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CONFLICT AS COMMUNICATION: PUBLIC PROTEST IN ISRAEL,  
1950-1982 \*

1. INTRODUCTION

Public protest in Israel has been on the rise from the early 1970s and shows no sign of abating.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the first year of that decade was marked by fifty-six protests, 1979 saw two hundred and forty-one such events — on average two protests every three days! Indeed, viewed from another perspective, Israel ranks as the *most* protest-oriented polity in the democratic world today. In a poll conducted during December 1981, 21.5% of the Israeli adult population admitted to having participated in a protest event, far ahead of the previous

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1 The first two decades of Israel's existence were relatively static, despite some year to year ups and downs. The 1950s averaged forty events per annum, while the 1960s averaged forty-three. The 1970s in contrast averaged one hundred and twenty-seven.

The methodology for data collection is explained at length in my article "Public Protest and Systemic Stability in Israel: 1960-1979," which appeared in the series' previous volume *Comparative Jewish Politics: Public Life in Israel and the Diaspora*, edited by Bernard Susser and myself. It can also be found in my other articles which are cited throughout this essay. Briefly, then, the main source for the data herein is the daily newspaper, *The Jerusalem Post* (*Ha'aretz* was used as a control). All protest events and/or instances of public unrest which entailed at least ten adults were scored along a number of variables (intensity, reaction of authorities, size, duration, organization, issue, level of authority protested against, locale, nationality, and type of protest). The following were not counted: economic strikes, Arab protest in the administered territories, regular conferences issuing a protest resolution, election rallies (unless they involved a public disturbance), and political pressure without a group physical presence (telephone campaigns, petitions, press conferences).

Attitudinal data were derived from a public opinion poll which I initiated (through the good offices of Dr. Mina Zemach — DAHAF Agency). The sample included 1250 adult Israelis, excluding the kibbutz and the Arab sectors.

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record (11%) held by the U.S.<sup>2</sup>—and this some time *before* the reported 400,000 who demonstrated against the government's hesitancy to establish a Commission of Inquiry immediately after the Lebanese Sabra and Shatilla refugee camp massacres.

Given the fact that Israel's very existence has been under constant threat since its establishment, such a "world record" seems astonishing and puzzling. It is a virtual truism in political science that external danger tends to crystallize internal solidarity among all social groups, and the nation-state is no exception. Paradoxically, there is even strong evidence in Israel with regard to war years that such is the case along a multitude of non-political indicators.<sup>3</sup> Why, then, given the parlous state of the State, is protest frequency so high in Israel?

There is virtually no limit to the number of factors underlying social turmoil and public protest which have been advanced in the past by researchers from such disparate disciplines as psychology, sociology, economics, political science, criminology, cultural anthropology, history, and most recently socio-biology.<sup>4</sup>

2 Samuel H. Barnes, Max Kaase, *et al.*, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979), p. 59.

3 Simha F. Landau and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, "Israel: Aggression in Psychohistorical Perspective," in *Aggression in Global Perspective*, ed. Arnold P. Goldstein and Marshall H. Segall (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 261–86. See also G. Fishman, "On War and Crime," in *Stress in Israel*, ed. S. Breznitz (New York: Van Nostrand, 1983). From an economic standpoint, Amira Galin and Baruch Mevorach found that strikes decrease during war periods; see their "Al Politikah Ve'Sihshai Avodah," *Riv'on Le'kalkalah*, No. 108 (March 1981), pp. 35–42. The same phenomenon seems to hold for public protests, as my project indicates. No protests took place during the actual war period in 1967 and in 1973. 1982 presents a problem given the uncertainty (for the Israeli public and for the researcher) as to when the war officially "ended." The major battles ended within a month of the outbreak of hostilities. During this period there were virtually no protest events. However, opposition did build up through that summer and continued in force until June 1985, a period when Israeli soldiers were still dying in Lebanon as a result of hit-and-run attacks. Thus, in a broad sense, the 1982 War does follow the trend of its predecessors (no protest during major hostilities, a buildup of protest after their cessation), but technically 1982/3 could be considered a war-time protest period and, as such, a reversal of previous trends. In any case, regression analysis suggests that several intervening variables may be at work during the earlier war periods. See Sam Lehman-Wilzig and Meyer Ungar, "The Economic and Political Determinants of Public Protest Frequency and Magnitude: The Israeli Experience," *International Review of Modern Sociology*, vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 1985).

4 To list but a few causes and/or facilitators put forward: relative deprivation, modernization, political culture, innate human aggression, mass communications, crowd psychology, frustrated expectations, territoriality, and anomie. For a useful introduction to the specific question of causality and to the whole field in general

All are reasonable, most are valid, but none can be said to be predominant — especially given the wide variations between nations from an institutional, environmental, and population standpoint. Thus, while several factors may be found in virtually all countries, the relative weight of each may differ considerably from society to society.

