

The Israeli Protester

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In their massive and definitive five-nation study of political action Samuel Barnes and Max Kaase note that 'slowly but surely during the last few years, the *idea* of unconventional political participation [public protest, etc.] as a legitimate resource of democratic citizenship has spread out into the wider political community... becom[ing] a significant part of the political repertory of many ordinary people in diverse sectors of society'.¹

In Israel, as well, public protest has become an accepted part of the political landscape over the last fifteen years. But despite a few impressionistic studies of certain protest groups² no empirical enquiry has been attempted – with regard to both the legitimacy of protest and to actual citizen participation. The present essay is a first attempt at placing Israel within the context of other Western democracies on the general topic.

Our data are the result of a public opinion poll taken in December 1981, thus testing the protest potential which existed before the 'Peace for Galilee' operation. It should be emphasized that with the

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¹ S.H. Barnes, M. Kaase, *et al.*, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies*, Beverly Hills (Sage Publications) 1979, p. 59. The five countries are the Netherlands, Britain, the United States, West Germany and Austria.

² See, e.g., E. Sprinzak, 'Extreme Politics in Israel', *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, 5 (Fall 1977), pp. 33–47; E. Etzioni-Halevy, 'Protest Politics in the Israeli Democracy', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 90, no. 3 (Fall 1975).

Table 1

<i>Annual Number of Israeli Protest Events, 1950-1979</i>					
<i>Year</i>	<i>Protest Events</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Protest Events</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Protest Events</i>
1950	69	1960	26	1970	56
1951	50	1961	37	1971	134
1952	35	1962	27	1972	122
1953	46	1963	52	1973	103
1954	56	1964	36	1974	132
1955	24	1965	47	1975	150
1956	34	1966	76	1976	119
1957	23	1967	42	1977	102
1958	36	1968	42	1978	112
1959	26	1969	45	1979	241

exception of one question asked in January 1950, no polling on the topic of public protest had ever been done before in Israel. The questions themselves do not exactly replicate the Barnes and Kaase study, but are similar enough for comparative purposes. Additional questions were asked as well to further round out the Israeli picture.

Background: 1950-1979

While public opinion studies in themselves can accurately portray what individual citizens think and do about public protest, it is far more useful to first place this data within a broader framework: how many protest events occurred, what trends emerged over time, etc. However, few nationwide studies can even attempt this type of research given the methodological problems involved in trying to cover all protest events in large countries. As a result, the present project used a local source - the Israeli English-language daily, *The Jerusalem Post*, thereby obtaining a far more accurate background picture against which to assess the poll results.³

As can be seen from Table 1 there has been a sharp increase in the number of Israeli public protest events in the 1970s. The possible reasons for this will be discussed later in this essay. What is certain, though, is the fact that public protest in Israel has become an almost endemic part of the political scene. While perhaps somewhat extreme compared to other years during the latter decade, 1979 saw on average twenty protest events every month. Not since the anti-Vietnam War period in the US has any Western

³ For a full discussion of the methodology employed see my 'Public Protest and Systemic Stability in Israel: 1960-1979', in *Comparative Jewish Politics: Public Life in Israel and the Diaspora*, eds. S. Lehman-Wilzig and B. Susser, Ramat Gan (Bar-Ilan University Press) 1981, pp. 171-210. The study extended to include the 1950-59 decade as well, and detailed results will be published in future articles.

The present poll commissioned and drawn up by the author was conducted through the offices of Dr. Mina Zemach (DAHAF), and included a representative sample of 1250 adult Israelis (excluding the Arab and *kibbutz* sectors).

democracy undergone such high levels of quasi-legal extra-parliamentary activity.⁴ The two periods or countries, of course, are not strictly comparable. If anything, Israeli protest in the 1970s entailed a significant relative decline in violence, to the extent that only one in ten such events were violent as compared with one in six the preceding decade. But regardless of protest intensity, the use of such public means of political self-expression in Israel had become *de rigueur* by the end of the decade.

