and a return to the ancestral homeland. Biblical history and ancient times are thus vivid not only for religious reasons, but also as a national epic that underpins the modern state. As Ya'ir Lapid, a secular politician and a centrist by local standards, stated upon taking office as Prime Minister: "Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people. Its establishment didn't begin in 1948, but rather on the day Yehoshua Bin Nun crossed the Jordan and forever connected the people of Israel with the land of Israel".[15]

This approach leads to an unprecedented immersion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in ancient history and an intermingling of the present-day political and legal order with the biblical one. This is reflected in such things as bickering, going back thousands of years, over who in Palestine is the "indigenous" people and therefore has a stronger mandate for sovereignty over its territory, holy sites, etc.[16]

15 'Lapid speech: We must stop the flow of extremism…', *op. cit.*

16 For instance, see the 2017 parliamentary address by former minister and now Israeli ambassador to London Tzipi Hotovely, *Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely to Arab MKs: You are thieves of history*, 12 July 2017, youtube.com.

This dispute is intensifying in view of the fact that the perspective of the Jewish side – which dominates the conflict – is influenced by the concept of Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel), which includes all the territories from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea and the southern regions of Syria and Lebanon. It is a religious notion, but one that has also been embraced by the secular national movement and repeatedly invoked in the Declaration of Independence and other basic legal acts.

This approach can be seen, for example, in the consistent use of the term "Judea and Samaria" in reference to the West Bank, the settlement drive that has continued in these areas since the victory in the Six-Day War, and also in the fact that Israel has never defined the maximum extent of its territorial ambitions. Juxtaposed with the biblical reference point, the "Green Line" – formed as a result of the 1949 armistice – is merely a line on the map. It crosses Eretz Israel in an arbitrary and haphazard manner and, from Israel's perspective, is only relevant insofar as the outside world is attached to it. This is reflected in the government's efforts to remove the very concept of the "Green Line" and its course from the consciousness of its own citizens. It does not appear on official maps published by the Survey of Israel and attempts to remind people about it are condemned by those in power.[17]

Never – neither under Likud, which originates from the most territorially expansionist stream of the Zionist movement, nor indeed under the Labour Party – have the authorities in Jerusalem aspired to annex the whole of the biblical Eretz Israel. This, however, has stemmed from political pragmatism and an awareness of their own limitations rather than a conviction that the historical rights of the Jewish people to territories situated on different sides of the "Green Line" were in any way different.

17 See 'Tel Aviv marks Green Line on classroom maps, bucking Education Ministry', The Times of Israel, 25 August 2022, timesofisrael.com.

Regional and cultural affiliation

In 2021, when asked about what part of the world Israel belongs to, 32% of the respondents living in Israel answered "the Middle East", 23% – "Europe", 22% – "the Mediterranean" and 10% – "none of the above".[18] These results show how difficult it is to attribute this country regionally, and in a broader sense also politically and civilisationally. Geographically, it is located in the Middle East, and this is where its most important security interests lie. At the same time, for a number of reasons – primarily in this sphere – Israeli contacts with its immediate surroundings remain limited. Out of the four land borders, just two are open – those with Egypt and Jordan (Lebanon and Syria do not recognise Israel), and El Al airlines do not offer connections to any of the neighbouring capitals. While Cairo and Amman can be reached from Tel Aviv by EgyptAir (three flights a week) and Royal Jordanian (nine), these routes are mainly used by Israeli Arabs. By comparison, there are about 80 flights a week to London, Paris and New York, about 30 to Warsaw, 15 to Moscow, eight to Chișinău and three to Helsinki, as many as to Cairo.[19]

As the decades have passed, Israel has increasingly "settled down" in the Middle East. In 2020, for example, it normalised relations with as many as four Arab states and began to rapidly develop political and economic relations with them. A change is also taking place in self-perception. The aforementioned percentage of respondents who consider their country to be Middle Eastern (32%) has clearly increased compared to the first edition of the survey in 2013, when 23% of respondents held this view.[20] Despite these processes, the Middle East is still primarily seen as culturally alien, backward and dangerous. As former Prime Minister

[18] *The Israeli Foreign Policy Index for 2021*, The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, October 2021, mitvim.org.il.

[19] Data on the number of connections for the week of 26 June – 3 July 2022, per: iaa.gov.il/en.

[20] *Findings of a Mitvim Poll on Israel's Foreign Policy*, The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, November 2013, mitvim.org.il.

Ehud Barak said back in the 1990s, Israel is "a modern and prosperous villa in the middle of the jungle".[21]

Incomparably stronger political, cultural, economic and people-to-people ties bind Israel to the Western world. This closeness is also fostered by common features – the democratic system, the rule of law, etc. (see further below). At the same time, however, a strong sense of cultural and political uniqueness and a belief in the primacy of the national-religious factor over universalism are deeply ingrained among the vast majority of Israelis. This is also reflected in international politics. Israel sees itself as a separate and independent actor in the global game, unaffiliated with any bloc. Neither does it aspire to pursuing the so-called ethical foreign policy that – at least declaratively – characterises the West.

The Holocaust...

Israel is the state of a people that has been stigmatised and persecuted for centuries and systemically exterminated in the 20th century. The extermination of Jews during World War II (Hebrew: *Shoah*) was neither the first nor the only genocide in history. But the unique nature of this atrocity is evidenced by its state-sponsored, bureaucratic nature, the industrial scale and efficiency of the killing, its grounding in a pseudo-scientific racial theory, its continental scope and maximalist goal of destroying an entire people.

For Israel, the Holocaust is simultaneously:

- an individually and collectively experienced trauma that is still vivid among the second and third generations;
- an exhortation that the threat of physical annihilation of almost an entire nation is not merely theoretical in the case of the Jews;

[21] L. Berman, 'After walling itself in, Israel learns to hazard the jungle beyond', The Times of Israel, 8 March 2021, timesofisrael.com.

