

On the Fringe of the Arab Spring: The Tent Protest in Israel

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98

Anat Lapidot-Firilla

Senior Research Fellow
Academic Director, Mediterranean Unit
Van Leer Jerusalem Institute

Hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets in the summer of 2011 to protest the government's socioeconomic policy. This wave of protests, which came to be known as "the tent protest," focused initially on demanding implementable affordable-housing solutions for all Israel's residents. But it expanded quickly to include other important issues related to the cost of living, education, and medical care, as well as substandard or totally lacking public infrastructure. Within a few days, demonstrations were organised in various social sectors. These included a demonstration by young mothers, dubbed "the stroller protest," against the high direct and indirect costs of rearing children. The protesters as a whole were expressing their dissatisfaction with how the government had responded to their immediate distress, and they demanded a change in Israel's social and economic agenda.

Although quite a few older people took part in these demonstrations, the protest was primarily about the future of young people in Israel. Many hoped that the generational protests of the 1960s, which took place in many Western countries but bypassed Israel at the time, had finally reached Israel, inspired by the protests in the Arab world. The joining together of the struggles of various sectors – including students, medical apprentices, and young intellectuals – strengthened the feeling that the protest was becoming generational, of a generation protesting against its parents, who had turned a welfare state into a free-market state. Whereas the parents' generation succeeded in amassing capital in the course of their working years, the younger generation be-

lieves that education and hard work are no longer enough to allow one to live with dignity. Indeed, the struggles of the adjunct instructors against the tenured professors, like those of the medical residents, for a fairer distribution of the burden between them and the senior experts, were clear signs of a generational protest. The fact that the protesters' outcry was initially directed against landlords and high rental costs likewise highlighted the generational character of the protest.

The protest had two main stages. The first and spontaneous stage consisted of young people who were struggling to cope with many hardships in the big city. The striking characteristics of this stage were the frustration generated by the young people's realisation that they would not be able to fulfil their dreams within the foreseeable future and the very emotional outburst against the small number of tycoons who control the country's economy and have close ties to the government. In the second stage, more organised and established civil-society groups were mobilised. They tried to formulate a new, alternative socioeconomic agenda through discussions and dialogue with various groups and by creating a more professional discourse, with the mediation of academic experts dedicated to equality and distributive and social justice.

Some commentators suggest that the protest erupted last summer because of the Arab Spring and because of the global economic crisis, which indirectly affected NGOs and civil society in Israel. Others seek the causes in local political developments and the crisis of democracy in Israel. But even if there is no causal connection between the protests elsewhere, especially in Spain and in the Arab world, and the protests in Israel, in today's global and wired society people whose frustrations have local characteristics and causes may draw inspiration from parallel protests, especially from how they are presented

in the new media. The use of social media in public protests began in the first half of 2011 with a series of large demonstrations in Arab countries in the Middle East. But the use of social media is not the only similarity between the protests in Israel and the Middle East. The two waves of protest grew out of a rise in the cost of living, were organised by young people who were employed, and demanded not only economic changes but also changes in the form of government. But in Israel, this was also the first broad public boycott aimed at food manufacturers. The so-called “cottage cheese protest,” which focused on the high price of cottage cheese, had wide resonance and led to the lowering of prices. This achievement generated the feeling that the public had the power to bring about change and that the elite, which had far too much power, could no longer expect the public to sit quiet. In short, the causes of the protest in Israel are local; they are linked primarily to the gaps between expectations and ability, frustration at the absence of socioeconomic alternatives, and the lack of justice in the distribution of resources, as well as a growing feeling that the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, has become the enemy of the people and of democracy.

The Immediate Causes of the Protest

In the first stage, the protest began as a Facebook group, which led to the setting up of a tent on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. The boulevard rapidly became a large tent city, and then tent cities sprang up in other Israeli cities. The intention of the young people who set up the tents was to arouse public debate about the high cost of housing and the high cost of living and about social justice in Israel. Affordable housing was the sole concrete demand at this stage. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in several mass demonstrations throughout the country.

