Israeli Democracy and Politics

- **The Zionist movement has always included a broad range of political opinions from left-wing socialists to right-wing nationalists.**
- **Despite existential security threats, Israel has been a pluralistic, democratic state since independence.**
- **Proportional representation means divisions in Israeli society are reflected in a vibrant, multi-party system.**

The original Zionist movement represented a broad range of opinions.
Liberal Zionism represented the broad middle ground of the Zionist movement. Some of its most important leaders, such as Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann, can be identified with this tendency. The mainstream faction of the Zionist movement with which these leaders identified became known as the General Zionists. Although they promoted settlement in Palestine, they also placed great stress on diplomacy with the various great powers with interests in the Middle East.

Labour Zionism stressed the need to build the land as a socialist country. They believed that Jewish social structure had become distorted as a result of exile, and that Jews had to become farmers and manual workers in their own land in order both to revive the land of Israel and to restore normalcy to Jewish national life. The kibbutzim, or collective farms, were one of the distinctive expressions of this approach, as was the Histadrut (the Jewish trade union federation).

Labour Zionism was strong among the Jews of Russia and Eastern Europe, where socialist ideas were widespread.

David Ben-Gurion, subsequently the first Prime Minister of Israel, came from this tendency.

A more nationalist approach was that of the Revisionist organisation led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. Mainly liberal in its economic and political outlook, it took a maximalist position on territorial issues, believed that the Arabs would never agree to Jewish immigration to Palestine, and argued that only a strong Jewish state could secure the future of the community.

Other Zionists were less political and more cultural in their outlook, believing that the role of Palestine was to act as a cultural centre which would help to renew the whole Jewish world, rather than being a state in its own right.

There were some religious Zionists from the very beginning, but they tended to be in the minority, with both Orthodox and Reform strands of rabbinic opinion initially hostile.

Practical issues of settlement, political action and defence sharpened these differences and sometimes led to shifting alliances.
The Balfour Declaration and subsequent League of Nations mandate was seen as a boost for Chaim Weizmann's brand of international diplomacy and strengthened the reputation of the General Zionism which he represented.

However, over the subsequent years the 'Palestinians' – in the parlance of the time those Jews who actually lived in Palestine – became more dominant in the Zionist movement. In particular, the Labour Zionism represented by Ben-Gurion became the leading element in the Yishuv (the Jewish community of Palestine).

However, the labour movement was itself split, between Marxist parties who favoured the Soviet Union and more moderate elements who favoured the Western democracies. The latter, under Ben-Gurion and his successors, became the dominant political force in early Israel.

The new State of Israel adopted a democratic, parliamentary system.
Israel introduced a democratic system with a unicameral (single-chamber) parliament known as the Knesset. As in the UK, the most powerful executive role was that of Prime Minister, a post whose first holder was Ben-Gurion. After Israel's establishment the Knesset was dominated by a coalition of

socialist and allied parties. The left leaning parties eventually coalesced into what is now the Labour party.

Chaim Weizmann became Israel's first President, which was established as a largely ceremonial role.

Another feature of the Israeli system was the adoption of a proportional, party list system of election for members of the Knesset (MKs). An effect of this, which has shaped Israeli politics ever since, is the inability of any one party to achieve an overall majority which would enable it to govern alone. Hence every Israeli government has been a coalition of one complexion or another. One consequence has been that small parties, in particular the strictly-Orthodox parties, although representing only a minority of the population, have been able to exert considerable influence to protect and promote the interests of their constituency.

Israel's early years were characterised by the dominance of a predominantly Ashkenazi (European) Labour elite.
All of Israel's prime ministers, from Ben-Gurion to Golda Meir in the early 1970s, came from this background. They enjoyed enormous prestige as the leaders of the pre-state Yishuv and during the War of Independence.

The kibbutzim and the Histadrut were important sources of support for this leadership.

The major opposition grouping consisted of the heirs of the Revisionist right, grouped in party alliances which ultimately coalesced into the Likud. Their leader throughout this period was Menachem Begin, the former head of Irgun Zvai Leumi, the major right-wing Jewish armed organisation during the British Mandate, known for its bombing of the British HQ in the King David Hotel in 1946.

Arab Israelis, who always enjoyed voting rights, tended to vote either for Labour or for separate Arab parties.

Demographic changes post-independence challenged this political balance.
The major demographic change in the immediate post-independence years was the influx of large numbers of Jewish refugees from predominantly Muslim countries. Today the descendants of these 'Mizrachi' or 'eastern' immigrants comprise around half of the Jewish population of Israel. Today they play a prominent role in all Israel's institutions. However, in the early years they suffered from discrimination and felt neglected by the Labour elite. Partly for this reason, they often identified with the opposition Likud. Also, their cultural background and their experiences of Muslim persecution inclined them to both Likud's social conservatism and its hard-line foreign policy stance. Strictly-Orthodox Jews from Mizrachi backgrounds have their own political party, Shas, which has often played a pivotal role in forming coalition governments.

More recent (from the 1990s onward) was a mass immigration from the former Soviet Union. These newcomers were predominantly well-educated, and their background gave them a distinct political perspective. On the one hand, their experience of Soviet repression inclined them to the right, while on the other, the same Soviet experience had weakened and in many cases eliminated the hold of traditional religious forms of belonging. They tended to form a constituency for a right-wing, nationalistic but secular outlook.

Various crises in the 1970s weakened the authority of the dominant Labour movement.
One crisis was the economy. After a period of rapid growth in the 1950s and 1960s, the 1970s became a 'lost decade', with rapid inflation and stagnation. The right demanded liberalisation of the economy to cope with the new challenges.

