

# 1 INTRODUCTION

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A **POLITICAL SYSTEM** must be understood in terms of the people who live under it, their values and ideals, the resources at their disposal, the challenges that face the system, and the institutions developed to meet these challenges. Israel is a fascinating example of a complex system that has developed in a relatively short time (since the 1880s) into a dynamic country that has undertaken colossal commitments in the military, economic, and social fields. There seems to be never a dull moment, with Israel capturing an inordinately large share of the world's attention.

Israel has undergone tremendous changes over the decades. Recent developments have included the onset of accommodation with its Arab neighbors; the continuation of the struggle of the Palestinians over land and political rights; a major constitutional change to direct election of the prime minister, which lasted five years before it was repealed; the introduction of competitive features into the highly centralized economic system; and the continued ingathering of Jews from around the world—especially a very large wave of immigration by Jews from the former Soviet Union.

The Six-Day War of 1967 divides Israel's political history into two distinct periods: (1) the period of independence and state consolidation between 1948 and 1967; and (2) the period after 1967, which has been consumed by the dilemmas attendant on the struggle to extricate the country from the fruits of that victory, including the seeking of accommodation with the Palestinians. The Labor Party dominated the entire first period and some of the second, while the Likud has largely led the second period, with occasional moments of competition between the two groups.

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A peace treaty has been in effect with Egypt since 1979, but it was with the signing of the mutual recognition agreements between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Washington in 1993 (also called the Oslo Accords) that peace was recognized as a policy option in the war-torn Middle East. A peace treaty was signed with Jordan in 1994, and negotiations were begun with the Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese to end the long period of confrontation. Those negotiations with the Syrians and Lebanese were not successful; the vision of coexistence with the Palestinians faded with the beginning of the intifada in 2000. Years of suicide bombing, violence, and political stalemate have ensued.

The promise of peace was challenged by the specter of disunity and terror. A Jew assassinated the prime minister of Israel in November 1995, and Arab suicide bombers terrorized the population, killing more than a thousand Israelis in such attacks in the period between 2000 and 2004.

The political system abandoned the smoke-filled rooms of the party bosses and emerged into the open air of the public arena by instituting the selection of party heads and Knesset lists by the members of the major parties in primary elections; the aborted experiment of the direct election of the prime minister between 1996 and 2001 was another expression of this impulse. But the oligarchic party system was not successful in grafting on the new patterns of democratization, and by 2004, the system was in shambles. Likud had a strong leader in Ariel Sharon but he was often at odds with his party's convention. Labor was not able to rebound from its recent defeats or to generate a confident leadership group for the twenty-first century. The fractiousness of the Knesset during the period of the direct election of the prime minister (1996–2003) left in its wake a series of mid-size parties committed to sharply defined sectors of the population.

With the decrease in power of the political bosses, the political parties had yet to find the appropriate mechanisms to fulfill their classic functions of aggregating interests and articulating demands. The parties were largely eclipsed by an emerging politics of fleeting popularity based on television talk shows and opinion surveys. The legitimacy of the Knesset (parliament) was at a very low level, leaving it unable to provide meaningful parliamentary checks to balance the power of the prime minister. And, at the very moment of declining influence of parties and parliament, and the significant strengthening of the executive, the Supreme Court of Israel became more activist than ever before.

The economy's growth during the 1990s was stymied by world conditions and by the upswing of terror at home and abroad. Its transformation

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from centralization and state monopoly to more openness and market-orientation had been spurred by the partial lifting of the Arab boycott and by significant international investment, but that progress was stalled by the worldwide collapse of the hi-tech bubble and the eruption of the intifada (Arab uprising). The demographic revolution that occurred with the arrival of a million immigrants from the former Soviet Union was partially offset by a very high birthrate among Israeli Arabs.

The booming economy occasioned an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor in Israel, with many—half of them Arabs—below the poverty line. In addition, the relaxation of government control of various sectors of the economy often led to the emergence of a few dominant actors in these sectors rather than to a pattern of pluralistic competition.

The large-scale immigration from the Soviet Union, as well as the much smaller one from Ethiopia, brought to the country many individuals whose classification as Jews was in doubt, according to the Orthodox rabbinate charged to decide on such matters. The demographic transformation of the country, along with the fear of increased terror, resulted in the partial replacement of workers from the territories of the Palestinian Authority, who had been squeezed out of the labor market by new immigrants, at least in some occupations and for a certain period of time, and also by foreign laborers who had been brought to the country in very large numbers.