Legitimacy and Personal Participation

Whereas Barnes and Kaase asked their respondents to score the legitimacy of 'lawful demonstrations' among a list of other types of activities (e.g., rent strikes, petitions, etc.), our Israeli respondents were asked a general question along an ordinal scale of five responses (see Table 2). Since in almost all cases (except response item No. 7) those Israelis who legitimated less 'lawful' behavior also accepted 'non-violent, licensed demonstrations' we shall use the sum total of 'legitimacy' (items 1-6) in order to compare the results with the other five democracies' response to 'lawful demonstrations'.

As might have been expected, given the Israeli hyper-protest situation which we see in reality, Israelis have a high rate (75.9 per cent) of protest legitimation - second only to the Dutch (80 per cent) in the percentages of people who legitimate such unconventional political activity, slightly ahead of even the US (73 per cent), and significantly ahead of Germany (62 per cent) and Austria (58 per cent). Yet this result, in one sense at least, is quite startling, for it marks a complete reversal of attitudes among the Israeli population since the establishment of the state. In order to determine just how much attitudes have changed, the exact same question which was asked in January 1950 was included in the present survey: 'In your opinion, are protest demonstrations by the unemployed justified or not?' Whereas back then only 37 per cent thought this type of protest was justified (*vs.* 56 per cent who thought not), thirty years later 61.4 per cent accepted its legitimacy (as opposed to 24.1 per cent).⁵ As in the overall picture of actual protest events, Israelis have come a long way in their attitudes to the whole phenomenon.

Regarding actual participation in protest events, Israel stands far ahead of all the other five countries. Only a very small proportion of

⁴ This excludes such countries as Italy where patently illegal terrorist activity occurs almost daily. Such terrorism is not only illegal, but is aimed at undermining the very system of government itself. Israeli protest, by comparison, is overwhelmingly geared to changing public policy or laws - not the constitutional regime.

⁵ For a report on the poll which was conducted by the Israel Institute for Applied Social Research, see *The Jerusalem Post*, May 25, 1950, p. 2.

Table 2

Attitudes Towards Protest Legitimacy: Israel vs. Five Nations¹

<i>Israel</i>	%	<i>Total Approval²</i>
1) Non-violent event licensed by the police	45.9%	} 75.9%
2) Non-violent event, unlicensed	21.8%	
3) Disturbance of public order (e.g. traffic) or occupying government offices	3.4%	
4) Destruction of property (e.g. breaking windows, smashing office equipment)	0.2%	
5) Violence against people	3.6%	
6) Only items Nos. 1 and 3	1.0%	
7) Only item No. 3	0.2%	
8) Did not respond	1.4%	
9) Do not justify any type of protest activity	22.5%	

Table 3

Protest Legitimacy and Participation by Socio-Economic Variables

<i>Age:</i>	<i>18-22</i>	<i>23-30</i>	<i>31-40</i>	<i>41-50</i>	<i>51-60</i>	<i>61+</i>
'Yes' Legitimacy	82.8%	77.7%	76.6%	76.1%	75.0%	64.9%
'Yes' Participated	23.7%	19.8%	23.1%	21.7%	22.8%	18.5%

<i>Education:</i>	<i>University</i>	<i>High School Grad.</i>	<i>Partial High School</i>	<i>Elementary</i>
'Yes' Legitimacy	83.1%	78.4%	69.1%	67.2%
'Yes' Participated	32.8%	19.9%	16.2%	13.2%

Country	Disapprove		Approve	Approve		Total Approval ¹
	Very Much	Disapprove		Very Much	Approval ²	
Netherlands	5%	12%	50%	30%	80%	
U.S.	8%	16%	47%	26%	73%	
Britain	7%	22%	52%	13%	65%	
Germany	17%	19%	39%	23%	62%	
Austria	18%	16%	34%	24%	58%	

¹ Barnes & Kaase, *op. cit.*, pp. 544-546.