- the foundation of the identity of the nation and the state – as Israeli leaders declare, the purpose of a strong and defensively capable Jewish state is to prevent a repetition of the Holocaust and to ensure that every Jew can find refuge there.

The memory of the Shoah is – in its established form – an area of social and political consensus, and any attempts to relativise or belittle it, let alone deny it outright, are met with broad cross-party condemnation. At the same time, in the internal debate, it serves as a prime ethical and political guidepost, albeit interpreted in different ways. Imperatives ranging from universalist humanism to extreme national egoism derive from the experience of the Holocaust.

...and its importance in dealings with the world

The memory of the genocide also plays an important role in Israel's relations with the outside world. Indeed, the special moral capital held by the victims of the Shoah and their relatives extends to some degree to the entire Jewish people – marked out for annihilation by the Third Reich – and to Israel as its legal international representation. On the part of the Jewish State's partners in Europe or, more broadly, in the West, this creates a kind of special ethical obligation (especially in view of the fact that hardly any European nation has a completely clear conscience on the issue of the Holocaust). This is reflected, for example, in a commitment to Israel's security, but it can also affect the willingness to assess its policies – suppress it or, paradoxically, increase it (when the partners consider Israel's policies to be out of step with its status).

The global dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The Jewish-Arab and then Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has been going on for more than a century, is not just a regional dispute between two ethnic groups over land, resources and power. It also has a global religious, political and identity dimension and, consequently, is of vital

importance to numerous groups that are not directly involved in it. This state of affairs affects both how the conflict is perceived worldwide and, because of the political, material and military support provided to the parties, how it unfolds. The Jewish diaspora and parts of the US establishment (especially the religious right) play an important role here. At the same time, however, support for the Palestinian cause has been part of the credo of the Western left and the countries of the global South (especially the Muslim ones) since the late 1960s. For representatives of many of these groups, taking sides emotionally and politically gives them a sense of purpose and confirms their belonging to a larger community. As US right-wing star Nikki Haley (who comes from a family of Sikh immigrants from Punjab) put it: “Israel is more than a country. It is a righteous cause”.[22]

From the outsider’s perspective, on the other hand, the conflict is so protracted, convoluted, and steeped in the most ancient history that it seems almost eternal. It is therefore impossible to pinpoint its origins or to determine what, in its context, should be considered an effect and what should be considered a cause.

22 See Nikki Haley’s tweet from 2 May 2022, twitter.com/NikkiHaley.

II. THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF ISRAELI POLITICS

The constitution and the legal order

Israel is a parliamentary democracy based on a tri-partite division of power. But it does not have a constitution in the form of a single legal act and there are "differences of opinion", as the Knesset website says, as to whether it has one in another form.[23] Although the 1948 declaration of independence envisaged the swift drafting of such an act, disagreements on fundamental issues meant that as early as 1950 it was decided that it would be adopted in chapters in such a way that each of them would have the status of a separate "Basic Law".

There are currently 13 such laws in force, concerning e.g. the parliament, the government, the judiciary and the armed forces. They are meant to be parts of a future single constitution, but their shape reflects the political climate of the eras in which they were introduced. For example, the Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty and the Basic Law on Freedom of Occupation, adopted shortly after the end of the Cold War (1992), are marked by the spirit of the "end of history", or liberal democracy's moment of triumph. In contrast, for example, the Basic Law: Israel – The Nation State of the Jewish People from 2018 was enacted under the sustained ideological dominance of the nationalist right.

Basic laws are adopted by a simple majority and their supremacy over other legislation is not self-evident. The "constitutional revolution" announced by the Supreme Court after the passage of two such acts in 1992 is considered to be a turning point in thinking about them. In the Court's view, the inclusion of special limitation clauses[24] in these acts

[23] See *Basic Laws*, The Knesset, m.knesset.gov.il/en.
[24] According to the limitation clause included in the two Basic Laws (Articles 8 and 4 respectively), "one is not to violate the rights accordance by this Basic Law save by means of a law that corresponds to the values of the State of Israel, which serves

meant that the Knesset de facto placed restrictions on its own future legislative activity and thus conferred a higher normative status on these laws. At the same time, the Court recognised its prerogative to examine other acts for their constitutionality and its right to potentially invalidate them.

This position, formulated in full in a 1995 judgment, unexpectedly "granted" Israel an (incomplete) constitution, limited the sovereignty of parliament and made the Supreme Court a permanent feature of the legislative process. Nevertheless, some political forces and legal circles to this day fiercely challenge it as a usurpation by the judiciary and an assault on democracy. Consequently, the answer to the question of whether Israel has a constitution depends on who you ask.

To sum up: a lack of a single basic law, a lack of political consensus on fundamental issues (see further below) and tensions between the legislature and the judiciary contribute to the fact that many sensitive issues are regulated on an ad hoc basis. For example, there are laws with a time clause – their validity has to be extended by parliament from time to time, which generates regular political tensions. Conclusive decisions on various issues are sometimes suspended or postponed. As a result, the Israeli legal order in some important areas (e.g. the Palestinian question, state-religion relations) remains fluid and unfinished to this day. This generates fierce disputes over the interpretation of existing laws or the shape of final arrangements and, as indicated above, competence disputes between the individual branches of government.

an appropriate purpose, and to an extent that does not exceed what is required". In addition, Article 7 of the Basic Law on Freedom of Occupation stipulates that it may only be amended by another act of this kind passed by an absolute majority of Knesset members.

Parliament

The 120-member Knesset is elected under proportional representation in a single nationwide constituency, and a 3.25% threshold of votes must be crossed to win seats. This privileges small factions and so-called sectoral parties – focused exclusively on the interests of one social group (religious, ethnic or socio-economic). In turn, the fact that votes are cast for a party rather than a candidate strengthens the position of leaders. As a result, parliaments are made up of many (usually more than 10) relatively small factions with quite distinctive leadership.