Well into Israel's sixth decade, its strong sense of isolation resurfaced. Faced with vocal international pressure and censure, with anti-Semitism growing around the world, the Israel of the 2000s was much like the Israel of the 1950s—defiant, besieged, determined. The brief eclipse of these feelings in the years following the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 was receding. However, the collective ethos that had characterized the country during its formative years was now replaced by individualism. While this individualism had existed in the past, it was often denied; now it was celebrated. Choice among options in such areas as university education, travel, communications, and entertainment were more plentiful than before, and growing. Health care was now provided as a national service, and that development created an attendant weakening of the major labor union, the Histadrut, whose membership base had once been ensured because it was the major health care provider. Even the esteemed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was in danger of losing its status as the key mechanism of social integration in the country, as it reconsidered its future needs and policies of recruitment in an age of changing

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military threat and warfare technology. And there had been a parallel growth of both secularism and religion in the country, decreasing the spirit of coexistence and pluralism, and increasing the anxieties and fears of a “war of cultures”—or worse—among the Jews of Israel. Shinui, a major winner in the 2003 elections, presented itself as an anticlerical party.

Since independence in 1948, Israel had changed enormously. From a population of 780,000, it had increased by 2003 to 6.6 million. There were 130,000 students in 1948, compared with 2 million in 2003, as well as 700 university students before the war of independence (one-third were killed in that war) compared with 120,000 in 2003. Exports amounted to \$35 million in 1950 and to \$25.6 billion in 2003. In 1948 less than 6 percent of the Jews of the world lived in Israel; 39 percent did so in 2003. The percentage of the population with thirteen years or more of formal education jumped from 9 percent in 1960 to 39 percent in 2003 (42 percent for Jews, 22 percent for others). One-half of one percent of the population lived in housing with three or more persons per room in 1993, compared with 21 percent in 1960; 54 percent of the population lived in housing with one or fewer persons per room in 2002, compared with 7 percent in 1960. Israel’s gross national product rose from \$2.5 billion in 1960 to \$122.6 billion in 2003. The number of tourists arriving jumped from 110,000 in 1960 to 2.4 million in 2000 (before the onset of the intifada). The number of private cars in Israel increased in that same period from 24,000 to almost 1.5 million in 2002, while the number of telephone subscribers went from 68,000 to 3 million (92 percent of households), with another 2.5 million cell phones, and the number of air passengers grew from 223,000 to 9.6 million in 2000.

Despite all these dramatic changes, Israel’s political system has retained its democratic form, and that is a remarkable achievement on its own. Israel is unique just as any other country is unique. And yet because of its record, it is tempting to declare Israel “truly unique.” Merely by virtue of its membership in the exclusive club of democratic nations (in which parties compete for power in free elections), Israel is in a special category. In the 1970s and 1980s, when this club shrank until only a couple of dozen countries in the world met the criteria, Israeli democracy persisted—and this in a period in which the defense burden on Israel was unparalleled in other countries, democratic or not. Other countries had large immigrant populations, but proportionate to its size none had absorbed so many immigrants in so short a time as had Israel. When the ranks of the world’s democracies again swelled with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Israel was one of the older established democracies in the world.

Political scientists who compare political systems find difficulty in fitting Israel into their schema. Discussing political parties, Giovanni Sartori found the extended dominance of Mapai exceptional, while Arend Lijphart, in his study of relations between major ethnic, religious, and language groups, left Israel outside his framework because of its uniqueness. In respect to the relations between the military and civilian sectors, or its success in curbing runaway inflation without causing large-scale unemployment or political and social upheaval, Israel is often regarded as special; and discussions of political modernization point to Israel as falling outside many general patterns.<sup>1</sup> The system of separately electing the parliament and the prime minister was certainly unique.

But we should resist the temptation of establishing a “truly unique” category for Israel. We should recognize special conditions and achievements but strive at the same time to recognize the similarities and patterns that are familiar to students of other societies. For in other senses Israel's political and social experiences are similar to those of other countries.<sup>2</sup> The scarcity of local resources meant continual searching for foreign sources of import capital, and importing this capital gave the central authorities great sway not only over the economy of the country but over its politics as well. The large number of immigrants facilitated the development of machine politics, but the children of these immigrants provided the votes for the successful challenge to the dominant party. Politics in Israel tended to be party politics, and party politics tends to be hierarchical. Because no single party held a majority in the system, smaller parties (usually religious ones in Israel) held the balance of power in coalition formation.

As Israel moves well into its second century of development—independence came in 1948 but modern Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel (the land of Israel) began in the early 1880s—it faces problems and issues that are neither new nor unique but will have a strong impact on the system. Through its response to these issues, the politics of Israel will be played out.