A close reading of the Israeli scene suggests three general categories under which might be subsumed most of the significant factors outlined by the vast literature. These are policy output, environmental conditions, and political communication. The first two are relatively straightforward since they lend themselves to statistical analysis (however sophisticated, cumbersome, and/or open to manipulation that may prove to be). The third is more difficult to deal with quantitatively and as a result is less “popular” as an explanatory variable. In the case of Israel this is particularly unfortunate because political communication may indeed be at least as important as the other two.

This essay, then, will devote most of its attention to delineating this third general factor, bringing to bear a number of peripheral quantitative studies which indirectly illuminate the nature of the problem. The predominant focus here on political communication, therefore, should not be construed as suggesting that it dwarfs the other two in importance; rather, it is an attempt to right an imbalance in previous works which have dealt with the cause(s) of public protest in general and Israeli protest specifically.<sup>5</sup>

see Ted R. Gurr, *Handbook of Political Conflict: Theory and Research* (New York: The Free Press, 1980), especially pp. 175–219 and its massive bibliography on pp. 501–53.

- 5 In a sense, I share part of the blame in this. My first article within this project — “Public Protest and Systemic Stability . . .,” *op. cit.*, virtually ignored the issue of political communication. Indeed, I began that article by declaring that the collected data supported my hypothesis of an increased protest pressure with the consequent weakening of formal political institutions, not realizing that the causal chain may have been the reverse. Later studies in the overall research project did begin to address this aspect, as shall shortly be seen. The same myopia exists in the general literature. In Gurr’s review of the multifarious causal factors of protest and turmoil (*Handbook*, *op. cit.*), no mention is made of political (non)communication on the institutional plane. Indeed, “political communication” does not even appear in the volume’s Index of Subjects! The closest thing to my argument is Huntington’s modernization/institutionalization thesis: social modernization mobilizes the public to greater political participation; if political development lags, blockage ensues and aggressive modes of action occur instead. See Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). In a sense, my argument looks at the other side of the coin — what happens when political participation stays at relatively high levels while the formal political system *regresses* from a formerly open condition.

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### 2. POLICY DISSATISFACTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Policy dissatisfaction is the most obvious factor underlying public protest. Were one to ask virtually any Israeli protester why s/he was protesting, invariably the answer would be: "I'm against this specific law/policy."<sup>6</sup>

Given the very high level of political interest which Israelis display, it is not surprising that they are sensitive to the system's output. A poll taken in the late 1960s found 87% of the population to be "very" (61%) or "somewhat interested" (26%) in national security and foreign relations issues, with 85% discussing them "frequently" (55%) or "from time to time" (30%).<sup>7</sup> Eighty-six percent of the population read at least one daily newspaper; the most-watched TV show with the highest viewership is the nightly news report (*Mabat*). The country itself is relatively small and the government's role in daily life quite preponderant. Thus, almost nothing goes unreported and all public decisions have a strong impact on the citizen's social existence. As a result, Israelis react quickly and vociferously to what they consider to be policies harmful to their interests. In this they are qualitatively no different from most other democracies for, as Barnes and Kaase discovered in their massive project, "in all five countries, policy dissatisfaction has an impact on protest potential. In a broad sense, then, protesting is a response to dissatisfaction with specific societal goals."<sup>8</sup>

Yet, by itself, policy dissatisfaction cannot explain the phenomenon of Israeli public protest in its entirety. For one thing, wide variations in protest frequency over the years tend to indicate that more is at work here. The citizen does not live in a vacuum, reacting in reflex fashion only to stimuli from above. Rather s/he is a social being, and consequently is influenced by the general social, economic, and political environment. Thus, all things pertaining to political output being otherwise equal, significant differences relating to protest

6 This is not true of protest in many other — usually non-democratic — countries. A large part of the protest there is geared to toppling the government or even the regime. This motive is virtually nonexistent in Israel (excluding the extreme fringe on the Left and the religious fanatics on the Right). Protest against the continuation of the government has begun to increase recently, but is still usually as a result of specific policies. Israel has yet to see the "general strike" designed to topple the government.

7 Shlomit Levy, *Political Involvement and Attitude* (Jerusalem: The Israel Institute of Applied Social Research, Publication No. SL/530/E), Table 3, p. 22. On social issues the results were 67% ("interest") and 65% ("discuss"); on economic issues 69% and 63% respectively. The poll was taken in 1969.

8 Barnes & Kaase, *et al.*, *Political Action*, op. cit., p. 439.

frequency and other related aspects (e.g. intensity, duration, etc.) still manifest themselves as a result of differing environmental conditions.