² 'Lawful Demonstrations'

Income:	High	High/Middle	Middle	Low/Middle	Low
'Yes' Legitimacy	88.7%	90.0%	79.9%	62.4%	61.5%
'Yes' Participated	30.5%	23.4%	24.6%	16.7%	16.5%
Origin:	Children Eur./Am.	Children As./Afr.	Israeli 2d Gener.	Eur./Am.	Asia/Afr.
'Yes' Legitimacy	86.8%	77.2%	77.0%	73.8%	69.0%
'Yes' Participated	26.5%	20.7%	22.2%	21.7%	16.8%
Ideology:	Right	Moderate Right	Moderate Left	Left	
'Yes' Legitimacy	81.4%	80.6%	78.7%	69.4%	
'Yes' Participated	21.8%	20.1%	27.8%	25.9%	

their populations get personally involved in protest demonstrations: Britain and Austria 6 per cent each, the Netherlands 7 per cent, Germany 9 per cent, and the US 11 per cent. By comparison, Israelis have participated at almost double the rate of the US - 21.5 per cent. In other words, the endemic state of Israeli protest is not the result of a small nucleus of 'professional gadflies' constantly sounding off in collective fashion, but rather involves a relatively broad - albeit still minority - cross-section of Israeli society. Indeed, exactly half of the self-admitted protesters acknowledged joining a protest event only once, while the other half became involved two or more times (twice - 5.4 per cent; 5 or more times - 2.6 per cent; in between - 3.3 per cent).

What accounts for such a high rate of protest participation on the part of Israelis? While there are a number of possible causes for Israeli protest, a fourth question which was asked of our sample suggests that part of the reason stems from the perception that protest in Israel is efficacious. We again asked a question similar to one in the Barnes and Kaase study: 'In your opinion, do lawful protest activities in Israel achieve their purpose?' While the 'very effective' response rate among the five countries ranged from 4 per cent (Austria) to 17 per cent (Netherlands and Germany), 24.9 per cent of the Israeli sample felt that public protest either 'always' (5.8 per cent) or 'generally' (19.1 per cent) achieves its goal.⁶ Since this figure of one quarter of the Israeli population is quite close to the over one fifth who have actually participated, one can surmise that the perception of protest effectiveness has some bearing on actual protest activity. Whether protest in Israel really is effective is another matter altogether, one requiring a type of analysis different from that presented here.

The overall picture with regard to the past, then, is quite clear. The number of protest events in Israel is steadily (if erratically) on the increase. The attitudes of the Israeli public have undergone a profound shift, to the extent that a large majority fully legitimate public protest. And finally, on a personal level many more Israelis have taken part in such protest activity than their overseas democratic counterparts. But social trends, however clear, can never be simply extrapolated into the future. Our next task is to try to evaluate what lies in store for Israel in the future.

⁶ On 'somewhat effective', the variation is 9 per cent (Austria) to 51 per cent (US), whereas 40.2 per cent of Israelis thought that 'occasionally' it succeeded. This latter percentage, however, does not include an additional 15.6 per cent of the Israeli sample choosing 'infrequently'. With it, 80.7 per cent of Israelis think public protest has at least a chance of achieving its goal. Without it, the figure is 65.1 per cent. This compares to 67 per cent (US), 63 per cent (Netherlands), 58 per cent (Britain), 55 per cent (Germany) and 13 per cent (Austria). See Barnes and Kaase, *op.cit.*, pp. 551-53 for the full table of figures.

While prognostication is extremely hazardous, one can at least attempt to pinpoint certain indicators with regard to probable future behavior. A breakdown of the responses to the 'legitimacy' and 'participation' questions, according to various socio-economic groups, provides such future indicators. If the highest 'legitimacy' and 'participation' responses come from those groups who will in the future constitute a larger part of Israeli society than is the case today, then we may surmise that the protest phenomenon will continue to expand. The converse socio-economic group responses, of course, would augur the opposite.

There are five independent variables which have shown clear patterns of change in the past, and can be expected to do so in the foreseeable future: age, education, country of origin, income, and ideological orientation. In both of our two central questions distinct variations can be found along the spectrum of each of the five variables. More germane, however, is the fact that in almost all of them the future trend points in the same direction, to even more protest.

Table 3 which refers to the question of legitimacy illustrates this quite clearly. With regard to age groups, the youngest (18-22 years) shows the highest rate of legitimizing protest (82.8 per cent) while the oldest age group (61+ years) exhibits the lowest rate (64.9 per cent). Since it is the former bracket which constitutes the wave of the future, their greater acceptance of protest means that in a number of years protest activity in Israel will have little if any cultural stigma attached to it.