### **Legitimacy**

Almost six decades after independence, the issue of legitimacy still poses a potential threat to the country. Political legitimacy is the basis on which the exercise of political authority is established; a system is legitimate when its decisions are generally and widely accepted as just and proper by major groups in the system.

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The pre-state period in Eretz Israel witnessed the development of a regime that had authority without sovereignty. That is, the population on the whole voluntarily undertook to obey the rules and laws set down by the leadership, including taxation and conscription. This was in addition to the rules set down by the mandatory power that held sovereignty. For our purposes, however, what is important is that the overwhelming majority of the population perceived the organized decision-making bodies of the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community) to be legitimate.

The pre-state period saw both secular and religious challenges to the legitimacy of the Yishuv's decisions. The Revisionists split from the organized Yishuv over issues of policy toward the British mandatory power, arguing that Yishuv institutions and their decisions were not binding on them; in a word, that they were illegitimate. David Ben-Gurion never forgave the Revisionists and their Herut successors for this withdrawal, and he attempted to deny them standing when he placed them in the company of the communists, the other ostracized group of mainstream Israeli politics in the years following statehood, by declaring that all parties were candidates for his coalition government except the communists and Herut.

In the Yishuv period and even in the state period, some (especially the haredi ultra-Orthodox Neturai Karta group) have adopted an anti-Zionist position that denies legitimacy to the laws of the state and the rules by which decisions are to be made. The basis of their opposition is theological, and thus it represents a potentially dangerous challenge to the State of Israel. There are, likewise, elements in the ultranationalist fringes of the Zionist right whose rejection of government decisions regarding the peace process led to the assassination of the prime minister in 1995; the basis of this political opposition is also theological, and it represents no less of a challenge. Most of the Jewish terrorist groups active in the 1980s and 1990s were religious, and they justified their behavior on religious grounds, but whatever the basis of the opposition, when religious authorities (or others) declare that their divinely revealed law is superior to and in contradiction of man-made law, severe crisis is inevitable. The existence of competing bodies of law to which significant segments of society owe their allegiance is a prescription for disaster. This fate has been avoided in Israel thus far because most religious groups accept the legitimacy of the laws of the state (see chapter 10), but the potential for crisis exists, especially if highly emotional issues emerge to divide the public.

The rules by which decisions are made must be perceived as legitimate; so too must the decisions themselves. One may disagree with a

decision yet concede that the decision-making process is legitimate and that those who participate in it have the legitimate right to make it. It is important to distinguish clearly between *legitimacy* and *legality*, for the question is not only whether the decision makers have the legal right to make the decision but whether the decision is generally accepted. If the debate over the future of the post-1967 territories is between returning them and annexing them, it is likely that major groups in the country (military, press, politicians) hold that either or both options are legitimate. A crisis for the political system arises when people are asked to support or act on decisions they perceive to be illegitimate.

Legitimacy in Israel is by no means assured simply because the government has been duly elected and constituted. Sensitive issues have the potential for polarizing the body politic. The future of the territories taken in the Six-Day War is such an issue. But even then, the matter must be broken down further: there was little real opposition in 1995–1996 to the transfer to Palestinian control of the Gaza Strip and of cities on the West Bank of the Jordan (Bethlehem and Nablus, for instance); there was some opposition to the transfer of Hebron. However, there is likely to be strong opposition to a treaty that turns over the Golan Heights to Syria, and fierce opposition to any agreement that is perceived as giving up sovereignty over parts of Jerusalem.

The population is divided between those who felt strongly about retaining sovereignty over these territories and those who felt that annexing them would change the basic nature of the state and would therefore be detrimental. This kind of basic issue holds great danger for a democratic society because a mere majority for either position will not assuage the intense feelings of the other group. In the light of the polarization of public opinion, Prime Minister Menachem Begin showed masterful political skill in calling on the Knesset to determine whether the Israeli settlements were to be removed from Sinai as part of the peace treaty with Egypt in 1979. By involving the entire political system in the decision, and not just his governing coalition, he won an overwhelming vote for his position, which was supported more by the Alignment opposition than by his own Likud. The coalition of these two groups was more than enough to overcome the fervent opposition of those who wanted to stop the withdrawal from the Sinai.