Despite its obvious shortcomings, this system is an enduring feature of Israeli political culture. It is underpinned by a desire to ensure representation of the broadest possible spectrum of views to reflect the diversity of society. This shape of the electoral law, coupled with typically high turnout (around 70%), gives parliament strong legitimacy and makes it the most important arena for public debate.[25]

On the other hand, chronic problems with forming a majority and five early elections in 2019–2022 show that, amidst deepening social divisions, party fragmentation does not make it any easier to reach compromise and form a stable government.

Government

In Israeli parliamentary elections, no list ever obtains a majority on its own,[26] resulting in multiparty governments. Despite this, they rarely have a comfortable majority, which increases the importance not only

[25] It is worth noting here, however, that Arab representation in the Knesset is more than 50% lower in percentage terms than the proportion of Arabs in society. In turn, they are over-represented by the Druze, who, unlike Muslims and Christians, have an affirmative attitude towards the State of Israel and who run for parliament as candidates of Zionist parties.

[26] Golda Meir came closest, with her list gaining 56 seats in 1969. In the last two decades, the winning factions have won between 28 and 38 seats.

of individual factions that make up alliances, but even of individual MPs. At the same time, coalition bargaining is aided by the fact that many small parties do not aspire to wield power on their own, but only fight for the specific (material and symbolic) interests of their electorate.

The need to satisfy the aspirations of all coalition partners means that Israeli governments feature a very large number of ministers – an average of more than 26 over the past 20 years. Unusual divisions of competences are also the norm: for example, in 2020–2021, Israel had a minister for higher education and water resources, and Benjamin Netanyahu, during his more than 12-year premiership, periodically combined his office with the functions of minister for communications, defence, health, foreign affairs or pensioners' affairs.

The most important decisions for the country, however, are taken in a much narrower circle. On foreign and security policy matters, the ministerial security committee, a de facto "government within the government", has the final say. Netanyahu, meanwhile, often bypassed any formal bodies or procedures during his years-long dominance, consulting only his closest associates and ignoring such key figures as the heads of the defence or foreign ministries.

In ethnic terms, the situation in government is fundamentally different from that in parliament, where Arab MPs have sat from the beginning. They are rarely included in ministerial cabinets and occupy only secondary positions. The first Arab entered government in 1992 (as deputy health minister) and the country got its first Arab minister in 2007 (heading the ministry of science, culture and sport). To date, there have been two Arab ministers in Israel's history, or four if the Druze are included. However, it should be emphasised that they belonged to Zionist factions. A situation where an Arab party would have the opportunity to fill government positions has not occurred so far.

The history of the political scene...

Israel's political scene has gone through unipolar (1948–1977) and bipolar (1977–2006) phases, and is now in a third – multipolar. The first 30 years were dominated – under various party banners – by Labour Zionism, or the national left (from 1968 – the Labour Party). The second period, also of 30 years, began with a historic electoral victory of the nationalist Likud. During this period, the two above-mentioned factions alternated in power or jointly formed a grand coalition government. This phase ended in 2006, when someone else won an election for the first time – Kadima formed by Ariel Sharon. From then on, the Labour Party was progressively marginalised while Likud maintained its status as one of the two main political forces. Its subsequent rivals were centrist parties (according to the local typology) that replaced the left in this role: successively Kadima, Yesh Atid, Blue and White and Yesh Atid again. In addition to these currents and actors, ultra-Orthodox and nationalist-religious parties, as well as a broad spectrum of Arab factions ranging from communists to nationalists to religious conservatives, appearing in different configurations and under different names, are also a permanent feature of Israel's political landscape.

...and the categories that organise it

The criteria for political divisions have changed a lot over the decades – some have gained in importance while others faded away. But as already mentioned, the overarching division of the Israeli scene into Zionist and non-Zionist factions remains relevant.

The former category includes almost all Israeli parties. Both historically and contemporarily, they are divided into: (1) the secular right, (2) the religious right, (3) the left and (4) the centre. Today, these orientations are represented by such parties as (1) Likud and Israel Our Home, (2) Religious Zionism, (3) Labour Party, (4) Yesh Atid. The left-wing Meretz, considered as extreme and post-nationalist by most of society,

occupies the fringes of the scene. Meanwhile, ultra-Orthodox and, most notably, Arab factions remain outside of the Zionist spectrum, with the latter also being politically isolated and excluded from government coalition scenarios.[27]

Within the Zionist spectrum, the distinctions of the left, the right and the centre have evolved throughout Israel's existence (nearly 75 years). Originally, they mainly concerned the economic and ideological model. As previously mentioned, factions representing Labour Zionism set the tone of politics in the first three decades. They built their programme on state ownership, extensive bureaucracy, collective forms of social life and a secular worldview (constantly restrained in practice by the need to forge coalitions with religious parties). The rest of the scene positioned itself in relation to this current, advocating such things as respect for religious values, cultural conservatism, marketisation of the economy, or a more hawkish course towards Israel's Arab neighbours.

The situation fundamentally changed after the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Yom Kippur War in 1973. In the following decades, the debate gradually shifted its focus to making peace with the Arab states, returning the occupied territories, the settlement activity, and finally, an end to the conflict with the Palestinians. In the context of these issues, the left increasingly called for political solutions involving the handover of land in exchange for lasting peace, while the right – motivated by security, territorial ambitions or religion – supported settlement activity and binding the occupied territories to Israel. This division was most evident in the 1990s and the early 2000s, when attitudes to peace initiatives

[27] The situation from 2021, when the Arab religious-conservative Ra'am party entered the government with four seats as one of eight parties, is a precedent that happened amid a protracted political crisis and has little chance of happening again. In a poll conducted in May 2022, 70% of respondents said they did not want a coalition with Arab factions in the future. See D. Rosenberg, 'Poll: Likud 35, Otzma Yehudit 6, Meretz 0', Israel National News – Arutz Sheva, 27 May 2022, israelnationalnews.com.

pursued by Labour Party Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak organised the political scene and defined the left and the right.