'Education' shows the same tendency. Those who attended university are most prone to legitimize protest - 83.1 per cent - as opposed to the 67.2 per cent rate of those with only an elementary-school education. Here too the trend in Israeli society is toward ever higher levels of education, further reinforcing the normative legitimacy of protest in the future. Perhaps surprisingly, the same is true with regard to level of income. By and large, the higher the income level the greater the tendency to legitimize protest: 90 per cent of the upper middle class compared to only 61.5 per cent of the lower class. One might have expected more of the lower classes to view public protest as a legitimate means of political expression, given their lack of formal political sophistication and greater sense of relative deprivation, but apparently their innate conservatism and/or 'subject' political culture predominate.

In fact, a question designed to test for feelings of 'relative deprivation' was included in our survey: 'Is your economic situation like others with the same education, talents, and work ethic, or is it above this average or below it?' 7.7 per cent answered 'above', 76.0 per cent 'similar', and 12.1 per cent 'below' (4.2 per cent did not answer). This suggests, first of all, that relative

economic deprivation is not a major problem in Israeli society. More relevant to our point here is the breakdown on the 'legitimacy' question. Those who felt themselves deprived were much less likely to legitimize protest (66.9 per cent) compared to those who felt themselves privileged (83.3 per cent). The same spread holds true for actual participation: 32.3 per cent of the 'privileged' have participated in at least one protest event, while only 21.9 per cent of the 'deprived' have done so. This overall result is remarkable in light of several works in the general literature which indicate a substantial possible connection between relative deprivation and public protest. Obviously, with regard to Israel one must be very careful in trying to link the two. Be that as it may, should Israel continue to succeed in raising the economic level of her population, a further strengthening of protest legitimacy is in the offing.

The fourth variable - country of origin - is a bit more complex, but the general conclusion is the same. While 75.9 per cent of the total sample accepted the legitimacy of lawful public protest, immigrants tended to answer 'yes' in lower numbers: 69 per cent of Asian/African origin and 73.8 per cent of European/American origin. First-generation *sabras*, on the other hand, had a higher-than-average 'yes' response: 77.2 per cent of those born to Asian/African parents, and 86.8 per cent of those born to European/American parents. Thus, with immigration in Israel down, and the 1948-1953 immigrant wave beginning to die out, one can again expect protest legitimacy to be reinforced. Here, however, the long-term trend is not so clear, since second-generation *sabras* answered 'yes' at a slightly lower percentage than their first-generation counterparts (77 per cent), so that the latter's very high 'legitimacy' response may be due to factors unique to their generational situation.

Finally, we arrive at 'ideological orientation'. The question posed in the survey was an open one: 'Where do you place yourself on the political map; which ideology is closest to yours - the Left, Moderate Left, Moderate Right, or Right?' It should be noted that the non-response rate to this question was the highest of all questions (16.7 per cent), probably due to its great ambiguity, but at the same time such ambiguity ensured that no political party connotations would distort the respondents' self-identification. When crosstabulated with the question on legitimacy the results proved to be by far the most surprising and inexplicable in the entire survey.

The further one moves to the Right along the ideological spectrum the higher the rate of protest legitimacy. Whereas only 69.4 per cent of the Left legitimized lawful protest, a remarkable 81.4 per cent of the Right did so (the Moderate Right and Moderate Left are much closer here to the Right than to the Left). This result is no statistical fluke, for when the legitimacy question is crosstabulated

with 'present' party preference, the *Likud* again leads the way with a 77.7 per cent 'yes' response compared to 68.9 per cent of 'hawkish Laborites' and 74 per cent of 'dovish Laborites and/or *Mapamniks*'. Such a response is all the more remarkable given the fact that today such protest would have to be directed mostly at the ruling *Likud*.

These findings not only contradict the findings of recent work on political intolerance in Israel,⁷ but seem to upend several shibboleths of the Israeli political scene. They can hardly be explained by 'country of origin' since although the *Likud/Right* garners greater support today from the Oriental communities, it is precisely these groups who show relatively less acceptance of protest, as we have already seen. The same is true for educational level and income level. Not even 'age' seems to be much of a factor here. The Left draws 38.8 per cent of its strength from the under-30 group (those who legitimate protest the most), compared to a slightly higher 46.9 per cent of the Right. In short, ideological and political orientation seems to be the most salient factor in one's attitude towards protest legitimacy - but in precisely the opposite direction than one might expect.