It should be noted that this was not the first protest linked to the housing crunch in Israel. In 2002–2003 protesters in need of affordable permanent housing set up tents in Kikar Hamedina (State Square), one of the most expensive squares in central Tel Aviv. But the dissonance between the tents with their hungry, unemployed inhabitants and the wealthy residents of Tel Aviv in the houses surrounding the square failed to generate an active and broad movement for change. The protest, called the “Bread Square dem-

onstration,” was eventually broken up by court injunctions. But in 2007 housing prices began to rise substantially, especially in the Dan Bloc, and even more so in central Tel Aviv. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics show that in the last six years (from 2005 to 2011), rental prices in the urban centre of the country rose by an average of 49%.

Knesset members were not completely indifferent to the housing crunch. The Knesset Finance Committee discussed the housing crisis and its records point an accusing finger at various governments for their failure in this regard, caused by the lack of long-term, multi-systemic strategic planning. In March 2011, shortly before the eruption of the wave of protests, the government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu presented a plan that would establish committees for national housing, to ease the housing crunch by accelerating the approval process for apartment blocks. But, many young people saw this proposal as growing out of the government’s old agenda, which benefits developers and tycoons.

It is noteworthy that the central tent city, on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, was set up opposite where the People’s Council – the state of Israel’s first Parliament – was established in 1948. With a touch of humour, the protesters hung signs that changed the name of the street to “If I were Rothschild,” which is the Hebrew version of the famous song “If I were a rich man” from the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. Other signs explained the struggle by means of scores, as one might see on a soccer pitch: “The people = 1; Bibi = 0.” It was a play on words suggesting that the people had an advantage but also that they were united. And it gave Bibi – Prime Minister Netanyahu – the unflattering attribution of “zero,” which in Hebrew means “a nobody.” As stated above, the choice of Rothschild Boulevard as the location of the protest’s headquarters was not coincidental. To a great extent, like many other protests in the eastern and southern Mediterranean basin, the tent protest began as a civil, democratic process aimed at wresting sovereignty from the government and the institutions that supposedly represent the people and restoring it to the people. In Israel, the protest expressed the public’s dissatisfaction with a political system that grants power not to the people but rather to sectoral parties – and often to the rabbis that head them – which are loyal only to their constituents. The young protesters felt that something was wrong in the democratic process, in which parliament is supposed to represent

both the needs of its constituents and the general good. The political games played in the Knesset did not allow for economic and diplomatic alternatives, but only for different parties that competed with each other for seats. Thus the public felt that the political system did not represent its interests and wishes. Moreover, it seemed that instead of dealing with social problems, in recent years the Knesset had tried to badger the public and constrain it by means of fear and a McCarthy-like style. To some extent, the protesters were signalling that in a democracy the elected officials were supposed to represent the general good and to conduct a substantive dialogue with their constituents after they were elected.

Indeed, the nationalistic security discourse that has become more strident in the Knesset in recent years has pushed aside democratic principles. Among those principles is the idea of equality and of basic human rights, including socioeconomic rights, which cannot be abrogated, even by a “democratic” process, that is, by means of a majority of votes in the Knesset. The identification of certain political views regarding the fate of the occupied Palestinian territories in Judea and Samaria with the socioeconomic views of the Israeli left caused an automatic linkage and automatic rejection of every demand for social change. To a great extent, the tent protest denoted the limits of cynicism and of the cooperation politicians could expect in an era of McCarthy-like moves and the perpetuation of inequality. Perhaps it also denoted the limits of indifference of the masses.

However, after the initial euphoria that the protest generated, the demonstrators discovered that although they had restored to many Israelis the hope that they had the power to change things and even the feeling of social solidarity that many had thought was irretrievably lost, and although their demands based on social justice were very attractive, they had to formulate a strategy and clear demands. At this point, many people representing the established civil society came to the aid of the young demonstrators. In neighbouring countries, in Egypt, for example, a similar process took place. There, too, members of the established civil society, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, joined the young demonstrators and together they succeeded in bringing about change. But that is the extent of the similarity between the two cases.