A few of the most important such conditions should suffice to illustrate the point. Arguably, the central one is the economic milieu. Even here, however, the situation is complex. In a regression analysis which included virtually all the major economic variables and a few non-economic ones as well,<sup>9</sup> inflation exhibited the most consistent effect upon the frequency of protest. Less consistent, but still quite significant, was unemployment. It must be noted that in both cases this held true for protests on most *non-economic* issues as well (social, political, and religious). In other words, the fear of losing one's job and the frustration at seeing one's earning power eroded causes a general feeling of dissatisfaction, creating a mental set more predisposed to protest — even on issues not directly connected with inflation or unemployment themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Far more surprisingly, as GNP *per capita* increases and as the *rate* of such increase rises, protest frequency on all issue areas in Israel has gone up as well! The most probable reason for this is that *rapid* economic growth (a situation endemic to Israel for much of its history) leads to socio-economic dislocation. Relative deprivation can occur precisely when economic growth is at its peak, through a widening of the gap between some sectors and others.<sup>11</sup>

Another environmental condition, especially germane in the case of the State of Israel, is war. Until Operation Peace for Galilee in 1982 virtually no protest was to be found during hostilities throughout Israel's history. The immediate post-war periods display a more complex picture: social, economic, and religious protest is lower than "normal" for each respective period, while the frequency of political protest tends to be higher. This latter probably reflects the public's frustration with the government's inability to transform the fruits of military victory into any sort of permanent political achievement

9 Lehman-Wilzig & Ungar, "The Economic and Political Determinants of Public Protest . . .", *op. cit.* See too our article "Al Me'kha'ah Tziburit Ve'gomehah Ha'kalkaliim: Yisrael 1951-1979," *Ri'von Le'kalkalah*, No. 114 (September 1982), pp. 275-83, which comes to much the same conclusion although more limited in scope.

10 The consequences of inflation, especially, are both objective and subjective. Despite the most sophisticated system of linkage and indexation in the world, Israeli wage earners still suffer(ed) from salary erosion over the three- or six-month period until the next automatic raise. However, were this hole to be plugged up, the general disorientation of the consumer/worker/employer as a result of ever-rising prices may by itself be enough to cause profound social dissatisfaction. In addition, the steady devaluation of the national currency adds little to national collective self-respect, with its consequent political malaise.

11 For a fuller discussion of this see Mancur Olson, Jr., "Rapid Growth as a Destabilizing Force," *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 23 (1963), pp. 529-52.

(not to mention peace *de jure*). Thus, for example, whereas in 1967 there were 9 political-issue protests, the following three years were marked by 20, 26, and 27 respectively (the number of non-political-issue protests actually declined relative to 1967). This dramatic increase is all the more remarkable given the fact that the years 1968–70 saw the first national unity government in Israel's history. Despite a virtual wall-to-wall government coalition of all the mainstream and non-radical parties, political-issue protest still rose precipitously (even above and beyond the pre-war period).<sup>12</sup>

One can point to a number of other environmental conditions which possibly influence protest. Some have been proven to be significant, others are more speculative. Of the former, government size, the existence of television, and election campaigns each correlate in some way to Israeli protest, and will be discussed in the following section. Political culture, on the other hand, is more nebulous — both definitionally and as a causal factor. One can point to the Jewish ethos of argumentation — in the social and educational spheres (the Talmud proceeds by dialectical argumentation almost throughout), as well as in the political sphere (numerous cases of “public protest” can be cited from the Bible alone: Exodus 14: 10–12; 15: 24; 16: 2–3; 17: 2–3; *Numbers* 11: 1; 14: 2–3; 16: 3, 13, 14; etc.).<sup>13</sup> Cecil Roth, the noted Jewish historian, described the Jew as the “Eternal Protestant.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in the aforementioned public opinion poll, when asked “why do you think there is so much protest in Israel,” the Israeli public placed the answer “in Diaspora the Jews always protested against the authorities and continue this tradition today in Israel” — well below all others. Thus, if political culture does act as an environmental factor it is too subtle for the protesters themselves to be aware of it.

### 3. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Modern democratic institutions came into being about 200 years ago — more or less when political parties crystallized in their modern form. As a result, it was the political party which constituted the central component in the ongoing process of democratic political communication between the elected representatives and their constituency. The party served as the chief source for inter-

12 For a detailed numerical rundown of all annual protest in Israel — by issue — see Lehman-Wilzig and Ungar, “The Economic and Political Determinants . . .,” *op. cit.*, Table 1.

13 See Abraham Kaplan, “The Jewish Argument with God,” *Commentary*, vol. 70, no. 4 (October 1980), pp. 43–7.

14 Cecil Roth, “The Eternal Protestant,” in *Personalities and Events in Jewish History* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1953), pp. 69–77.

esting and mobilizing the masses into some form of political activity, as well as constituting the actual channel for delivering political messages to the powers-that-be. In short, as Kaase notes, the political party is the "core mediating element between the governors and the governed."<sup>15</sup>

If anything, the pre-State situation in Israel was marked by the virtual supremacy of the political party in the political sphere.<sup>16</sup> The Labor camp, the dominant faction which held the key posts in the *Va'ad Leumi* (National Directorate) throughout the entire history of the Mandatory *yishuv* (the pre-State Jewish community), was considered in certain quarters to be indistinguishable from the government itself — a situation which continued for twenty-nine years after the establishment of the State of Israel. Party membership in proportional terms was high for all the major parties, in part as a result of the highly ideologized atmosphere, the multifarious services which the parties provided, and probably also in some measure due to the freeing of the Jews' political energies after two millennia of political quiescence in hostile and constricting surroundings.