What this means in terms of future protest potential is as clear as our other four variables. Israel over the past several years has undergone a profound ideological and political shift to the Right, and there are no signs as yet that the momentum is decreasing. Ideological orientation, then, adds a final corroborating element to the prognosis that Israeli protest has still not reached its peak.

If one's normative acceptance of protest indicates a possible greater predisposition to participate in protest, even more so does the act of having already personally protested. While one need not belabor the statistics (see Table 3), here too the trend is clear. With the singular exception of ideological orientation, our other four variables present the same picture, albeit not quite as strongly: the younger the Israeli (except for the 23-30 age group) the higher the rate of past protest (already); the more educated, and the higher the economic class, the greater the probability of past protest participation; the same with regard to those born in Israel relative to their foreign-born parents. Again, the protest wave of the future has already built up 'street' experience.

These two indicators - legitimacy and past participation - can only implicitly suggest what the future may bring. When at all possible it is always best to ask the person involved. Thus, the survey included the additional question (asked only of those 77.9 per cent who responded negatively to the previous question on past participation): 'Do you think that in the future you would participate in protest events on issues which are important to you?' Fully one third (33.1 per cent) answered 'yes', constituting another

⁷ See D. Goren and M. Shamir, 'Political Tolerance, Freedom of the Press and Campaign Violence', in *Elections in Israel - 1981*, ed. Asher Arian (forthcoming).

25.8 per cent of the entire sample (above the 21.5 per cent who have already joined in such a protest event) ready and willing in the right circumstances to join the fray tomorrow. Put another way, among the Israeli public lies a human reservoir of potential protesters which is larger than the entire present protest population, the latter already having made Israel one of the most protest-prone democratic societies in the world today.

Causes and Prescriptions

Whether the trend towards more political protest augurs positively or negatively for the future is a question best left to the political philosopher and is beyond the scope of this study in any case. But assuming that Israeli society would like to dampen the expansion of this phenomenon, one must attempt to discover just what the essential cause is.

There are a number of 'environmental' factors which partly account for the increase in protest and its acceptance over the past decade or so. The introduction of television has proved to be a facilitating factor in the dissemination of public dissatisfaction. Both those behind the cameras and public groups in front of them have learned how to manipulate each other for their respective purposes, thereby exaggerating (or at least focussing on) the 'magnitude' of protest. Thus, the heightened public consciousness of the existence of protest and its utility in the political arena feeds on itself and leads to increased protest which the medium of TV is only too willing to exploit. Protest is 'news'; and the more spectacular, the more 'newsworthy' it becomes.

A second factor in the rise of protest has been the breakdown of consensus in Israel – both within the government and among the public. During the early years of the state, the government was able to effectively mold public consent on a wide array of issues. This was accomplished by the Labor establishment's tight control over such quasi-governmental institutions as the *Histadrut* and indeed the parties themselves (through the party newspapers, etc.). With the demise or weakening of such institutions of control, and as a result of increasing dissent within the ruling coalition parties, the national consensus began to break down. Increasing governmental weakness led to increased protest. Government dissension led to public dissent.

No less important is the question of political communication, i.e., expanding and opening the formal channels of political discourse. It is no coincidence that the rise in the annual number of protest events coincides with the reverse image decline in the Israeli public's political party affiliation and activity. The political parties in Israel have not been willing to allow public scrutiny of their membership rolls, but few observers doubt that most have suffered serious erosion since the establishment of the state. In order to

determine the current state of affairs with regard to conventional political activity, therefore, we asked our respondents: 'Are you active in any way in Israeli political or public life?' The response was woeful.