The underlying assumption of the Israeli protesters' leaders was that the only tool that the Knesset and

especially the government had was the security discourse and the ability to sow fear and divisiveness. Consequently, they chose to separate the discussion of distributive and economic equality from the debate over the state of democracy in Israel and the implications for society of the occupation of the Palestinian territories. In the short run, this strategy proved effective, but it failed in the long run. After all, the series of antidemocratic bills is linked to the government's economic policy.

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In the second stage of the protest, well-known academics and NGOs that deal with issues of social justice joined in and formulated documents that explained the failures of the government's socioeconomic policy. These documents show that inequality in Israel is one of the greatest in the world and the greatest among the OECD countries. The highest salaries are five times the salaries of those who earn 10% more than the average. These documents also reveal the protesters' view of the effect of the governments' social policies in recent years on the nature of the challenges facing Israeli society:

- Differences in income that are among the greatest in the Western world: For example, the difference between the salaries of workers with 10 years' or more experience and those with less than 10 years' experience has been about 50% for the last decade. The difference between the salaries of workers with more than 12 years of schooling and those with less than 12 years rose from 66% in 1998 to 80% in 2009.
- Lack of infrastructure: The government does not invest sufficiently in infrastructure in Israel. The lack of infrastructure for alternative transportation isolates the residents of the periphery, rendering them unable to extricate themselves from the poverty that has been imposed on them.

- Inequality in access to medical care: Even in the area of medical care there is a clear paucity of government investment. The public medical services in Israel suffer from structural difficulties deriving from the lack of resources that are necessary for the system to function. Government support of the medical care system dropped from 67% in 1998 to 59% in 2010. The rise in individuals' costs for medical care has pushed thousands of households below the poverty line. Also, there are huge differences between the centre and the periphery in the quality of medical care. These differences are manifested in the number of doctors and beds and the availability of expensive, life-saving equipment.
- Differences in education: One of the main demands of the participants in the tent protest with regard to education was the implementation of the compulsory education law from birth. Many women remain at home today for financial reasons and cannot afford to pay for preschool education for their children (up to age five). Similarly, there are great differences within Israel's education system that parallel the class differences. The results of global tests in the sciences show a worrisome decline in the achievement of Israeli children.
- Employment: The differences in education are the primary reason for salary differences in Israel. Salary differences between workers with more than 12 years of schooling and those with less than 12 years of schooling grew over the last decade from 66% in 1998 to 80% in 2009. Salary differences between men and women are 35%.

The protest focused on shoring up the foundations of the welfare state through a larger government investment in public education, the strengthening and broadening of public medical care, and the provision of more generous aid to weak population sectors. The protesters sought a dramatic elimination of the pyramidal structure of companies in Israel, the creation of a barrier between the ownership of real corporations and financial corporations. They also sought to limit widespread employment through manpower companies.

Another data point is that, in contrast to most Western countries, Israel's public civil spending dropped in relation to its GNP over the past five years. At the same time, defence spending in relation to the GNP remained almost unchanged. However, the protest-

ers' big problem was that while they were pointing out the structural weaknesses of Israel's economy, it remained strong in comparison to the economies of the rest of the world, in terms of both unemployment and growth. Israel's economic strength stood out against the backdrop of global economic crisis.

Despite this relative strength of the economy, the plight of the workers in Israel and the lack of infrastructure in education, medical care, and transportation, as well as the unjust distribution of the national duties (military service and taxes), were at the heart of the public debate that the protest generated. But it is possible that the protest erupted when it did because of other factors. Among them was the feeling that negotiations with the Palestinians had reached a dead end. The frustration over this and the fact that the topic had for all practical purposes dropped off the government's agenda made room on the national agenda for civil issues.

Among the burning civil issues was the religious-secular rift that continues to roil the country. Young people who have served in the army and taxpayers have long felt that they have been the victims of highway robbery by the shameless religious parties, the tycoons, and the real estate magnates. And indeed, the religious-secular rift and the housing crunch fed the flames and led to the emotional outburst. In addition, established civil society organisations, which had long been under heavy pressure from the Knesset, saw this as an opportunity to demarcate the limits of permissible criticism and to shift from a defensive posture to one of attack. For them this was an opportunity to legitimise their activity by appearing as supporters of the poor and of young people and not only as supporters of the minorities in Israel.