The second intifada (2000–2005), the ensuing wave of violence and the de facto freezing of the peace process undermined public confidence in resolving the conflict by political means and achieving state security through territorial concessions. This mistrust contributed to the devaluation of these issues. Combined with the aforementioned demographic changes (the growing importance of Israelis with Middle Eastern roots, the influx of immigrants from the former USSR), it resulted in a progressive marginalisation of the left, which was also discredited ideologically as incompetent, submissive towards the country's adversaries and insufficiently patriotic. Its place as the right's main rival was taken by the ideologically amorphous centre in its various party iterations. The common axis of the factions that formed the centre included liberal nationalism, state security, secularism, livelihood issues and, during Netanyahu's rule, the defence of democratic standards.

The 21st century brought a far-reaching shift to the right in the political spectrum and public debate in Israel. For example, in the four elections to the Knesset in 2019–2021, right-wing parties (ultra-Orthodox, national-religious and secular) won a total of 45–60% of seats (with an upward trend), centrist parties – between 20 and 30%, and left-wing parties – around 10%.

It is currently impossible to define a single dividing line between these camps. A number of factors need to be considered to systematise them, as outlined in the next chapter.

III. CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL LIFE

The actors

After the parliamentary elections in March 2021, 13 groupings comprising more than 20 parties entered the Knesset (see table). Some of them – the right-wing Likud, the left-wing Labour Party, the ultra-Orthodox and Arab parties – have been part of the political scene for decades. Others, mainly smaller right-wing parties – such as Yamina or New Hope – may disappear from the scene at any time, as their successes are driven by the popularity of their leaders. For almost two decades, Likud has been continuously and unquestionably dominant, outperforming the second-placed party by 50–100% in successive elections.

The dividing lines

In Israel, as in all modern democracies, fixed political credos, manifestos and lasting ideological declarations are losing their importance. Instead, personal distinctiveness, image creation, the ability to manage voter attention and, last but not least, major or minor scandals are playing a growing role. As a result, some disputes are red herrings and parties are increasingly defined not by their programmes, but by their leaders and – in the case of smaller factions – by group interests of the sector of the electorate they are courting.

Another thing to bear in mind is that, again as in many democratic countries, the sphere of political life in Israel is governed by its own logic, and there is a specific interdependence between the parties and society. Their demands, slogans and programmes on the one hand reflect the needs and views of the citizens, but on the other hand, they largely shape them themselves, such as by introducing certain topics into the debate and manipulating people's emotions. Thus, the hierarchy of issues that are the subject of political discourse seldom overlaps entirely with the hierarchy of needs of the so-called average citizen.

Table. Composition of the Knesset after the March 2021 elections

Grouping name	Leader	Profile	Number of parties in the grouping	Number of seats	Government (+) / opposition (-)
Likud	Benjamin Netanyahu	nationalism, economic liberalism	1	29	(-)
Yesh Atid (There Is a Future)	Ya'ir Lapid	liberal nationalism, secularism	1	17	(+)
Union of Sephardic Torah Observers (Shas)	Aryeh Deri	religious conservatism, Sephardic ultra-Orthodox interests	1	9	(-)
Blue and White*	Benny Gantz	liberal nationalism, social-liberalism	1	8	(+)
United Torah Judaism	Moshe Gafni	religious conservatism, Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox interests, indifference to Zionist ideology	2	7	(-)
Yamina	Naftali Bennett	conservative nationalism, economic liberalism	1	7	(+)
Israel Our Home	Avigdor Lieberman	nationalism, secularism, interests of immigrants from the former USSR	1	7	(+)

Grouping name	Leader	Profile	Number of parties in the grouping	Number of seats	Government (+) / opposition (-)
Labour Party	Merav Michaeli	national left, social democracy	1	7	(+)
Religious Zionism	Bezalel Smotrich	radical religious nationalism	4	6	(-)
Joint Arab List	Ayman Odeh	Arab minority interests	4	6	(-)
New Hope*	Gideon Sa'ar	nationalism, economic liberalism	2	6	(-)
Meretz	Nitzan Horowitz	social democracy, secularism	1	6	(+)
United Arab List (Ra'am)	Mansour Abbas	religious Muslim conservatism, Arab population interests	1	4	(+)

* In the 1 November 2022 election, Blue and White and New Hope will run together as the National Unity Party.

The differences between the two particularly involve the issues of identity and worldview, which occupy a much more important place in disputes between politicians than in the everyday experience of citizens, who are, as everywhere, primarily focused on livelihood issues.

All this does not mean that Israeli political life is devoid of content. On the contrary, it consists of a set of real and – in most cases – persistent problems that frame debate and lead to divisions. These are outlined below.

"The Jewish and democratic state"

The overarching dilemma concerns the identity of the state. The law defines it as "Jewish and democratic".[28] But there is a fierce political and ideological dispute over what these terms mean, what their conjunction is supposed to look like (and whether it is possible), which one – in the case of conflict between them – should have primacy and who should decide about it. Fundamental differences in defining "Jewishness" and "democraticness", and also in understanding the relationship between these terms, are the common denominator underlying the bulk of political debates.

In practice, these dilemmas relate primarily to three questions: what should the relationship between the state and religion look like, whether Israel belongs to all citizens or only to Jews, and what to do with the occupied West Bank and the Palestinian population living there. These three general questions, in turn, give rise to a great number of partial ones – theoretical and practical, general and specific, self-evident and those that may seem completely out of place.

[28] The definition was formulated in this way in 1985 in an amendment to the Basic Law: the Knesset (1958) and was subsequently repeated in a number of other pieces of legislation.

For example, the dispute over the "Jewish and democratic" character of the state forms part of dilemmas as diverse as whether supermarkets can be open on Saturdays,[29] whether a given Jewish settlement in the occupied territories will be connected to the electricity grid,[30] whether civil weddings should be introduced, whether ultra-Orthodox Jews should serve in the army, whether an Arab party can be part of a government coalition,[31] whether the forestation of the Negev desert is a political act,[32] whether the Supreme Court can overturn laws passed by the Knesset, etc. These are just a few examples from a huge number of questions, the answers to which depend on the answer given to the overarching question.