Only 3.2 per cent admitted to being 'an active party member', while a mere additional 8.2 per cent acknowledged being 'an inactive party member'. Indeed, 'active independents' (3.8 per cent) outpolled the 'active party members'. Altogether 82.4 per cent of our sample defined themselves as 'inactives', a figure surprising not only in light of the relatively great interest and knowledge which Israelis exhibit on public matters, but perhaps even paradoxical given that in the same poll 21.5 per cent admitted to having participated in at least one public protest event. But this is precisely the point – Israelis differentiate between their activity in the (institutional) sphere on the one hand, and their extra-parliamentary (non-conventional) activity on the other, activity which is a result of the lack of opportunity to express themselves in the formal sphere.

Numerous previous studies have described the Israelis' relatively low sense of political efficacy. As Etzioni-Halevy notes:

In practically all surveys the percentage of those professing high political efficacy is perceptibly smaller than the percentage of those professing high political interest. Even when extensiveness of interest in 'politics' is compared to confidence in ability to influence policy, political interest *still* clearly exceeds political efficacy... Thus, most surveys indicate that a clear discrepancy has developed among the Israeli public between declared political involvement...and confidence in political efficacy.

She calls this state of affairs one of 'blocked involvement', and suggests 'that blocked involvement with its attendant stress...may, under certain conditions, lead to a hostile type of interference'⁸ – public protest.

This point emerges quite clearly on a different plane. Elsewhere I have shown how Israeli protest *versus* the central government authorities has risen proportionally over the decades, while protest addressed to the local authorities has declined in relative terms.⁹ Here again one can trace the latter phenomenon to the fact that the localities in Israel have developed new political institutions (regional councils, etc.), channels of communication (local newspapers, etc.), and even independent (locally based and supported) parties which incorporate much larger segments of the population into the political process – whereas very little of a similar nature has been done on the national level.

In the final analysis, it is best to ask the public directly what it

⁸ E. Etzioni-Halevy, *Political Culture in Israel: Cleavage and Integration Among Israeli Jews*, New York (Praeger Publishers) 1977, pp. 78, 86.

⁹ 'Public Protests Against Central and Local Government in Israel', *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* (forthcoming December 1982).

thinks are the reasons for an increase in public protest. Our survey outlined six possibilities which were offered to the respondents, from which they were permitted to choose a maximum of three answers. The most agreed-upon reply (by a relatively wide margin of 7.5 per cent ahead of the second most popular) was: 'There are not enough other means for the citizen to express his opinions to the authorities'. Indeed, the next most agreed-upon answer has similar implications: 'Whoever protests publicly achieves something. This is one of the few ways of achieving something.'

Most interesting, however, is the fact that a gap of almost 9 per cent exists between the most popular answer, and the third one: 'There is a need to protest because the government does not respond to the wishes and needs of the public'. Here is a clear confirmation of what was suggested earlier - policy dissatisfaction may be less of a salient factor in public protest than the lack of opportunities for public self-expression. This, however, is not something unique to Israel. In the summary of their five-nation protest study, Barnes and Kaase come to much the same conclusion:

...the increasing emphasis on participation, information feedback, and control of administrative decision-making is in no way part of a new, more ideological belief system aimed at overcoming the liberal democratic order. Quite the contrary: under a functionalist perspective these developments [protest, etc.] can very well be regarded as one possible response to ossified political structures that need to be cracked in order to accommodate and facilitate peaceful sociopolitical change.¹⁰

What then, can be done in Israel? While an exhaustive list is also beyond the scope of this essay, a few central directions readily come to mind based on the above discussion. First, a change in the electoral system to some form of district representation whereby the citizens would have a specific address to turn to when they wished to get something off their chest. Second, greater democratization of the internal nominations process within the political parties so that party membership and activity for the non-'professional' offers a real chance of political influence. Third, an acceleration of the movement towards decentralized decision-making; for instance, citizen involvement in local planning as exists in Britain and Germany.

While all indicators show a continued increase in Israeli public protest in the future, there is nothing historically 'inevitable' about such a trend. If the Israeli authorities begin to take notice of not only the discrete demands of this or that protest group but of the fundamental message underlying the act of protest *per se*, then the phenomenon can be checked. Otherwise, Israeli public discourse in the future will certainly become noisier and less efficient.

¹⁰ S.H. Barnes, M. Kaase, *et.al.*, *op.cit.*, p. 532.