### Identity

Whether or not an individual has a clear conception of the nation-state and his or her place in it is an important question asked by political

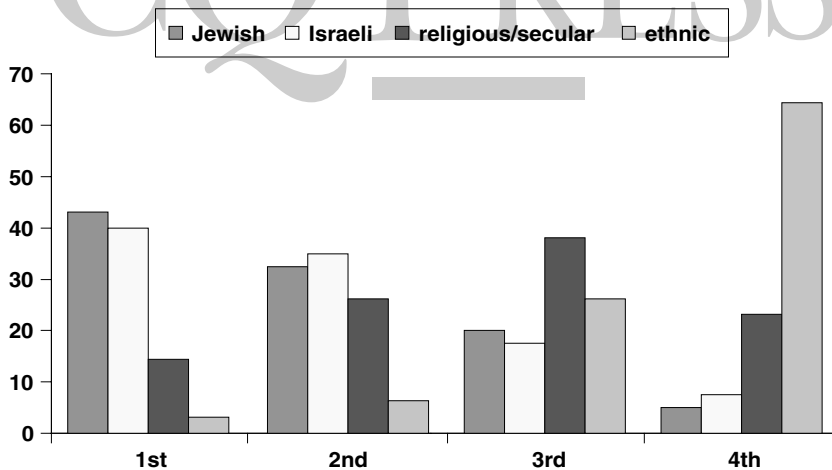
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scientists.<sup>3</sup> The state is the most pervasive object of identification in modern political life, surpassing in importance the family, clan, village, movement, and political party. The Zionist idea was catalyzed into the Zionist movement at the end of the nineteenth century as nationalist ideas and movements were sweeping Europe; Israel was born in a period that saw the emergence of many new states. But Israel calls itself a "Jewish state"—this notion has been expressed in legislative declarations and is fervently supported by most Israeli Jews. When asked, "Are we in Israel an inseparable part of the Jewish people or a separate people?" 85 percent chose the first option.

An overwhelming and growing majority of Jews in Israel identify themselves as both Jews and Israelis. More than two-thirds in 1965 and almost three-quarters in 1974 responded that being Jewish played an important part in their lives. When asked about the centrality of being Israeli, 90 percent of the same samples reported in both 1965 and 1974 that "Israeli-ness" plays an important part in their lives.<sup>4</sup>

In a 2004 survey, respondents were given four identities to rank: Jewish, Israeli, their degree of religious practice (observant or secular), and their ethnic classification (Ashkenazi or Sephardi). As figure 1.1 shows, 83 percent chose as their prime identities either "Jewish" or "Israeli"—almost 40 percent of the respondents chose one of these categories as

**Figure 1.1** Identities among Jews, 2004 (in percentages)



Source: Asher Arian, Shlomit Barnea, Pazit Ben-Nun, *The 2004 Israeli Democracy Index: Auditing Israeli Democracy* (Jerusalem: Guttman Center at The Israel Democracy Institute, 2004). Jewish respondents only: <http://www.idi.org.il/>.

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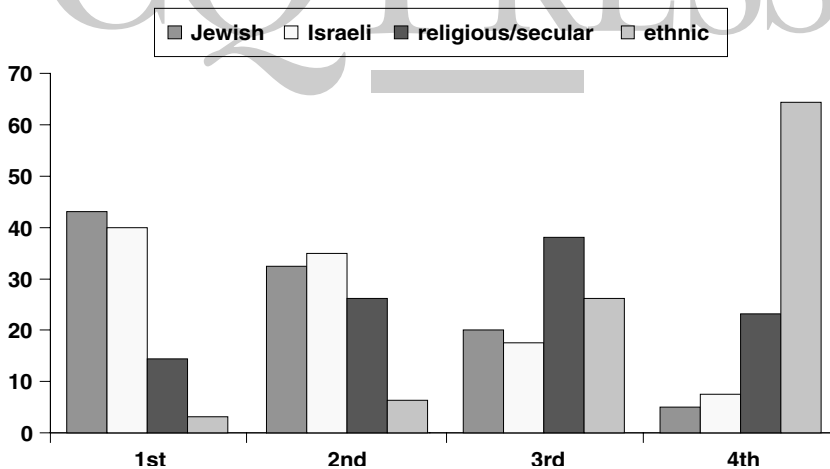
their first choice and the other as their second choice. Ethnic and religious observance identities were left far behind, and these results were very similar to those observed in 1996.

There was a clear difference in ranking when the responses were broken down by political orientation based on a right-left self-placement scale (see figure 1.2).

Presented with a 7-point scale and asked to place themselves on it, 26 percent of respondents placed themselves in the three places on the left of the scale, 27 percent in the middle place, and 47 percent in the three places on the right of the scale. Of the left identifiers, 56 percent ranked "Israeli" first, compared with 26 percent that ranked "Jewish" first. The opposite pattern occurred on the right, where 55 percent ranked "Jewish" first and 30 percent ranked "Israeli" first. The center group chose "Israeli" at a 47-percent rate and "Jewish" at a 37-percent rate. None of the ideological groupings has a monopoly on either of these two identities; very few Israelis chose the more particularistic ethnic or religious observance categories in first or second places.