Positions in these discussions are not distributed along the right-left divide – they should rather be placed on a coordinate system defined by the "religious-secular" and "national-civic" axes. Hence, as we traverse Israel's rich political landscape, we come across, on the one hand, religious, anti-religious and religiously indifferent nationalists, and on the other, the left which fights for a secular state, within which both a national and a post-national wing can be identified.

The state and religion

The first of the fundamental questions posed above is whether the "Jewishness" of the state has Judaism as its foundation (and if so, what kind of Judaism), or whether it constitutes a separate, secular national identity that is rooted in religious tradition but is by definition pluralistic and unbound by the precepts of Jewish law.

[29] See J. Manville, ''Supermarket bill' sparks tensions in Israel's Ashdod municipality', i24news, 22 January 2018, i24news.tv.
[30] 'Opposition bill on connecting illegal West Bank outposts to power grid shot down', The Times of Israel, 9 February 2022, timesofisrael.com.
[31] See footnote 16.
[32] S. Hanau, 'Israeli Government Coalition Teeters Amid Conflict Over JNF Tree--planting in Bedouin Villages', Philadelphia Jewish Exponent, 12 January 2022, jewishexponent.com.

Some parties call for a more or less fundamental separation of religion and the state, including the introduction of secular marriages (also for LGBT people), divorces and burials, as well as public transport and freedom of economic activity on the Sabbath, restrictions on the autonomy of religious education, the inclusion of ultra-Orthodox men in military service, the promotion of their entry into the labour market and the legal recognition of non-Orthodox strands of Judaism.

All or most of these demands are supported by the left-wing Labour Party, the nationalist Israel Our Home, the centrist Yesh Atid, the Joint Arab List and Meretz, which goes as far as to call for the abolition of the Chief Rabbinate as the central institution with exclusive control over many aspects of Jewish life.

On the other hand, religious groups and parts of the secular right put forward (more or less radical) opposite proposals – they strive for a close relationship between the state and religion, also at the price of limiting the personal freedom of citizens. In practice, this means, for example, strict enforcement of the Sabbath, maintaining the current strict rules on conversion to Judaism, meticulous verification of the Jewish background of the "olim" (Jewish immigrants), opposition to the recognition of non-Orthodox strands of Judaism, maintaining the status quo on marriage, preserving the autonomy of religious education and introducing more elements of religious law into the secular legal order.

These demands come mainly from ultra-Orthodox and nationalist-religious factions. A separate case is Likud, historically a secular nationalist party (it even has an affiliated LGBT organisation – Likud Pride), but which has been in a long-standing alliance with religious factions whose aspirations it has consistently supported when in power.

As almost none of the above-mentioned contentious issues have been permanently regulated at the statutory level, they are addressed through lower-level legislation, interim solutions or unwritten agreements.

This lack of conclusive resolutions means that Israel is regularly rocked by heated debates in which one side challenges or undermines the existing legal framework.

From the perspective of the outside observer, these discussions may sometimes seem incomprehensible or even trivial (e.g. the dispute over whether hospital security has the right to take away sandwiches and cakes brought by visitors for their relatives during Passover). However, they touch on fundamental issues, i.e. the boundaries between personal freedom and religious precepts, and as legal problems formulated in this way, they end up in the Supreme Court[33] and even lead to political crises.[34]

The changing demographics of the country, including the systematic increase in the proportion of the ultra-Orthodox population, which is projected to make up 25% of Israeli society in about 25 years, means that the issue of state-religion relations will likely remain a central political issue in the country for a long time to come, and also result in increasing polarisation.

Jewish-Arab relations in Israel

The other aspect of the debate about the "Jewish and democratic" character of the state concerns the attitudes of political forces towards Arab citizens and residents. And these are varied. Almost all sides of the spectrum (with the possible exception of the extreme right) hail individual successes achieved by Arab citizens in Israeli society, e.g. in sport, culture, science or state administration. At the same time, the right, which sets the tone of public debate, tends to treat them collectively with hostility and distrust – portraying them as a security threat and a fifth column. It also demands that they demonstrate their loyalty as a condition

[33] H. Levi Julian, 'Israel's Supreme Court Approves Chametz on Passover in Hospitals', The Jewish Press, 30 April 2020, jewishpress.com.
[34] N. Shpigel et al, 'Israel's Ruling Coalition Loses Majority as Whip Steps Down', Haaretz, 6 April 2022, haaretz.com.

for enjoying civil rights and even the right to remain in the country.[35] In practice, this means that they are expected to renounce their Palestinian national identity[36] and accept Israel as a Jewish state in a symbolic and ethnic sense. Displays of Palestinian symbolism, for example during demonstrations, are met with threats from members of the right (both extreme and within the mainstream) to complete the Nakba, or the expulsion of the Arabs in 1948.[37] In 2019, Netanyahu, as head of government, openly stated that Israel is not a state of all citizens, but of the Jewish people.[38]

To get the full picture, it should be noted that the right, while in power during Netanyahu's 12-year premiership (2009–2021), did not implement the radical points of its chauvinist rhetoric, and Arab citizens – while undoubtedly symbolically, materially and socially discriminated against – benefited from living in a country which is developed and prosperous. As Netanyahu argued (and not without reason), the Arabs live in far better conditions in Israel than under the Palestinian Authority or in any of the neighbouring Arab states.

The left and the centre dissociate themselves from chauvinist rhetoric and demand, with varying degrees of determination, that Arab citizens be granted a status as close as possible to that of the Jews. Therefore, they support measures aimed at integrating them more closely with the

[35] An example of this is a project by the leader of the Israel Our Home party to carve out the so-called Arab Triangle – an area where some 300,000 Arab citizens live in a compact way – from Israel and hand it over to a future Palestinian State in exchange for its consent to the annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. For the residents, this would mean the loss of Israeli citizenship. See A. Hofstein, B. Goren, 'Liberman: Future peace deal with Palestinians must include Arab Israelis', The Times of Israel, 9 July 2019, timesofisrael.com.