The centrality of the party apparatus<sup>17</sup> with regard to the transfer of political messages from the public to the government was even further reinforced by the unique system of pure proportional representation in effect since 1920. No national representative is elected by a specific geographical constituency; rather, all enter national office<sup>18</sup> as part of an electoral *party* list. This has

15 Max Kaase, "The Crisis of Authority: Myth and Reality," in *Challenge to Governance: Studies in Overloaded Politics*, ed. Richard Rose (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), p. 17.

16 The same held true in the socio-economic sphere as well, since many if not most newspapers, sports teams, cultural clubs, publishing houses, banks and corporations, were party-owned and/or controlled. While this is a somewhat different matter, it does have bearing on our subject. One of its consequences was to stunt the growth of independent civic institutions which could have been used later as tools for lobbying and otherwise informally transferring messages from the non-affiliated public to the government.

17 Yonatan Shapira, *Ha'demokratia B'yisrael* (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1977), sees this aspect as being perhaps the most critical one in the development of Israeli politics: The transformation of Achdut Ha'avoda into a bureaucratized party was an event central to the understanding of the Israeli political system in its entirety. It constituted the dominant party and its internal organization became a model for all the others which arose thereafter. One cannot understand Israeli politics and the essence of the Israeli democratic regime without taking into account the behavioral patterns of these party bureaucrats (p. 102; translation mine).

18 Until 1978 the same held true on the local municipal level as well. Now, mayors are directly elected by the voting public; the city councils continue to be elected through proportional representation.

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the effect of making all Members of Knesset beholden to their party first and to their (self-defined) constituency second, if at all.

As a result of all this, the formal channels of political communication all led through the same source. But as long as the party had a wide formal base, as long as it actively tried to mobilize new members,<sup>19</sup> and as long as it was willing to serve as the quasi-official conduit of public requests, demands, and even displeasure, to the formal political leadership, the political system as a whole could function with relative efficiency. However, this same overwhelming dominance would cause difficulties for the Israeli system as a whole were the parties to cease to function in their traditional manner. This is precisely what has happened over the past two decades.

The reasons for such party ossification and systematic hardening of the arteries are numerous, but an examination of those causes would lead us too far astray from the subject at hand. However, the post-1948 facts speak for themselves. As late as the early 1960s Gutmann could note that, despite some padding, "the incidence of party membership among Jews in Israel is certainly one of the highest in the world. At the time of the 1961 election almost one-third of the eligible voters of the eight major parties (excluding the Communists) were party members."<sup>20</sup> As a follow-up, in the 1981 poll the respondents were asked about their party membership and other political activity (Table 1). A mere 3.8% considered themselves active party members, a miniscule total exceeded by "active independents." Another 8.2% attested to being inactive party members. Indeed, only 8.9% of the entire sample acknowledged being formally active in any way, shape, or form in Israeli politics, while, as earlier noted, the same poll showed almost two-and-a-half times as many (21.5%) having already participated in a public protest!<sup>21</sup> It is little wonder that in an

19 For an illustration of the dominant party in the early *yishuv* successfully attracting a whole set of new immigrants, even at the expense of transforming the founders into a small minority, see Yosef Gorni, *Ahdut Ha'avoda, 1919-1930* (Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1973), pp. 34-9.

20 Emanuel Gutmann, "Israel," *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 25, No. 4 (Nov. 1963), p. 704. Earlier, in his "Citizen Participation in Political Life: Israel," *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 12 (1960), he noted that: "At the end of 1952 it was reported by the parties themselves that about 300,000 persons, or a little over 20 per cent of the Jewish population of Israel, were organized into political parties. Three years later it was estimated that between one-third and one-fourth of all Jewish voters . . . hold formal party membership" (p. 55). These fluctuating numbers notwithstanding, the general impression is one of far greater party membership a decade or so after 1948 than is the case today in the middle of Israel's fourth decade.

21 10.2% participated in one event, 5.4% in two, 2.5% in three, 0.8% in four, and 2.6% in five or more.



even more recent poll Dr. Mina Zemach found that a full 55% of the Israeli Jewish public believed that "the parties are not a critical component" of Israeli democracy.<sup>22</sup>

If the party's base has so shrunk that it can no longer function as a political communication intermediary, and the political system does not create or develop other institutions to take its place, one would expect a highly politicized public to take matters into its own hands. The dramatic rise in public protest since the early 1970s is precisely such a response to what Mueller describes as "constrained communication,"<sup>23</sup> and the Israeli protest data support this hypothesis in a number of ways.

First, an analysis of the differing levels of Israeli government against which protest has been directed shows a clear trend over the years away from the local authorities and towards the central government.<sup>24</sup> Whereas in the 1950s only 44% of Israeli protest was directed at the central authorities and 56% at the local authorities, by the 1970s the proportion had shifted markedly to 65% and 35%, respectively. On the face of it this is somewhat puzzling since there has been a slow but steady transfer of political authority to the local level.<sup>25</sup> If the mayor today has more power than yesteryear, why is the public directing its ire through public protest more and more to the central government?