To some extent, this political shift simply reflected the situation across many advanced countries during this period. The early post-war consensus was breaking down in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis and a new consensus was emerging on the need for a more liberalised economy. This shift is of course associated with the victories of Margaret Thatcher in Britain (1979) and Ronald Reagan in the United States (1980).

However, there were also specific factors at work in Israel. One, already mentioned, was the emergence of the Mizrachi working class as a major electoral factor.

Another was a new, younger Ashkenazi professional class. Often the offspring of the Labour-orientated pioneers, they were less tied to its inherited dogmas, and many had grown discontented with what was seen as an ossified and even corrupt Labour bureaucracy. This did not necessarily lead to support for Likud. Many supported a new – and as it turned out ephemeral – centrist grouping called the Democratic Movement for Change (Hebrew acronym Dash). Some, again, supported groups further to the left, such as Meretz. Nevertheless, it was clear that the old Labour ascendancy was breaking down.

The other crisis was in defence. The initial success of Egypt's and Syria's 1973 surprise attack, despite the subsequent Israeli military victory, shocked the nation and undermined the reputation of the leadership. In 1977 the Likud came to power and Menachem Begin became the country's first prime minister from the Zionist right.

One of the major political shifts in the last decade was the split in the right leading to the foundation of Kadima.
Ariel Sharon, a military commander regarded as a hero of both the 1967 and 1973 wars, helped found the Likud and became a minister in a number of Likud administrations. Despite official censure and heavy popular criticism for his role as Defence Minister in the 1982 Lebanon war, he eventually became Prime Minister in 2001.

Despite being seen as a hard-liner and a champion of settlement construction in the Gaza Strip and West Bank (areas populated by Palestinian Arabs, captured by Israel in the defensive 1967 Six Day War) he came to believe in the necessity of Israelis disengaging from the Palestinians. He orchestrated Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza strip in 2005.

The result was a split in Likud, with Sharon becoming leader of a new centrist party called Kadima ('Forward'), which formed with the intention of continuing the process of disengagement from the West Bank. Under Sharon and his successor Ehud Olmert, Kadima was for a time the country's dominant political force. Kadima has recently been in decline.

Likud revived under Benjamin Netanyahu, the present Prime Minister, although it has subsequently faced challenges from the nationalist right in the form of Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteneu (which it now runs jointly with in elections) and Naftali Bennett's HaBayit HaYehudi party which derives its support from the religious Zionist community.

Israeli politics today are organised around a variety of issues.
Foreign observers often view Israeli politics solely through the prism of "the occupation" or the peace process. However, other issues often preoccupy the mind of the average Israeli. This is not because Israelis are not interested in peace – rather that there have been so many failed efforts to make peace with the Palestinians that they have turned their attention to other issues affecting their society. These issues include:

Social justice: economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s gave a huge boost to the modern Israeli knowledge economy, but also led to Israel becoming a much more unequal society. High house and commodity prices have put pressure even on relatively well-paid middle class people, while making life extremely difficult for those at the bottom. This has triggered various forms of social protest, led to a revival in the Histadrut, and fuelled the rise of new political forces voicing the discontent in particular of the middle class.

The role of the Haredi (strictly-Orthodox Jewish) community: In many cases exempt from military service, in receipt of significant state subsidies, and on occasion attempting to impose their view of Jewish religious law in the public space, the Haredim have provoked resentment from their fellow Israelis. A central goal in the present governing coalition – which unusually includes no Haredi parties – is an attempt to drastically restrict Haredi exemptions from military service.

In short, Israeli political debate is dominated at least as much by questions about the kind of society Israel should be as about its survival and relationships with its neighbours.

The Israeli Political Spectrum

The Israeli party system can change dramatically from election to election as new parties are formed and older ones merge.

The January 2013 General Election saw a swing towards the centre-left. Overall, of the 120 seats in the Knesset, the rightwing block of parties got 42 seats, down by 7 compared to the last election in 2009, the centre-left got 48 (up 4), the Ultra-Orthodox religious parties got 18 (up 2) and the Arab parties got 12 (up 1). This is an exact 60-60 split between the right/religious blocks and the centre-left/Arab blocks. The most dramatic change was the rise of Yesh Atid, a new centre party appealing mainly to middle class secular voters and led by charismatic former TV presenter Yair Lapid. In the end, the coalition was formed of parties from centre and right wing parties who disagree over peace process issues, but who have a common agenda on key social issues, including drafting Haredim into the army and getting a better deal for the middle class.

The number of Members of the Knesset won by each party is shown below (with the change since the last election in 2009 in brackets):

Party	Leader	Seats
Likud Yisrael Beiteinu (right)	Benjamin Netanyahu	31 (-11)
Yesh Atid (centre)	Yair Lapid	19 (did not run)
Labor (centre-left)	Shelly Yakamovitch	15 (+2)
Shas (Sephardi Ultra-Orthodox)	Eli Yishai	11 (-)
Jewish Home (national religious/hard right)	Naftali Bennett	11 (+4)
United Torah Judaism (Ultra-Orthodox)	Yaakov Litzman	7 (+2)
Hatnua (centre)	Tzipi Livni	6 (+6)
Meretz (left)	Zahava Gal-On	6 (+3)
United Arab List – Ta'al (Arab)	Ibrahim Sarsur	5 (+1)
Hadash (Arab)	Mohammed Barakeh	4 (-)
Balad (Arab)	Jamal Zalaka	3 (-)
Kadima (centre)	Shaul Mofaz	2 (-26)