

A stylized map of Israel composed of a grid of grey dots, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is positioned in the background behind the title and subtitle.

For social justice but against a political agenda

The social protest movement in Israel is at a crossroads

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- The protest movement against soaring rents and the high cost of living began as a spontaneous protest of young people in a Facebook group. The movement is non-partisan and regards itself as apolitical. Parties and trade unions are not involved.
- At the root of the uprising is the economic situation of the middle class, which is highly burdened by the state but does not profit from the country's economic boom. Fear of social decline and an increase in poverty explain the movement's central demand: social justice.
- Prime Minister Netanyahu will not simply change the priorities of his rightist – religious government's political agenda: national security, settlement construction, government funding of the ultra-orthodox community. His number one political aim is preservation of power and of the status quo.
- The protest movement is at a crossroads. In order to be successful, it will have to find expression for its social demands in an authentic political agenda and build up an organisational basis. This will be the means to achieve their ends: redefining the priorities of national politics.

Ever since, on July 14, young people put up the first tents on Rothschild Boulevard in the centre of Tel Aviv as a sign of protest against exorbitant rents, the tent encampment protest rapidly widened into a protest movement seizing all of the larger Israeli cities. All of a sudden, Israel is no longer cut off from its Arab neighbours. The nationwide demonstrations and encampments rather reveal a surprising connectivity with those protest movements that in the spring of this year lead to the overthrow of autocratic Arab regimes. Needless to say that in Israel, we are not talking about the overthrow of an authoritarian regime, nor are the Israelis suddenly discovering new feelings of friendship for their Arab neighbours. However, like the latter they recognise that they have to actively defend their own interests when their elected government no longer does. It is in civil resistance that they hear the force of their own voice and find that they are not without power and are able to change politics. Their choice of watchwords and slogans reveals that a good number of the Israeli protesters did not intend to conceal the fact that they feel inspired by the peaceful Tahrir revolution in Egypt.

Facebook-group starts »Tent protest«

Like the majority of the latest protest movements in Europe and the region, the Israeli protest movement too began with a Facebook group in which a young student, Daphne Leef, first called for a »tent protest«. The group was quickly joined by the National Student Union and then other civil society organisations and initiatives throughout the country. Itzik Shmuli, chairman of the student union and Daphne Leef very quickly became the best known faces of the protest.

The movement swiftly followed a previous Facebook group's threat to boycott the drastic price increase of cottage cheese which is very much liked in Israel. The mere threat of a consumer boycott, the first in the history of Israel, quickly had dairy companies cut prices again. Much like an epidemic outbreak, a wave of further protests followed: Israeli doctors went on strike, pushing for health reforms; pensioners demonstrated against low pensions; the Holocaust survivors against low state benefits; parents in a so-called »pram-marches« took to the streets against the high cost of raising children. Counting in Israel's youth's »tent protests«, the country is experiencing a protest movement embracing all groups of this very heterogeneous society. Secular and religious

Israelis, peace activists and settlers, Ashkenazi and Oriental ultra-orthodox, Russian and Ethiopian immigrants and also people representing the 20 percent Arab minority joined the cause for more social justice and against the dismantling of the welfare state. If one visits the »tent encampment« on Rothschild Boulevard at night, one experiences that people not only jointly protest but that many issues are also controversially and intensely debated in discussion forums – often broadcasted live on the Internet – and the many smaller debating circles.

The crowning point so far of the so-called »J14« protest movement, which in many cities and towns is accompanied by dance and music, happenings and performances by well-known artists, were the demonstrations in the evening of 6 August that numbered 350,000 people – 250,000 in Tel Aviv alone. On 3 September, the movement plans to mobilize one million people throughout the country. That would be the equivalent of 12 million citizens taking to the streets in Germany. What began as a spontaneous protest by students and middle-class people gained momentum in only two weeks. People from all social, ethnical and religious groups joined the cause, whilst not a single social large-scale organisation such as political parties, trade unions or religious communities played a major role. In this summer of protest a deeply split country is experiencing a form of unity and community that had seemed long gone. Both the general public and the media euphorically speak of »wonderful rebellion«, »true democracy« and »true Zionism«. However, there are also those both in the media and in politics who tried to discredit the protesters by calling them »leftists«, »spoilt« or »a bunch of sushi eaters«.

The protesters were astonished and pleased to find that in a matter of days they were dominating the country's political attention and public discourse: social justice, distribution of income, the cost of food and housing, the country's high poverty rates, the promotion of social infrastructure were making front page news instead of security, the conflict with the Palestinians and the threat from Iran that otherwise dominate headlines.