Paradoxically, the proportional decrease in protest levelled at local government is a sign of its greater power — and the proper exercise thereof. Protest, after all, results from systemic dysfunction. If, on the other hand, the institutional channels of local government have changed and opened up to accept and transfer public input to the political leadership, then one of the main reasons for extra-parliamentary activity is negated. In the event, as Elazar has pointed out, it is "at the local level that the most innovative developments are taking place and local governments are far more advanced than the government of the state in institutionalizing the new democratic republicanism of

- 22 Eliyahu Chasin, "Ha'demokratia Ha'yisraelit '83 — Geshem Kashe 'Omed La'redet," *Monitin* (March 1983), pp. 149-51.
- 23 Claus Mueller, *The Politics of Communication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 87-8.
- 24 For a full discussion of this specific subject see Sam N. Lehman-Wilzig, "Public Protests Against Central and Local Government in Israel, 1950-1979," *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, vol. XXIV, no. 2 (December 1982), pp. 99-115.
- 25 The latest advance is, at the time of writing this essay (June 1985), a draft law supported by both major parties which does away with the requirement for the Interior Minister's approval of local authorities' by-laws (except for those involving the imposition of levies).

Israel.”<sup>26</sup> Local committees, regional councils, independent (non-)party lists, direct mayoral elections, etc., have enabled the citizenry to participate and/or communicate with their local governments, thereby reducing the need for “direct action.”

A second area of the protest data which indicates the importance of political communication is the period of election campaigns. As early as Hamilton and Tocqueville, it was noted that election periods raise the public's political temperature.<sup>27</sup> The same holds increasingly true for Israel. Yet of the nine Knesset election periods reviewed, seven were marked by *less* public protest *during* the two-month campaign period than in the same time frame immediately after the elections were over.<sup>28</sup> In fact, in most cases Israeli public protest is lower during the election campaigns than at any time over the ensuing two years. Why is this so?

In contrast to the trend of local government protest, here there are a number of possible (and complementary) answers. Psychologically, the public gets to hear what it wants from at least one potentially-governing source. From an economics standpoint, governments attempt to manipulate the business cycle so that prosperity coincides with the pre-election period.<sup>29</sup> Yet, to these must be added the element of political communication.

- 26 Daniel J. Elazar, *Israel: From Ideological to Territorial Democracy* (monograph — Jerusalem Institute for Federal Studies, 1978), p. 20.
- 27 “At the period which terminates the duration of the Executive, there will always be an awful crisis in the national situation” (Alexander Hamilton), in Max Ferrand, ed., *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 145. “The election becomes the . . . all-engrossing topic of discussion. Factional ardor is redoubled, and all the artificial passions which the imagination can create . . . are agitated and brought to light.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), pp. 140–1.
- 28 It should be noted that the same held true if six-month time frames were compared. For a full discussion of this specific subject and the data see Sam Lehman-Wilzig, “Thunder Before the Storm: Pre-Election Agitation and Post-Election Turmoil,” in *The Elections in Israel — 1981*, ed. Asher Arian (Tel-Aviv: Ramot Press, 1983), pp. 191–212.
- 29 For the Israeli case see Yoram Ben-Porath, “The Years of Plenty and the Years of Famine — A Political Business Cycle?” *Kyklos*, vol. 28, No. 2 (1975), pp. 440–3. A more general analysis of the phenomenon, which provides some additional information on Israel is Edward R. Tufte, *Political Control of the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). It could be argued that such manipulation might have the opposite effect, since as mentioned earlier *rapid* economic growth can be destabilizing and thus lead to more protest. However, such rapid growth must take place over a relatively lengthy period of time in order for it to cause socio-economic dislocation. “Election prosperity,” by the cycle's very nature, is short term.

Edelman points out how "election campaigns . . . give people a chance to express discontents and enthusiasms, to enjoy a sense of involvement."<sup>30</sup> Since political communication through the act of voting is formalized, ritualized, and even sanctified during this period, there appears to be less need to resort to other modes of political intercourse. On the other side of the coin, this is also the period when the political parties tend most to listen to the public's desires (or at least give the impression that they do). In other words, it is perhaps the only time when the establishment opens up somewhat and some semblance of political dialogue between rulers and ruled is possible. As soon as the elections are over and the establishment no longer feels itself obligated to continue with this pseudo- (or at best quasi-) dialogue and thus withdraws into itself, the jilted citizenry — demanding a continuance of the dialogue — resorts to more direct means of informing their former suitors as to their disappointment and resentment.

A third independent variable which reinforces the "protest as communication" hypothesis is government size. In the regression analysis mentioned earlier it was discovered that the size of the government (number of cabinet ministers) is negatively correlated to overall protest frequency<sup>31</sup> (i.e. the larger the government the fewer the public protests). Expansion of the cabinet enlarges the opportunity for communication on the part of social and religious pressure groups with governmental patrons — especially in Israel, where large cabinets are usually the result of the dominant camp's need to co-opt fringe parties into the government due to its own relative electoral weakness. Thus, paradoxically, the weaker the governing party is initially, the less overall protest it has to contend with as a result of its forced broadening of the government's ideological representation.

Religious-issue protest in Israel affords a fourth perspective on the issue.<sup>32</sup> Such protest does not emanate from one source or group alone. Rather, there

30 Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), p. 30.