[36] Using the term "Israeli Arab" instead of "Palestinian".

[37] See e.g. *Israeli politician warns Palestinians against raising their flag at universities*, Middle East Eye, 25 May 2022, youtube.com; A. Spiro, 'Smotrich at Knesset: Ben-Gurion should have 'finished the job,' thrown out Arabs', The Times of Israel, 13 October 2021, timesofisrael.com.

[38] 'PM to star who rapped anti-Arab rhetoric: Israel 'not state of all its citizens'', The Times of Israel, 10 March 2019, timesofisrael.com.

rest of society and improving their material living conditions. However, it should be remembered here that with the well-established ideological dominance of the right, highlighting such demands carries the risk of being accused of "collaboration" and "supporting terrorists", which can deter the electorate.

The desire to preserve the ethnically Jewish character of the state, pursued by all Zionist political forces, remains the insurmountable obstacle to any modification of attitudes towards the Arabs. In 2003, for example, legislation was passed to prevent Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip from obtaining the right of residence and citizenship.[39] As a result, Arab citizens who have close relationships with people from these areas cannot live with them in Israel. This has the effect of loosening ties and increasing the distance between Palestinian communities on both sides of the "Green Line".[40]

Officially, this regulation, which is renewed every year, is meant to protect the security of the state, but politicians admit that it is primarily aimed at preventing an increase in the Arab population. This position is openly expressed not only by the national right, but also, for example, by Yesh Atid, which considers itself a liberal party. As its leader Lapid stated on Twitter: "There is no need to hide the essence of this law. It is one of the tools to ensure a Jewish majority in the State of Israel. Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people and our goal is to have a Jewish majority".[41] In the vote to extend the regulation for another year in March 2022, it was opposed – apart from the Arab parties – only by Meretz.

The fact that these provisions are maintained is striking when juxtaposed with the provisions of the Law of Return, which allows anyone

[39] See *The Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law (temporary provision) 5763, 2003*, International Committee of the Red Cross, National Implementation of IHL, ihl-databases.icrc.org.

[40] See e.g. a tweet on the Knesset's channel from 10 February 2022, twitter.com/KnessetT.

[41] See Lapid's tweet from 5 July 2021, twitter.com/yairlapid.

with at least one Jewish ancestor (at most two generations back) or who migrates to Israel as the spouse of such a person to arrive, settle and obtain citizenship.[42]

In the context of the debate about the "Jewish and democratic" character of the state, right-wingers claim outright that national ideology has and should retain primacy over any other considerations in defining its policies. In 2017, for example, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked[43] – then a star on the right side of the scene – criticised the Supreme Court for placing too much emphasis on the protection of individual rights in its rulings and devoting too little attention to the protection of Jewish demographic supremacy. She also declared at the time that "Zionism should not continue (…) and will not continue to bow down to the system of individual rights interpreted in a universal way" and that she considered the rights of individuals as important, but "not when it is disconnected from context, from our national tasks, from our identity, from our history, from our Zionist challenges".[44] The ethnic strengthening of the Jewish character of the state was also openly cited as a justification for the adoption in 2018 of Basic Law: Israel – the Nation State of the Jewish People, which intentionally omits references to the attribute of democracy.[45]

The Palestinian question

The next part of the issue of Jewish-Arab relations concerns the stances of political forces towards the Palestinian question, and specifically their attitudes to Jewish settlements, Israel's territorial ambitions and Palestinian statehood.[46]

42 *Israel's Basic Laws: The Law of Return*, per: Jewish Virtual Library, jewishvirtuallibrary.org.
43 Interior minister in 2021–2022.
44 R. Hovel, 'Justice Minister Slams Israel's Top Court, Says It Disregards Zionism and Upholding Jewish Majority', Haaretz, 29 August 2017, haaretz.com.
45 J. Lis, 'Israeli Minister Explains Why He Led the Effort to Pass the Nation-state Law', Haaretz, 7 August 2018, haaretz.com.
46 Under the 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords, the West Bank was divided into Zones A, B and C, covering 18%, 22% and 60% of the territory respectively. In Zone A, Israel

As already mentioned, these topics determined the political scene in the past. They also remain important today, with each party having to formulate its position towards them, but their importance as determinants of public debate has radically diminished. They are overshadowed in election campaigns by personality issues, rising living costs, issues pertaining to religion, the Iranian threat, and so on. In addition, since there have been no substantial negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian side for years, opinions on this matter de facto hover in a vacuum – after all, they refer to a hypothetical situation. All this favours the formulation of vague concepts and the ritualisation of discussions.

Political disputes over the Palestinian question obviously have not disappeared, but they have been downgraded. They are no longer about big issues such as the peace process or the moral dimension of the occupation, but about smaller-scale problems and how to manage the status quo, rather than how to change it. These are dilemmas such as how many Palestinian labourers should be granted permits to work inside Israel, how many of the formally unsanctioned settlement outposts in the West Bank should be legalised and connected to utilities and how many should be dismantled, how much money should be allocated to extending and strengthening the "security barrier", and so on.

In contrast to the (frozen) peace negotiations, developments in the West Bank are extremely dynamic. Several thousand new settlers arrive there every year, as settlements continue to expand and new ones are created. This leads to a situation where the new reality is de facto forging itself. The settler population is growing in numbers and becoming more influential politically, and the settlements are more and more functionally

handed over responsibility for security and administration to the Palestinian side, in Zone B this was only done for administration, and Zone C remains under its full control. Zones A and B, where the vast majority of the 3 million Palestinians live, consist of more than 160 unconnected "islands". These are surrounded by land of the most territorially extensive Zone C. The latter, in turn, is inhabited by an indeterminate number of Palestinians (180,000–300,000) and an ever-increasing number of Jewish settlers (estimated at around 500,000).

linked to Israel (e.g. as a reservoir of cheaper housing). In turn, the Palestinian Authority, which administers the fragmented enclaves, is becoming weaker and weaker, resulting in deteriorating prospects in the context of a possible independent statehood.

