

## Israeli Social Movements

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Word Count: 1982

Since its founding, Israeli social movements have paralleled those of Western democracies, but with a concentration of movements that have pressed for national security and religion. In 1948, Israel was established as a Jewish State and was born out of a contested, transnational movement started in 1870, known as Zionism. As a result of its roots in Zionism, the early stages of Israeli government co-opted social movement organizations for the purposes of state building. This created a political system that allowed social movement organizations (SMO) easy access to the Israeli polity.

### [a] Early Israel

Israel is governed by a parliamentary system, which gives citizens 18 years and older the right to vote. The 120 available assembly (Knesset) seats are filled through public election and proportional representation. The threshold for proportional representation, currently at 2%, has always been low. When no single party has a majority, they must form coalitions to form a government. This highly democratic system of governance is a product of Israel's social movement beginnings. Not only was the state a product of the Zionism, but it also relied on SMOs to assist in early state-building. Because SMOs were heavily intertwined with the formation of the Israeli government, SMO leaders were often co-opted by the parties and appointed to leadership roles within the government.

Two iconic examples include the farmers' association and the Histadrut organization. Israeli farmers received privileged status as a result of the belief that their work was a calling, rather than a job. Farmers were viewed as settlers returning to Israel to care for the land. Histadrut, Israel's oldest labor organization, went beyond the goals of trade unionists and proposed to help build the necessary political and economic institutions in order to develop a sovereign state. The labor federation became deeply intertwined with the political parties. Following the first election, the Labor Party won 57 of the 120 assembly seats revealing the strength of labor movement. The Labor Party was able to hold onto its majority in the Knesset until 1977.

### [a] Later Israel

Following the Six Day War of 1967, Israel experienced massive economic growth and changes in its political environment. An increased sense of security allowed movements flourishing in other parts of the world, such as environmental and feminists movements, to begin airing grievances in Israel. Some of these SMOs relied on the language used by previous social movements, claiming they were not challenging authority, but encouraging Israeli nationalism. The environmental movement organization, Protection for Nature, attempted to foster love of country through infusing patriotism into nature activities. However, these SMOs were not able to get the same privileges awarded to previous organizations. For example, feminist organizations originally associated with various political parties, which provided vocational training and day care services in exchange for political support, detached themselves from the Knesset in the early 1970s when they sought to question male dominance in Israeli society. They attempted to do so using patriotic rhetoric, but began challenging the broader social structure of society.

Over time, it became increasingly difficult for the newer SMOs to realize their goals in the same way older organizations had. The government began disentangling itself from SMOs which led to the

1982 Law of Associations, which regulated interest groups by issuing rules for appropriate conduct and requiring all interest groups to register. Although legally citizens were free to form associations, requests could be denied if organizations acted illegally or undermined the Israel's democratic nature.

#### [a] Israeli Social Movements and the Arab Conflict

Israel's unique foundation as a small, contested secular Jewish state surrounded by Arab nations, has produced powerful SMOs concerned with national security and the role of religion in the government. Prior to Israel's founding, movements pressed for both more pacific and more aggressive approaches to the Arab world.

#### [b] Two state solution

Though there were always organizations within the state opposing military action against its Arab neighbors, social movements criticizing Israel's security practices became more prominent after the Six Day War. In 1942, Ihud was founded as a pacifist organization that supported a bi-national solution to the Jewish-Arab struggle. They fought against the creation of Israel as a solely Jewish state and decried military actions against Arabs by Israel, but failed to affect any change and eventually disappeared from the Israeli political scene shortly after the Sinai Campaign in 1956.

After the post-1967 economic boom, the Israel polity began to change. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 marked a change within the Israeli culture. Citizens began to criticize the government for its failings during this surprise attack. The long-standing, liberal-leaning government, led by the Labor Party, began to lose control of the majority of assembly seats and was replaced by the more conservative, right-leaning Likud party. Mustafa and Ghanem (2010) suggest that the rising percentage Mizrahi (Jews originating from the middle-east or northern Africa) and ultra-Orthodox Jews, who traditionally voted for right-leaning political parties, **contributed to** the political shift in 1977. Other theorists credit this shift to the changing economic conditions in Israel, the surprise attack in 1973, and the resignation of Prime Minister Golda Meir (Yishai 1998).