For most Jews in Israel, then, there is no discrepancy between being Israeli and being Jewish. Israel is "Jewish" in the sense that its language is Hebrew, its school curriculum is heavily laced with biblical and Jewish

**Figure 1.2** Identities among Jews, by Left-Right Self-Identification, 2004 (in percentages)



Source: Asher Arian, Shlomit Barnea, Pazit Ben-Nun, *The 2004 Israeli Democracy Index: Auditing Israeli Democracy* (Jerusalem: Gutman Center at The Israel Democracy Institute, 2004). Jewish respondents only: <http://www.idi.org.il/>.

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history, and its holy days are Jewish in origin and are set in accord with the Hebrew calendar (although important events, such as summer vacation, payday, and even the date when winter uniforms are distributed in the army, are determined by the Gregorian calendar).

Enormous efforts are expended in the educational system to promote both Jewish and Israeli identities. Politicians have developed a status quo agreement that supposedly freezes the religious identification issue as it was in the pre-state era—in effect, it is the basis for all further negotiations while claiming nothing has changed. Since the Second World War, the Jewish world has almost unanimously accepted Zionism and the security of Israel as the top priority on its agenda. It is not surprising, then, that few Israelis feel cross-pressured regarding these topics. To be sure, there have been expressions of support for one end of the continuum or the other. The Canaanite movement of the 1950s held that the geographical expression of its identity as originating from the land of Canaan was more meaningful to its identity than the Jewish identity that included two thousand years of Diaspora; this latter identity was adopted by the Zionist movement. At the other extreme are individuals who reject the national expression of Judaism—the State of Israel—and whose sole identification is with the Jewish religion. For some of them, such as the Neturai Karta group, citizenship in a Jewish state is a secular detail of no religious significance since the state was not wrought by divine decree; for others, it is outright blasphemy to support such a state, and hence it follows that obstructing it becomes laudable.

While the identity issue seems resolved for most Israeli Jews, the system is faced with three other crucial issues: the meaning of a Jewish state; the role of the State of Israel for Jews who do not live in Israel; and the relationship to the state of non-Jews living in Israel. What does it mean to have a Jewish state? Is Israel a country of Jews or a country with Jewish content? How is this Jewish content to be institutionalized in the life of the state and who is to decide? What expression is Judaism to have in the life of the state? More specifically, can both freedom of religion and freedom from religion be ensured? And what of pluralism of Jewish expression?

Israel has dealt with these problems in two ways: by promising to retain the status quo in synagogue-state affairs (meaning that arrangements in effect during the pre-state period regarding religion and religious practice would be extended into the state period), and by affording monopoly status to Orthodox Judaism—to the virtual exclusion of other forms, such as the Conservative and Reform movements—on matters in which the state provides a role for religion (as in personal law

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issues such as marriage and divorce). The implications of this latter practice are to circumscribe certain personal liberties, such as prohibiting marriage in cases in which the Orthodox rabbis have deemed it forbidden; to limit access of organizations and individuals to funding provided by the government for religious affairs; and to legalize, approve, and institutionalize limits on the role of women in communal religious life.

This state of affairs is a constant problem in a population that is not particularly observant. It is estimated that about a quarter of Israeli Jews are observant in an Orthodox sense or even beyond that, including 6 to 10 percent haredi, or ultra-Orthodox; that about 40 percent are determinedly secular; and that the rest are somewhere between those poles. While many are tolerant and even sympathetic to a religious way of life, many are not, and a sizable minority would resist imposition of a religious lifestyle.

The irony of the situation is that as Israel becomes more secular, the perception persists that the power of the Orthodox religious parties is growing. In 2003 they won 22 seats of the 120-member Knesset compared to 27 seats in 1999; Shinui, a party that ran on a campaign of decreasing the power of the haredim, won 15 seats. The Orthodox parties can tolerate the seculars and try to educate them; they abhor the Conservative and Reform denominations, feeling that they have usurped the titles, prayers, and ceremonies of Judaism. Orthodoxy becomes more influential in Israel as the power of the other denominations of Judaism increases in other Jewish communities around the world.