The current state of affairs is no accident. During the 12 years of Netanyahu's premiership, his governments consistently supported the settler movement, eroded the Palestinian presence in Area C and weakened the Authority's position. This way – through a fait accompli strategy – the balance of power and territorial holdings on the ground have shifted significantly in favour of the Jewish side.

In the political dimension, the resulting situation aligns with the interests of the Israeli right, which overwhelmingly supports settlement activity, opposes the creation of a Palestinian state and mostly prefers to manage the conflict indefinitely rather than ever end it conclusively. This position is motivated by ideological (secular or religious nationalism) as well as security considerations.

According to the right, first and foremost, no other independent state can be allowed to be established in the area of biblical Eretz Israel. Moreover, in the view of this part of the political spectrum, a possible Palestinian state would be a threat, both if it were strong and capable and if it were weak, since terrorist organisations could then operate on its territory. It is therefore better not to have one at all.

Undesirable developments – from the perspective of the right – are averted by petrifying the status quo or maintaining a state of affairs where Israel does not have to administer the dispersed enclaves of the Palestinian population on a daily basis, while the Jewish presence in the areas between them is systematically strengthened.

However, the favourable dynamic for the right does not prevent factions of this orientation from constantly tussling over who will prove more

intransigent towards the Palestinian side, support the settlers more vigourously and protect the country from real or supposed terrorist threats more effectively. Religious Zionism, the most radical in this field, demands an acceleration of the settlement enterprise and criticises successive prime ministers (including those from the right) over restrictions in this regard.

The current situation is, on the other hand, extremely difficult for those forces that consider the current logic of events to be dangerous and would like to reverse it. These are primarily the left, which has traditionally supported an end to the conflict through the creation of a Palestinian state and evacuation of some settlements, and the ideologically amorphous centre, which is clearly less determined to push for such a solution.

The right's worldview reigns supreme, the average citizen does not feel the costs of maintaining the status quo, the traumatic memories of the second intifada sap the public's willingness to engage in experiments on the Palestinian question, and the sense of strength makes Israel less willing to make any political or territorial concessions. In turn, the brutal and morally incriminating reality of Israel's occupation remains – despite its geographical proximity – almost absent from mainstream debate. Consequently, the enduring institutionalised domination over the lives of several million Palestinians is seen by most of the public as a generally unfortunate, but normalised development that absorbs little attention and is indelible in the foreseeable future.

In view of the above, raising the Palestinian issue and the peace process is extremely risky for the left and the centre – it is difficult to gain voter support from this, but it is easy to become a target of accusations of parleying with terrorists and compromising the country's security. In this situation, the concept of "limiting" or "shrinking" the conflict – expanding the scope of Palestinian self-government in Zones A and B and developing infrastructure links between the "islands" – is gaining popularity

among representatives of the political centre. This is supposed to turn the "fragmented and fragile network of autonomous islands into a contiguous and prosperous polity"[47], and consequently improve the position of the local population without the need for conclusive and politically risky decisions, including the evacuation of any settlements.

According to the official programmes, the parties' positions on the Palestinian issue are extremely diverse, but none envisages a complete withdrawal behind the "Green Line". With the traditional exception of Meretz, none of the political forces intend to discuss the status of Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem either.

The establishment of a Palestinian state is openly opposed by the religious-nationalist right (settling the territories is supposed to hasten the coming of the Messiah) and a large part of the secular right (security and identity considerations). Likud – the largest party on this side of the spectrum – does not officially take an unequivocal stance on the issue, but the steps it took during its 12 years in power leave no doubt that its stance is similar. The left and the centre call for a two-state solution and varying degrees of Palestinian sovereignty. The ultra-Orthodox parties, in turn, do not usually take an active part in these debates (as in other debates that do not directly concern the interests of their electorate).

For Bibi and against him

A separate dividing line is marked by political and personal attitudes towards Netanyahu, commonly referred to as Bibi – the man who has dominated the nation's public life over the past dozen years or so. His stature is such that, regardless of whether he is currently in power or in opposition, he single-handedly warps the political landscape. Moreover,

[47] Quotes are taken from an article by the author of this concept: M. Goodman, 'Israel's Surprising Consensus on the Palestinian Issue', The Wall Street Journal, 14 July 2021, wsj.com.

he polarises the public sphere to such an extent that the dispute over him at times becomes sharper, more uncompromising and more important for the shape of the party scene than any of the disputes described above. Consequently, for much of Likud's twelve-year rule, Israeli political life played out between camps brandishing the slogans "only Bibi" (the broad right-wing camp) and "anyone but Bibi" (everyone else).

There is no doubt, for example, that resentment towards Netanyahu and fear of his return were the only binders of the so-called government of change formed in June 2021. It brought together the hard nationalist right, the centre, the left and an Arab party, which, by the standard logic of the local scene, should never have happened. However, only such far-reaching mobilisation made it possible to oust this politician from power. As one local commentator said: "The pygmies have knocked down the elephant".

There are both worldview perspectives and personal reasons for this powerful influence that Netanyahu wields on the political scene. His achievements in the field of diplomacy and security are quite widely commended among representatives of all factions. At the same time, in the internal dimension, from the perspective of the left, the centre and the Arab parties, he symbolises all that is worst – national chauvinism, savage struggle against opponents, deliberate escalation of divisions, pandering to religious circles, corruption and degradation of political culture. On the right, in turn, there is a long list of figures ideologically close to him and associated with him in the past whom he has marginalised, expelled or deceived, or who pin their hopes for claiming leadership of the right on his departure.