The Government's Response to the Protest

In response to the protest, Israel's government announced a series of steps that would be taken to relieve the housing crunch. The Prime Minister also set up a committee headed by Professor Manuel Trajtenberg, with the aim of examining the protesters' economic and social demands, primarily regarding the high cost of living and the gap between the social classes, and proposing solutions. The committee included members selected from the public, academic, and private sectors. The committee dealt with proposals in five areas: a change in priorities

that would reduce the burden on Israeli citizens, a change in the structure of taxes, an increase in the accessibility of social services, an increase in competition in the economy, and the creation of implementable steps to lower housing prices.

In response to the establishment of the committee, the leaders of the protest established an alternative committee. The two committees had similar goals: increased socioeconomic equality and increased public involvement in the economic and social debate. However, that was the extent of agreement between them.

The differences between the two committees' proposals derive from their differing views of the public sector. The Trajtenberg committee's document expresses doubt regarding the importance and the efficiency of the public sector and therefore hesitates to enlarge it. The alternative committee sees the public sector as an important tool for redressing the failures of the market and improving the distribution of income. The protesters' reports express a belief in social solidarity and thus a belief that higher taxes should be imposed on the wealthy so as to create a more just society.

These ideological differences are manifested also in how the documents relate to the main topic on which the public dispute has focused until now: limiting the budget and public spending. The Trajtenberg report is not willing to increase public spending.

Outcome of the Protest

The protest brought hundreds of thousands of people to the streets, but its achievements were few. The inevitable failure of the protest might have been foreseen. After all, although the activists were very careful not to identify with Israel's left-wing parties and rejected any partisan affiliation, it became clear from the beginning of the struggle that this was not enough. The religious right wing and the settlers within it set themselves up as the clear enemies of the protest. In contrast to the sceptical veteran protesters, who were Mizrahi Jews and who saw the students as superficial children of rich people who were protesting because they were temporarily unable to take a summer break in the cheap resorts in Turkey, the religious right tried to label them as wild-eyed communists who were a danger to Israel's security. The welfare approach, identified with the left,

had become taboo among many on the religious right, even though most of them had similar economic and social problems. And thus, while the protest activists willingly passed up the opportunity to float an important discussion on the principle of democracy in Israel, they did not succeed in avoiding political labelling. The demand for social justice – which should have related to all sectors of the population, including Arabs, who because of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have a problem protesting on other issues – became a slogan. To a great extent the protesters lost their moral advantage because their strategy ignored the fact that without democracy there could be no right to demonstrate and that it was democracy that made possible the very existence of the struggle for social justice.

The result of refraining from a serious public discussion of the implications for Israel of the McCarthyism that had spread through the Knesset and of the lack of a diplomatic initiative to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not only a moral failure on the part of the protesters. In practice, it perpetuates the legitimization of the complex parliamentary puzzle that requires submission to the dictates of sectoral parties and continues the suppression of the rights of the Arab minority.

The protesters failed to convince the governmental institutions that their social approach must change radically. The proposals remained mainly on paper as a utopian alternative. Also, the fact that some of the leaders of the protest decided to become candidates in the coming elections as part of existing parties suggests that an opportunity was missed. Even worse, it suggests that the entire Knesset has become a single bloc that rubber-stamps government policy. It is doubtful whether this protest will have any substantial effect on the elections, on Israeli political culture, or on how the important current problems are dealt with. But the protesters succeeded in one thing. They introduced into the language of the younger generation concepts that had not been heard in Israel for years, including social justice and the equitable distribution of resources. They opened the door to many public discussions and introduced a refreshing spirit to activism at various levels. The social protest caught the public's attention and the interest of decision-makers, but at the moment it seems that that will not be translated into the creation of a new socioeconomic agenda for Israel. Thus, the protest will go down in history as a missed opportunity.