The second crucial issue unresolved is the role of the State of Israel for Jews who do not live in Israel. Conceiving itself as a Jewish state has been translated in practice to a policy that makes every Jew a citizen of Israel virtually for the asking. The Law of Return is the concrete expression of the prophetic vision of the "in gathering of the exiles." The statistical fact is that almost 40 percent of the world's Jews live in Israel, but the boundaries of Israel's political system are hard to set because the spiritual and material influence of Jews who are not Israelis is often felt. Many Israelis see their national undertaking as providing a refuge for the world's Jews; and many Jews in the world show pride, concern, and anxiety (or other emotions) toward Israel in a manner unusual for citizens of foreign countries. Regardless of the distribution of opinion regarding Israel among the Jews in other countries, the question of which identity predominates is always near the surface—sometimes it is asked by Jews themselves and sometimes by those who wish to question the loyalty of Jewish citizens to their home country. It is not a new

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question: if Jews were persecuted in the Middle Ages for having a distinct religion, in modern times this dilemma is compounded by the existence of the State of Israel and the difficulties this raises regarding both religious and national loyalties.

The third issue is the difficult dilemma faced by non-Jewish citizens of Israel, most of whom experience fundamental conflicts of identity. Let us begin by noting that the Arab population in Israel (within the boundaries preceding the 1967 war) is referred to as the "minorities"—what a wonderful example of a Hebrew expression laden with ideological meaning! The Arabs are a minority (almost 20 percent) in the formal sense, but this does not accurately reflect the demography of Eretz Israel or the Middle East, nor does it take into account Arab sensibilities. Being expected to support a Jewish state in a period of intense Arab nationalism, and when other forces are calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state, is a difficult position to be in. Israeli Arabs are not called upon to serve in the army (as the Druze and Bedouin are), and this exclusion can be seen as a measure of semi-citizenship because army service is so important in determining the pecking order of Israeli political and bureaucratic life.

The way this non-Jewish group identifies itself is both a crucial challenge to the system and a heavy burden on the members of the group. Israeli Arabs are confronted with multiple identities: their religion (most are Muslim), Palestinian, and Israeli. Most Israeli Arabs have demonstrated prudence in handling their dilemma, despite the killing by Israeli police of thirteen Israeli Arabs who were demonstrating in 2000, and the intifada that began a few weeks earlier. Their ambiguous position, however, places enormous strain on them; for the system, it represents a tremendous source of potential crisis.

During the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union, many people who were related to Jews but who were not themselves Jews arrived in Israel and were granted citizenship through the Law of Return. These citizens and their Israeli-born children confront unsettling issues when they need religious services such as marriage, divorce, or burial and find they are denied them by the Orthodox Jewish establishment.

### **Integration**

Over a hundred years ago, modern Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel began. The first hundred years were dominated by Eastern European immigrants and their children. Positions of power, institutions, the culture, the economy, and the educational system were in their hands. But

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a great historical asymmetry occurred. The Zionist movement—based on secular, nationalist European ideas—was not particularly successful among secular European Jews: while most were ready to subscribe to its ideology, fewer were actually willing to live in Israel. In a sense, the Zionist movement generated a leadership but failed to attract its natural followers.

After independence, large-scale immigration of Jews from Arab countries began. The people who arrived in this period tended to be more traditional than their European counterparts who came to Israel or their cousins from Arab lands who did not. They also proved to be much more loyal to the Zionist cause as a group. A minority of the world's Ashkenazi (European) Jews live in Israel, compared with two-thirds of the Sephardim (generally from Asian and African countries). The progress of the Sephardi immigrants in terms of education and occupation was swift; undergoing extremely rapid development, they also faced negative aspects of modernity such as the breakdown of the patriarchal family and soaring crime rates.

In the early 1980s, as the Israeli-born sons and daughters of Sephardi immigrants became a vocal and numerous factor in Israeli elections, the issue of their integration into the system emerged in a boisterous and sometimes violent manner. On the whole, extreme positions have not been taken, although there have been occasional outbursts of violent group behavior. Undoubtedly, the Sephardim have lately achieved higher levels of influence and power than they had in the past; they have made substantial gains in the political arena and have advanced socially and economically as well, but not nearly as much as the Ashkenazim. The majority position of the Sephardim among the Jews of Israel did not last long, since most of the immigrants in the wave from the former Soviet Union were Ashkenazim. The issue of the integration of the Sephardim into Israel's political and social life will remain a touchy one for years to come.