31 See Lehman-Wilzig and Ungar, "The Economic and Political Determinants . . .," *op. cit.* The only exception here was political-issue protest which showed a (relatively) less consistent positive correlation, perhaps as a result of the greater diversity of political opinions rendering decisive decision-making on political issues more problematical. It should be noted that no correlation was found with economic-issue protest.

32 For a fuller discussion of religious-issue protest see the first half of Sam Lehman-Wilzig and Giora Goldberg, "Religious Protest and Police Reaction in a Theocracy: Israel, 1950-1979," *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 25, No. 3 (Autumn 1983), pp. 491-505.

are five different group-types who protest on religious topics, but two predominate. One — a relatively small fanatic fringe group colloquially termed *Neturei Karta* (“keepers of the gate,” but for our purposes including also all other anti-Zionist zealot communities) — accounted for a full 47% of all such protest over the thirty-year period. The second grouping, religious parties who work within the political system, is a conglomeration of the National Religious Party and *Agudat Yisrael* (i.e. pro-Zionist or at least non-anti-Zionist religious Jews). Together they accounted for only 40% of all religious-issue protest, despite the fact that numerically they constitute the overwhelming majority of Israel’s religious Jewish community.

The disparity is to be explained, of course, by the fact that the latter parties are part and parcel of the political establishment (the NRP, especially, has been in the government for all but two years of the State’s existence), and thus have access to the formal channels of political communication. The *Neturei Karta*, on the other hand, by far the most protest-oriented community in Israel relative to its size, has consciously eschewed such access; yet living within the physical jurisdiction of the Israeli government it does find a need to “communicate,” to send a message to the Zionist Establishment, and the effective means of doing so is protest.<sup>33</sup>

Fifth and finally, if protest in Israel is in large measure a function of the public’s need to communicate with the governing authorities, any introduction of new communication channels can be expected to reinforce the protest tendency. Such was certainly the case after the introduction of television in Israeli society. Given a time lag of approximately three years since its inception in 1968 (a reasonable period for a change — or further reinforcement — of societal norms), the 1970s were marked by a veritable explosion of protest events relative to the 1960s. Whereas the earlier decade averaged forty-three events per year, the 1970s were marked by an annual average of one hundred and twenty-seven.

Commenting on the American scene, Etzioni suggests that the relationship is a general one:

The number of demonstrations in the pre-mass television decade (1948–58) was much smaller than the first television decade (1958–68) . . . television has played a key role in the evolution of this particular form of

33 It should be noted that such protests also serve internal purposes as well — fostering group cohesion or at times allowing one sub-group to display its holier-than-thou-ness *vis-à-vis* a rival sub-group.

political expression and in the increasing frequency with which this form is applied, in effect, in creating demonstration democracy.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, television is a protest facilitator and has several unique qualities which are particularly appropriate for protest as a mode of communication. Television thrives on "action"; public protest events (compared to the more sedate press conferences, petition signings, etc.) promise "action." Television by its very nature — limited time, need to concentrate resources — simplifies the message; protests, too, communicate simplistic ideas, demands, calls for action. In short, we have here a symbiotic relationship where both sides feed off the other to their mutual benefit.<sup>35</sup> In their need to communicate politically, Israeli protesters have gravitated to their "natural" partner, TV, significantly the *only* new institution for public communication established by the government since the early days of the State.

Taken one at a time, none of these five aspects are overwhelmingly persuasive in and of themselves. Different explanations can be (and in some cases have been) adduced to interpret the phenomena and the data. However, taken together they create a relatively coherent picture of protest as an act of political communication where other channels are blocked or do not exist. Still, they are all inferential; for the picture to be fully fleshed out it is incumbent to ask the Israeli public itself the reasons for their hyper-protest-activity.

As can be seen in Table 2, the respondents were asked the following question: "Compared to other countries, Israel has a high level of public protest. I [the interviewer] shall read to you a number of possible reasons for this. Choose up to three which you consider to be the most important reasons for the high number of public protests in Israel." Two answers (No. 1 and No. 4 in

34 Amitai Etzioni, *Demonstration Democracy* (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1970), pp. 12-13.

35 In facilitating protest it should be noted that the role of the mass media in general, and television in particular, functions on a different plane as well. As was mentioned earlier in this article, not only objective conditions but also the subjective perception of those conditions (e.g. relative deprivation) contribute to protest fomentation. Television does a marvellous job of bringing home the disparities of life — the opulent and extraordinary along with the destitute and mundane. This in itself can cause social disquietude. As Manoucher Parvin notes: "The more facts of a social condition are known by the people, the greater will be the likelihood that they will learn to dislike it more (or appreciate it less)." Thus, television acts as a protest facilitator not only as an effective transmitter of protest, but in addition actually may *cause* protest due to the "normal" messages it transmits. "Economic Determinants of Political Unrest: An Econometric Approach," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 17, no. 2 (June 1973), p. 293.

the order presented) dealt with "political culture"; No. 3 represented the "policy dissatisfaction" factor; No. 5 was an "environmental conditions" answer; No. 2 and No. 6 were related to "political communication" (the former, "communication" in and of itself; the latter, "communication" as an instrumentality).