Demographic, economic, and security changes contributed to electoral volatility and led to more contested SMO politics. During the 1982 Lebanon War, bereaved parents of fallen soldiers began speaking out about the war. Within the first week of the war, several families of fallen soldiers killed in a battle to conquer the Beaufort Post in Lebanon formed a group known as "Beaufort Family." They claimed the battle was an unnecessary operation and blamed the government for their sons' deaths. As the war evolved into a long-term attempt to reshape Lebanese politics, activists staged frequent protests. This was unique in that previously, such deaths were seen as a justifiable sacrifice but now families began to blame the government. The Soldiers Against Silence, a group of reserve soldiers, and Peace Now joined the Beaufort Family in voicing dissent. Outside of Prime Minister Begin's home beginning in April 1983 they displayed long lists with names of the casualties and a fatality count. Within three months, the Labor party, who initially supported the war, called for a withdrawal from Lebanon. After the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) withdrew from Lebanon in 1985, the war became known as the "war of choice" distinguishing it from previous wars of necessity (Levy 2010).

Other leftist movements concerning Israeli-Arab conflict became increasingly popular over the years. Women in Black (Nashim BeShachor) is one of the more well known examples. Originating in Jerusalem in 1988, this movement was entirely composed of women who sought to end Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These women met every Friday between 1pm and 2 pm in designated locations around the country and held silent protests. They dressed entirely in black to symbolize the tragedy of Israelis and Palestinians. These women held up signs: black octagons that read "Stop the Occupation" (Helman and Rapoport 1997).

## [b]Religious, Right-Wing and Settlers Movements

During the Six Day War, Israel captured a number of neighboring territories with the intention of exchanging them for peace with its neighbors. The Settlers' Movement, composed primarily of right-wing religious organizations, viewed the newly captured territories as part of the “entire Land of Israel”, as outlined in the Bible, and was opposed to returning them. One such SMO, “Land of Israel Movement”, were adamantly opposed a two-state solution and felt the Jews had claim to the “entire Land of Israel”. This organization was predominantly populated by religious leadership and the underground terrorist groups, Irgun and Lechi. After failing to convince politicians by directly approaching them, movement members took action by illegally settling in Hebron, a city located in the occupied territories. After increasing pressure on the Israeli government, Settlers' Movement achieved victory with the establishment of Hebron as a Jewish city. In the 1969, movement members created their own political party, the Land of Israel party, and ran in the upcoming elections, but were unable to win a single Knesset seat (Issac 1976).

Kach, a right-wing political organization led by Rabbi Meir Kahane, is another example of the influence of the religious right on Israeli politics. Kahane began taking action against the Arabs in 1972 when he and his followers distributed fliers in the city of Hebron, summoning their mayor, Muhamad Ali Jaabari, to a public trial in an attempt to incite conflict. In addition to symbolic actions, Kahane and his followers also used acts of terror to remove Arabs from occupied territories. In 1982, the members of Kach barricaded themselves in the Sinai Peninsula and, in front of the world media, threatened to commit suicide if Israel returned the land to Egypt as part of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty. The Israeli government rushed Kahane to the scene, and the Rabbi was able to publicly negotiate with his followers not to commit suicide. This led to his controversial win of a Knesset seat in 1984 under the Kach Party. In 1988 the revised Knesset laws banned parties that incited racism and prevented Kach from running in the elections of that year. Kahane was assassinated in 1990 leading the Kach Party to split into two separate political parties, which were both banned from the 1992 elections because of their original ties to Kach. By 1994 both organizations were banished from Israel's political landscape under 1948 anti-terrorism laws (Sprinzak 1986).

Not all religious-based political actions are related to the Settlers' Movement. Because Israel lacks a constitution, the role of religion in the public sphere is ambiguous and **religious organizations have** been successful in some areas. Several dimensions of public life are dictated by religious law. For example, secular Jews are legally required to use services provided by state-sanctioned Orthodox rabbinate for marriage, divorce and burial. In order to gain the majority, religious movements often form coalitions with the right-wing parties. In 2006, the rightist bloc won 50 of the 120 assembly seats with a coalition consisting of the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism party in addition to other extreme right-wing groups.

The diverse spectrum of social movements in Israel continues to be studied in a number of disciplines. Anthropologists, Political Scientists, and Sociologists have all tried to understand the field of social movements in Israel and its relationship with the government and the citizenry. While the majority of scholars have focused on the security-based social movements, research has also been done to understand the impact of religion on Israeli polity. Israel's constant state of uncertainty with regard to security and easy access to political representation allows for continued scholarship with regard to movement outcomes, social change, and counter-movements.

**See Also:** Coalitions; Cooptation; Countermovements; **Interest Groups and Social Movements;** **Religion and Social Movements;** State Building and Social Movements; War and Social Movements;

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