It is clear that the demographic and sociological changes that the Israeli population is experiencing will profoundly affect the political system. A century of Ashkenazi dominance was followed by a brief period with a Sephardi majority before the immigration from the former Soviet Union changed the balance again. What is likely to emerge in the not-too-distant future is a native-born leadership that is more Israeli than Ashkenazi or Sephardi. The children of Israel wandered in the desert forty years before they entered the land of Israel, before a new generation emerged to take on the burdens of nationhood. The elections of Binyamin Netanyahu in 1996 and Ehud Barak in 1999 marked the

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emergence of a young, Israeli-born leadership; Netanyahu was born in 1949, a year after the state was founded.

A problem of integration in another sense is posed by Arabs living in the territories Israel acquired in the 1967 war. Many of those Arabs now live under the Palestine Authority, but in terms of security and foreign policies they are still under Israel's control. The vast majority of them have known only occupation by the Israel Defense Forces or semi-autonomy under the Palestinian Authority. The issue of their future remains the most pressing issue on Israel's political agenda, and the Israeli political system will be tested as the Palestinians and Israelis attempt to work out a permanent status agreement. Should the Palestinians have their own state? Could a sovereign state (or would it) commit to permanent demilitarization? And if it should do so, how meaningful would that commitment be? What is to be done with the Jewish settlers and settlements in the territories? Should Jews not have the right to live anywhere in Eretz Israel? The dilemmas are stark; the answers will be complex.

### Political Culture

As change occurs in Israel's relations with its neighbors and in its position in the world, the character of the issues that dominate its domestic politics is likely to shift. The topics of security and foreign policy will likely remain central in public awareness, but the nature of the debate and the domestic implications are likely to change. In the past, security and the welfare state were dealt with as consensual issues. Maintaining strong defenses will continue to be the overriding concern of all Israeli governments, and many policies will still be cast in the name of defense. The welfare state has been shrunk as the leadership fashions an economy that is less protective of its weakest citizens and more competitive, but there is still a need to provide citizens with minimum standards so that the youth will be fit for army life and the economy will be competitive in the international marketplace.

However, these issues have become more divisive and the debate will likely spill over into the political system more openly than in the past. What type of army is best suited to the changing conditions—a broad-based conscription army as in the past, or a much smaller, professional volunteer army with high levels of technological capability? What are the implications of these choices for the defense of the country, and what is the likelihood that an officer class will emerge that sees itself not only

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as different from but better than the elected leaders? How much welfare can the imperatives of international economic competition allow? Are the rewards of national economic success to be shared, or should the successful be allowed to enjoy the fruits of their effort, while many others live at a much lower economic level?

If the country succeeds in resolving the issues of the territories and of the Palestinians, will it then be able to come to grips with the real questions of Zionism, such as the definition of a Jewish democratic state? What is the meaning of a Jewish state: a state full of Jews, or a state filled with Jewish content? And who is to define Jewish content? For that matter, who is to define who is a Jew? In a postwar period, one could imagine public concentration on issues such as these, and perhaps even a Labor-Likud coalition of secular Zionist parties defining the relations with the Jewish religious parties and with the Arab parties.

Certain characteristics are likely to persist. Politics in Israel has always been party politics, and party politics has been elite politics. The party system has undergone a shift from dominance to competitiveness. The Knesset as an institution has become the weakest of the three branches of Israel's government, mostly because the political parties have lost their cohesiveness and focus.

Responsiveness to the public has grown over the years, yet Israel's political system retains features of centralization and hierarchy. The prime minister has enormous power, with few checks or balances on his ability to control the Knesset majority and the major ministries. The Israeli political system is hierarchical in the sense that a party, a politician, and a citizen all tend to know their place in the power structure and rarely overreach themselves. The opposition accepts its relatively powerless role, just as a junior coalition power accepts its relatively subordinate role in the calculus of power. All eyes tend to focus on the leader, waiting for the cue. Individuals and groups fit into this structure, and political parties tend to be collections of factions, or nuclei, around leaders, jockeying for position in the pyramid of power. The hierarchical nature of the structure is facilitated because subordinate groups and individuals are likely to be dependent on decisions regarding appropriations and appointments that are made at higher levels of the hierarchy.

All this fits in nicely with Israel's bureaucratic public life. The centralized economy encourages dependency, with the government controlling about half of the economy's activity and directly influencing much of the country's economic life. These proportions register enormous economic

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influence and hint at enormous political power. Add to that the facts that almost two-thirds of those employed work in services and that three-quarters of the employed are salaried, and the impact of the control of the centralized economy is clear.

The future of the political party, the centralized economy, and the role of ideology are likely to persist in Israeli politics. All of these features will shift in content and style, but they will still be central. The style of Israeli politics will remain ideological: the use of symbols, rhetoric, and coded phrases has always been evident in the Israeli political experience and is not likely to diminish soon. What is also true is that Israeli politicians can be very pragmatic and can review long-expressed ideological formulations if their understanding of political reality so demands. The population on the whole tends to be less ideological but shows a high degree of deference to the ideological expressions of politicians, just as it does to the decisions of the leadership.