The response practically speaks for itself. Political culture, both past and present, is considered to be a weak explanation. The environmental factor fares somewhat better, as does policy dissatisfaction. Slightly stronger (42.2%) is instrumental communication ("whoever protests publicly achieves something; it is one of the few ways of achieving something").<sup>36</sup> But in first place by a significant margin (49.7%) the Israeli public chose the "pure" communications explanation: "the citizen does not have enough other means to express himself to the authorities." In other words, *insofar as the Israeli public is concerned, harsh environmental conditions and general policy dissatisfaction are less salient factors in fomenting protest than the lack of formal opportunities for political communication.*

This of course does not mean that the problem of political communication is the sole factor underlying Israeli public protest (after all, policy dissatisfaction and environmental conditions did attract some support). Nor does it mean that if the formal channels of communication were opened up once again, such protest would disappear (if not earlier in Jewish history, by now certain cultural patterns of public behavior have become normalized). But at the least, Israeli "democracy" — in the original Greek sense of the word: the rule of the people — would become more than a formal term, nowadays practically emptied of actual content in between the quadrennial ballotcasting. One might even expect a lowering of the political temperature as measured in the streets and a return to more orderly political communication between the governed and their representatives.

On a more general level, as the foregoing analysis suggests, protest *per se* is not an altogether negative phenomenon, although its high level of use does indicate a deep-rooted flaw in the political system.

There are several positive aspects to public protest. First, as Coser notes of societal friction in general: "Frequent conflict . . . indicate[s] that a relatively high proportion of the membership actually is involved in the life of the group."<sup>37</sup> High levels of protest, then, are but another indication that the

36 Two other questions in the poll are relevant in this context. When asked — "do you think *legal* public protests in Israel are successful in achieving their goal?" — 5.8% answered "yes, always," 19.1% "yes, usually," and 40.2% "sometimes." When the question was changed to *illegal* protests, the drop was not all that substantial: 3.9%, 12.3%, and 33.3%, respectively.

37 Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1956), p. 85.

Israeli public does care and would like to be more involved. No "Silent Generation" here. Second, the protest vehicle serves to attract segments of the population which might otherwise not be involved, or even interested at all, in politics.<sup>38</sup> Although at first the personal motive for such participation may be entertainment or social, they soon discover the functional and instrumental utility of this mode of political expression. As Etzioni argues, "demonstrations help to reduce the inequality among the member groupings of society in terms of their access to political tools; they add to the tools particularly appropriate to the middle and upper classes [e.g. lobbying], one which is especially suited to the under-privileged and young."<sup>39</sup>

Protest utility, however, is not merely a particularistic matter. Society as a whole may benefit. The problem lies in the dynamics of political organization development. Virtually all political systems are built to preserve and continue themselves as they were originally designed or formed. This refers to the overall ideology, the system's institutions, and the group(s) controlling the sources of power. It also involves the access to, and patterns of, communication within the system. "In other words," Coser elaborates, "the channels of political communication tend to be so constructed that they admit access only to those social forces that have succeeded in making their voices heard in the past. When new social forces appear in the arena they often find themselves blocked from these channels and hence remain unable to actualize their potential force."<sup>40</sup> Protest, then, communicates to the establishment the fact that new social forces have arrived and need to be incorporated *into* the system. As Zimmerman summed it up: "If protest and turmoil call attention to problem areas hitherto neglected and if they lead to solutions, they may be said to have beneficial effect. If (potential) dissidents gain access to institutional channels for expressing their protests, a better overall integration of the political system may result."<sup>41</sup>

Thus, protest as a form of political communication has not emerged to supplant traditional democratic institutions or activities. Democratic protesters are (usually) not interested in changing the system but, on the contrary, are demanding to be counted in. "Part of the causes of violence and the means for its prevention rests at the level of alternative modes of political expression,"

38 Ekkart Zimmerman, "Macro-Comparative Research on Political Protest," in Gurr, *Handbook*, op. cit., p. 235.

39 Etzioni, *Demonstration Democracy*, op. cit., p. 20.

40 Lewis Coser, *Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 96.

41 Zimmerman, "Macro-Comparative Research . . .," op. cit.

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asserts Etzioni. "They [demonstrations] are not to replace existing democratic instruments but to complement them."<sup>42</sup> In the end, therefore, protest does present a challenge to the establishment; but it is more in the nature of a call to expand the house and broaden the lines of communication, and not necessarily to remove the occupants or build the structure anew.

### CONCLUSION

The problem of public protest as a result of political non-communication is not unique to Israel, although it apparently suffers from this more than most. In his book, *Politics as Communication*, Meadow notes that "the reasons for demonstrations and protest are many, but most important is the fact that they often are the only channels of communication available for demands (or support) to be articulated in totalitarian systems."<sup>43</sup> Israel can by no means be considered to be such a system, and the point of this essay is to highlight how a very open democracy (in many other ways) can suffer from being closed in one important respect.