Approach to security

As mentioned at the beginning, ensuring the country's security is one of the most important themes of Israeli policy. This general term entails the need to counter a variety of threats – Iran's nuclear and ballistic

missile programme, its proxies and regular forces in Syria, pro-Iranian militias in Lebanon, rocket fire from Gaza, as well as terrorist attacks. Understandably, individual forces differ in their approaches to these challenges, but – especially among the right and the centre – there are hardly any cardinal policy divergences in this respect. The situation is different when it comes to the credibility of individual politicians. After several years of Netanyahu's dominance and his systematic smear campaigns against the left (portraying it as weak, naive and dangerous when it comes to maintaining security in the country), these issues are mainly associated with him. At the same time, others – such as Lapid or former Chief of General Staff Benny Gantz – have consistently demonstrated that they are no less tough and determined in this area. Regardless of ideological colours, governments usually also include a significant proportion of former high-level military officers, including generals.

Supreme Court actions

The Israeli right points out that overreaching moves by the Supreme Court are nothing more than illegitimate usurpation and interference with the sovereignty of the legislative power. As former Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said when commenting on its interventions in the national legal order, "democracy is running away from the nation".[48] According to this narrative, shared by much of the right, the institution is a bastion of left-liberal forces which are unable to accept their decline, so they try to retain influence over the country's political life and restrict the democratic rights of the people in a liberal-universalist spirit. This perspective of the right wing results in its repeated – though so far unsuccessful – efforts to narrow the prerogatives of the Supreme Court through legal and procedural methods, but also by turning public opinion against the judicial authorities.[49] According to the left, the

[48] Y.J. Bob, 'Shaked: Judges are not the sons of light, legislators are not sons of darkness', The Jerusalem Post, 22 December 2017, jpost.com.
[49] See e.g. D. Scheindlin, *The Assault on Israel's Judiciary*, The Century Foundation, 7 July 2021, tcf.org.

centre and that part of the right which has split with Netanyahu, these actions threaten the rule of law and democracy.

Tackling economic problems

With the exception of brief downturns triggered by the global financial crisis and then the pandemic, Israel has seen rapid economic growth over the past two decades. But at the same time, high living costs – primarily due to rising property prices – and widening social inequalities are becoming increasingly important problems. The latter are apparent on many levels: between the social mainstream and the cultural enclaves of the ultra-Orthodox and most of the Arab population (together some 30% of the population); between the affluent Tel Aviv conurbation (4 million inhabitants) and the country's peripheries; between the high-tech sector and the rest of the economy, and so on.

These developments make economic and social issues important topics in election campaigns. Individual political currents have their own distinct traditions in this area: the left is concerned with the welfare state, the secular and national-religious right with economic liberalism, the centre with intermediate solutions, and the ultra-Orthodox parties aim to secure the largest possible state subsidies for their communities. At the same time, few parties currently have coherent, comprehensive socio-economic programmes fully based on a specific economic doctrine, and proposals concerning this area tend to be formulated ad hoc, depending on the needs of the moment.

SUMMARY

Israel's political life has many features in common with the state where it unfolds, which is full of paradoxes and extremes. On the one hand, the country is developed, prosperous and influential, on the other – from the European point of view – it is characterised by an unprecedented scale of makeshift legal and political arrangements. It is not entirely clear what borders it has or would like to have, and the status of its constitution is a contentious issue. It has been mired for decades in an unresolved conflict with the Palestinians. The state-religion relations remain unregulated and many regulations important for its functioning have to be renewed every now and then. On top of this, millions of its citizens de facto live in cultural enclaves and existing laws are sometimes applied *à la carte* depending on the type of population that is dominant in a particular region.

If we take the modern European state as a reference point, the picture of Israel also stands in contrast to it in terms of constitutional, humanitarian and legal standards. Of course, it is a vibrant, pluralistic democracy whose society highly values freedom of speech, fierce disputes and flat hierarchies, and it is the only outpost of Western, liberal morality in the Middle East (an example being the Tel Aviv Pride march of the LGBT community, held since the late 1970s and now attracting around 200,000 participants every year). It is also undoubtedly a state under the rule of law, where legislation and executive activity are effectively controlled by independent courts. But at the same time, it is in some ways reminiscent of the European state from the first half of the 20th century, when leading democracies simultaneously exercised military, political and economic power over other ethnic groups. In that era, no one was surprised either by the presence of ethnocentric views in public debate or by the use of national myths and legends to justify the pursuit of territorial expansion and attainment of "historical" borders. The Israeli attitude towards national minorities is also characteristic of that period – though they have the right to exist they must accept a subordinate status to the dominant ethnic group and convincingly demonstrate their

loyalty. This can be seen, for example, in politics, where cooperation with national minority parties or drawing on their support weighs heavily on the image of mainstream forces.

Israel is thus a state straddling the 20th and 21st centuries – modern and developed, yet routinely appealing to ethnic nationalism. This state of affairs is also reflected by the contours of the political scene and public life.

At the most general level, there is a basic consensus among Zionist factions on the preservation of the Jewish character of the state, the need to defend it against external threats, and the main tenets of foreign policy. But at the same time they are locked in a fierce dispute over the attitude to religion and, to a lesser extent, to Arab citizens, and about what to do with the Palestinian question and with deepening economic inequalities. These frictions are exacerbated by the fact that many fundamental issues for the country have never been resolved (such as the constitution and state-religion relations).

There is no doubt that, at this stage, the nationalist and/or religious right has won this confrontation politically and ideologically and the secular Zionist left has lost it. The parties representing this tendency – even if, as with the so-called government of change, they participate in governance – can at best focus on modifying specific aspects of the functioning of the state according to their worldview, rather than on setting the general directions it would follow. While the centrist factions – currently the only relatively realistic electoral alternative to national-religious rule – are trying to contain the radical zeal of the right with slogans of moderation, common sense, searching for a middle way, etc., they are not in a position to present any coherent and viable alternative. They will also certainly not invest political capital in an issue as risky and socially unpopular as a possible new attempt to settle the conflict with the Palestinians. They can therefore moderate the trajectory imparted to Israeli political life by the dominant right, but not reverse it. This situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

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