Israel's political culture demonstrates a fascinating mix of ideology and pragmatism.<sup>5</sup> The socialist ethic that ruled for decades has withered, although some signs of it can still be found. The element of nationalism, on the other hand, has retained its intensity, if not strengthened. The materialism of many Israelis is obvious to the observer, and it seems to have become the norm; despite very high levels of taxation, the ethos developed is one of seeking creature comforts in the present tense. This materialism does not blunt, and indeed perhaps enhances, high levels of identification with the system by most Jews, as well as a willingness to sacrifice for its preservation and maintenance.

The most enduring feature of the system is likely to be the politician. Israeli politicians tend to be dependent on the party and its institutions for their influence and livelihood. But all of them, except two or three at the apex of the pyramid, share a generally low level of prestige. In the late 1970s, "Knesset member" was ranked 64th out of 90 preferred occupations by a national sample.<sup>6</sup> A taste of the orientation of the public is gleaned from the story of the Haifa-area resident arrested for attacking his neighbor with a knife: in explaining his behavior, he claimed that his neighbor had called him a politician.<sup>7</sup>

The politician and the political system have three distinct spheres of activity—electoral politics, coalition politics, and bureaucratic politics—each with its own rhythm and rules. The politician divides his time among the three, but the nature of his investment and his expectation of profit are different in each sphere. Electoral politics may be the most important formally because it is the selection of the prime minister and the allocation of Knesset seats as determined by voters on election day

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that establishes the division of political power. Electoral politics is limited to the campaign period, although the press and public (and perhaps politicians as well) think of political life as an unending campaign.

Coalition politics can come up at any time, and it usually involves only a handful of actors. Since the coalition is necessary to rule, however, the payoff of the coalition game is high. Coalition politics determines who will control important government ministries, Knesset committees, policies, and budgets. Creating crisis in the coalition is an effective way of pressuring for more, but there is also a danger that power already achieved will be lost if the coalition crumbles.

Bureaucratic politics is likely to be the major investment of the politician, who must retain or enhance his position within his organization if he is to continue his career. He may well assume that others covet his position: if he is the representative of a group, he may assume that others in the group would like to see him rotate out of office; within his party, other groups may feel deprived as they are denied representation because of his group's success in achieving positions of influence; certainly, outside his party, members of other parties have set their goal to replace him and his party. He must keep the politics of his constituency organization, his party, and the country clearly in mind as he meets, speaks, maneuvers, and negotiates to retain power for himself, his group, and his party. This group infighting is the kind of politics that is most hidden from the public eye but the one that probably takes up most of the energies of the politician.

The world of Israeli politics often seems confusing to the uninitiated. One reason is that names of parties and alignments change, although the basic uniformities are strong, and concentrating on major issues and patterns shows that the system often follows a few basic rules. For readers familiar only with Anglo-American politics, a word of advice: try not to transfer your understanding of politics and its terminology to the Israeli system without adjustment. Terms such as *left-right*, *checks and balances*, and even *democracy* are widely used in Israeli politics, but it would be misleading to interpret them in the same way they are used in other systems. The Israeli system is much more easily understood by someone who knows political systems in continental Europe, as the forms and usages are more directly traceable there. Even then, however, Israel poses special problems, for its history is unique, and its politics must be understood in that light.<sup>8</sup>

The dilemmas faced by Israeli democracy are similar to those that other advanced democracies confront in the twenty-first century. The details will depend on each country's unique historical developments,

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but the complexity and confounding nature of the perplexities are familiar. These themes will recur in the following chapters:

- Can the rule of law be maintained when many have intense and conflicting views of the appropriate sources of legitimacy in the system?
- Can pluralism and tolerance be fostered when religious and nationalist passions well up?
- How is it possible to forge into a single nation citizens of various ethnic backgrounds and different religions?
- What is the meaning of participatory democracy when technological innovations atomize society and individualism is rampant?
- How are the branches of government to be balanced so that abuses of power will be checked and individual liberty maintained?
- How can public needs be met by a profit-driven media?
- What is the responsibility of the state to weaker elements in the society during a period of globalization and open borders and markets?
- What is the meaning of parliamentary democracy when political parties are in serious decline?
- How can a sense of responsiveness and accountability be promoted within a political system that is perceived by a cynical electorate to be peopled by manipulative politicians?