At the end of their massive five-nation protest study, Barnes and Kaase arrive at much the same conclusion: "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."<sup>44</sup> If so, then the ever-increasing public pressure in Israel through protest<sup>45</sup> might eventually lead to a thoroughgoing reform of the political system. This is an optimistic way of viewing the matter, and as noted earlier, at least on the local level of government, the Israeli polity has shown an ability to transform itself institutionally. But one must inject a note of pessimistic caution here as well, for the rot at the central level has advanced for at least fifteen years without much being done about it. Arian noted that as early as 1969, despite the high level of political involve-

42 Etzioni, *Demonstration Democracy*, op. cit., p. 45.

43 Emphasis mine. Robert G. Meadow, *Politics and Communication* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1980), p. 79. More interestingly, he notes how political noncommunication can be used at times as an explanation by the government for public protest when the matter is really one of policy dissatisfaction. As a result, "symbolic reassurances of future access are offered in place of substantive concessions to defuse the situation" (p. 81).

44 *Political Action*, op. cit., p. 532.

45 A socio-economic breakdown of past Israeli protesters indicates that all else being equal, the number of protesters will increase in the future. See my "The Israeli Protester," *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, No. 26 (Winter 1982), pp. 127-38.



ment among Israelis, they were left with a low sense of political efficacy.<sup>46</sup> If anything, this gap is wider than ever before.

In the final analysis, therefore, it is incumbent upon the authorities to take notice of not only the sundry demands of Israel's multifarious protest groups, but even more important to focus on the fundamental message underlying the act of protest *qua* protest. The general environmental conditions in which Israel finds itself are not wholly under the Israeli government's control. Policy dissatisfaction is a natural problem endemic to all political systems, and in any case the deep-seated cleavages in Israel society cannot always be resolved by governmental acceptance of pressure group demands (since another group would then in turn be dissatisfied). However, restructuring the form of political communication is well within the means and capability of the political establishment — assuming sufficient political will exists.<sup>47</sup>

As Meadow points out, "historically, it has already been possible for regimes to operate without linkages to demands."<sup>48</sup> Thus, the issue here is not merely one of (decibel) level or type of public discourse. Rather, reforming the channels of political communication is ultimately a matter of the continued health and very existence of Israeli democracy.

46 Alan Arian, *The Choosing People* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1973).

47 While a detailed discussion of possible prescriptive cures is beyond the scope of this study, several suggestions can be advanced in schematic form: 1) Changing Israel's election system to allow for some form of district representation which would give the constituency a specific electoral address for the redress of grievances or even merely for verbal unburdening. 2) Greater democratization of the internal nominations process within the political parties, so as to make the party more responsive to its grass-roots supporters. 3) Accelerating the movement towards decentralized, local decision-making and/or execution in a host of social areas: education, health, welfare, etc. Barring that, or in addition, the central government would do well to learn some lessons from the local authorities' successful systemic experimentation. 4) Expanding the mass media (especially electronic) and allowing bi-directional communications technology (e.g. two-way cable television) to develop and grow without the present innumerable government restrictions and prohibitions. Numerous "teledemocratic" experiments in the U.S., Sweden, West Germany, and New Zealand have already met with some success. (See my "Demokraty in the Mega-Polis: Hyper-Participation in the Post-Industrial Age," in *The Future of Politics*, ed. William Page [London: Frances Pinter, 1983], pp. 221-9.)

48 *Politics as Communication*, op. cit., p. 83.

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TABLES

*Table 1 — Political Activity in Israel \**

"Are you active in any way in the political or public sphere in Israel?"	
1) Active party member (devotes time to party matters) —	3.2%
2) Active member in pressure group — a non-party group attempting to influence public issues —	1.9%
3) Active independent (write letters to the editor, to MKs, involved in community activities, etc.) —	3.8%
4) Non-active party member —	8.2%
5) Not involved at all —	82.4%
6) No answer —	0.6%

\* The poll surveyed a representative sample of 1250 Israeli adults, excluding the kibbutz and the Arab sectors. It was conducted in December 1981.

*Table 2 — Public Explanations for High Level of Israeli Protest*

"Compared to other countries, Israel has a high level of public protest. The interviewer shall read to you a number of possible reasons for this. Choose up to three which you consider to be the most important reasons for the high number of public protests in Israel."

1 — "In diaspora the Jews always protested against the authorities and continue this tradition today in Israel"	10.7%
2 — "The citizen does not have enough other means to express himself to the authorities"	49.7%
3 — "It is necessary to express protest because the government does not repond to the wishes and needs of the public"	40.9%
4 — "When cabinet ministers and members of Knesset want their point of view to be accepted they shout and use forms of protest, and this influences the man in the street"	35.1%
5 — "Living conditions in Israel are generally difficult, and this leads to protest against the authorities"	39.3%
6 — "Whoever protests publicly achieves something; it is one of the few ways of achieving something"	42.2%
7 — Did not answer	7.7%

*Note:* While the 7.5% difference between answers 2 and 6 may not seem overly large, it is a substantial one given the method of response (the ability to choose up to three answers).