The economic situation of the middle-class

At the root of the protest action is the continuously worsening economic situation of Israel's middle class, which is highly burdened by the state. Although Israel's eco-

nomy has been growing for years (by 5.2 percent this year), the unemployment rate is at a low of just 5.7 percent and the state's tax revenue has exceeded projections, it does not benefit the majority of the population. Quite to the contrary, food and property prices are rising as is the percentage of insecure employment and the gap between rich and poor. 20 percent of Israelis live under the poverty line. That is the second highest poverty rate among OECD countries after Mexico's.

The social breakdown has polarized the country and the fear of social decline is growing. This fear has now captured large parts of the middle class population and taken them to the streets. Their key demand is social justice and an end to the dismantling of the principles of the welfare state. This demonstrates that it is about more than financial benefits and tax relief. It's about a different form of society, one in which there is more solidarity and a side-by-side of social groups, a society in which the rich stop getting wealthier and the poor poorer. They also took to the streets because they no longer believe that the present government and the state are indeed defending their interests. To put it in author David Grossman's words: »People are loyal to the state but the state is not loyal to them«.

Yet, the protesters continue to emphasize that they are concerned with social aspects and that they do not see themselves as a movement with political goals. They do not wish to be associated with political parties or the trade unions for fear of being pigeon-holed as leftists and thus lose the broad popular support. Controversial issues such as the massive state funds for the settlements policy, social transfer payments to the ultra-orthodox population or a cut in the hitherto considered untouchable defence budget are topics so far deliberately not addressed.

Shift to the right and political frustration

The background to this is the shift to the right that took place in Israel in the past few years. The perception of the majority of Israelis is that the Oslo peace process and its principle of »land for peace« have failed. In their opinion, the withdrawals from Lebanon (2000) and the Gaza Strip (2005) as well as the continued threat from Iran have not resulted in less but in more insecurity and rocket attacks. The belief that a solution of the conflict

cannot be reached by politics and dialogue but through military strength is what led to the rise of right-wing nationalist Avigdor Lieberman and the election victory of Benjamin Netanyahu in 2009. Accordingly, »left« in Israel today stands for weakness and political failure and has even become a four-letter word.

That puts the protest movement at a crossroads. If it chooses to remain apolitical, it will soon lose its vigour. The alternative is to come up with a clear political. This requires a vast amount of patience and an organisational basis that works. But it will be the only option to put the necessary pressure on Netanyahu and force him to make true changes and adopt new priorities in his strictly neo-liberal economic and financial policies. At the latest at the 2013 elections, it will show whether or not the protest movement has indeed affected Netanyahu's policies. His is a political line marked by massive privatisations and the dismantling of the social principles – as was the political line of preceding governments. Investments in social housing, the state subsidised educational system and the country's transport infrastructure continue to be neglected, while – as a result of the government's political agenda – vast government resources flow into settlements construction, into the infrastructure of the occupied territories and transfer payments to the large number of non-working ultra-orthodox Israelis.

Furthermore, economy and politics are problematically close in Israel and there is an extremely high degree of concentration in the economic and financial sectors. Very few super-rich families control both the largest corporations and the largest banks in the country. Imposing high import duties in many areas, the government ensures that their monopoly status remains unchanged. Unfettered by lower-priced imports, they multiply their wealth at the expense of the majority of the population. This is particularly true for foodstuffs, but also for the making of cement for instance – crucial in construction! – with only one company controlling 80 percent of the market.

Netanyahu's policy of pure power preservation

In his response to the protests, Netanyahu made clear that he is unwilling to simply change his course, for doing so would directly encroach upon the interests of his

right-wing and religious coalition partners. So while he assured the protesters of his full solidarity and pledged to solve the problems, neither he nor the ministers responsible for economy, finance and social politics took part in the extraordinary sitting of the Knesset that was convened despite summer recess. He appointed a committee of experts to look into the causes of the problems, but at the same time said that their recommendations would not be binding and that the current two-year national budget would not be raised. Nonetheless he could not conceal that he was slightly uncomfortable with the situation. In an action-driven attempt to contain the protests, he announced a program to build new student housing, pledged to reform the Israel Land Administration, which manages most of the land in the country, and revoked the increase in fuel prices the finance minister had planned. But it was all to no avail.

That the protesters have little faith in Netanyahu is demonstrated in the fact that they set up their own expert committee, independent from the government, to look into the causes of the problems and come up with recommendations of their own. Obviously, they have little confidence that words and announcements will be translated into action – with the exception of some cosmetic changes, perhaps – and fear that soon Netanyahu will revert to a business as usual policy.

And this political »business as usual« is preservation of the status quo and preservation of power. This is true for the Middle East peace process, with Netanyahu always reiterating his willingness for peace but not taking concrete steps to put words into action, while the building of settlements in the Westbank and East Jerusalem continues. His speech before the American Congress in May this year – full of brilliant rhetoric and void of peace-policy substance – bears testimony to this standstill. A comparable political tactic with regard to their social demands is what the protesters are apprehensive of.

In the two years as finance minister (2003-2005) in the Sharon government, Netanyahu considerably lowered the state allocations to members of the ultra-orthodox community, family allowances in particular. This was part of his economic reform package. As a result of these measures, the number of ultra-orthodox men seeking and finding employment rose and poverty in the community diminished. However, when he formed his government in the spring of 2009, Netanyahu accept-


ed the demands imposed by the two ultra-orthodox parties (Shas, United Torah Judaism) for higher family allowances and more transfer payments running into the billions as a prevailing condition to join his right-wing religious government. He dropped the reform programme – which he had pushed through against considerable resistance – solely on power political grounds. If today he were more tight-fisted and made cut-backs in the transfer payments, something the protesters are not requiring but which is what large parts of the population would welcome, both parties would in all probability pull out of the coalition (a total of 16 Knesset seats) leaving Netanyahu unable to govern.

Reducing the high government funding for the settlement constructions on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem would probably have the same consequences and mean the end of Netanyahu's coalition government. The politically very influential lobby of settlers (the Yesha Council) has already announced its opposition. Lieberman's party Yisrael Beitenu (15 Knesset seats) and the national-religious party Jewish Home would not sit back and watch either. It will be interesting to see what steps Netanyahu will take to deal with the protest movement to not lose the political initiative nor risk the existence of his coalition government.

Redefining national politics' priorities

Looking at the demands put forward by the protest movement, one is inclined to think they are taken straight from the social democratic political agenda: battling for social justice, strengthening the public sector and the social infrastructure, fighting poverty. Is this an important opportunity for the Israeli Left? Only to a very limited extent since at the moment the Left is ill equipped to tackle these crucial problems. The Labour Party is going through its worst crisis ever and, after the dramatic electoral defeat of 2009, it is absorbed in leadership struggles and the election of a new Party Leader. At present, Meretz too lacks sufficient political strength to seize this political opportunity.

Will the protests cause serious difficulties to the Netanyahu government? At the moment, it does not look that way. Netanyahu is still in the driving seat, his government is stable, and he is likely to demonstrate here again what a cunning power politician he is. It can not be excluded



that he sees the time right to redouble his efforts and his willingness to compromise in order to reach an agreement with Hamas over the release of the kidnapped Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. That would certainly boost his tarnished popularity and his approval rates.

In addition to this, in the event of new military confrontations, security issues may rapidly reclaim public attention, as is the case at present due to a series of terrorist attacks in the south of the country. The same is true for the proclamation of a Palestinian state before the UN in September and the new tensions and outbursts of violence this may entail. The consequence of such events is an automatism Israel has lapsed into for decades: thinking and actions aimed at national security supersede all other problems and social issues. This automatism would have to be disrupted and the resulting catch-22 situation overcome – for security threats are genuine. When a deputy Likud-minister called for an end to the social protests in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, representatives of the protesters replied that social and national security go hand in hand and that they were no longer prepared to view them separately. They did not discontinue the protests, but instead went on to demonstrate holding candles in memory of the victims of the attacks.

And another taboo has been broken: the defence budget – usually left untouched in the past. An increasing number of Israelis are wondering whether the defence expenditures need to be maintained at the existing level. While defence minister, Ehud Barak, displayed solidarity with the protesters concerns, he nonetheless rejected cuts in the defence budget. The defence ministry is the only ministry to control its own spending and must not render accountability to the ministry of finance on how it uses its financial resources.

One may summarise by saying that the protest movement – whose young leadership many Israelis think is acting wisely and smart – is faced with four major challenges if it aims to be successful: 1) draft a clear agenda and thus overcome the initial aspiration to be apolitical; 2) prevent the social problems and social demands from being pushed out of the consciousness of the public; 3) convert the spontaneous protest movement into an organised force that eventually succeeds in 4) redefining the priorities of national politics.



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