Introduction

Exploring New Perspectives

Israeli Civil Mobilization and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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In May 2008, Israel celebrated its sixtieth birthday with official ceremonies and popular events. At the same time Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza commemorated the Nakba, as they name the “catastrophe” of the creation of the Israeli state in 1948. Sixty years after the establishment of the State of Israel, Israeli society is fragmented, socioeconomic tensions are strengthening, the crisis of trust in politics and politicians is culminating, and the Zionist myth of the Sabra, the new idealistic Israeli citizen, has been contested Arab citizens, who composed nearly twenty percent of the Israeli population, are not integrated in a state which defines itself as “Jewish and democratic,” and no peace solution with the Palestinians seems realistic in the near future.

Since the development in the mid-1970s of the first massive social movements in Israel various political and civil groups have emerged within the public sphere. Both the transformation of the Israeli liberal economy as well as the failure of the Oslo peace process have intensified the establishment of interest- and identity- or community-based organizations that mix social and political repertoires of action. Israel faces an unprecedented situation where various and opposing visions

I owe special thanks to Nonna Mayer (CEVIPOF, Paris), Cedric Parizot (CNRS-CRFJ Jerusalem), and Richard Ratcliffe (Oxford University) for their helpful comments and advice on this chapter.
of society struggle to change the state’s social and political nature. Jewish settlers, peace activists, anarchists, and feminists, but also Arab nationalists and Islamists are contesting the Israeli public sphere and are changing its configuration. In this, Israel is located at the cross-road of national, regional, and international tensions that challenge its current and future stability.

The outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000 marked the failure of the Oslo peace process and accelerated the rise of both Israeli and Palestinian extremist movements refusing dialogue and cooperation. Subsequent peace actions such as the Geneva Initiative conducted after the failure of the Taba talks in 2001 did not succeed and confirmed the current weakness of mainstream peace coalitions. Jewish settlers intensified their occupation of Palestinian lands with the more or less tacit support of Israeli authorities. The Gaza withdrawal in 2005 evacuated eight thousand settlers, representing only two percent of the total settler population in the Palestinian Territories. In spite of this localized failure, settler mobilization is still very active and well integrated within the Israeli parliamentary system where they constitute a political force to be reckoned with. Ehud Olmert’s government, elected in 2006 after the forced departure of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, just authorized in April 2008 the construction of hundred housing units in El Kana and Ariel, two settlements in northern West Bank. In spite of the road map established by the Quartet for Israeli Palestinian peace (United Nations, USA, European Union and Russia), settlements and violence continue. Furthermore, in order to reduce formal contacts with Palestinians and to prevent potential suicide attacks, Israel started in 2002 the construction of the controversial separation wall. The current situation in the Palestinian Territories and more specifically in Gaza is very chaotic. The death of Yasser Arafat in November 2004, the longstanding charismatic leader of the Palestinian resistance, and the 2006 electoral success of Hamas provoked unprecedented inter Palestinian conflict and reprisals. Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority since 2005, did not manage to contain Islamist protest in Gaza where they unilaterally proclaimed the creation of an Islamic Republic in June 2007. On a regional level, the consequences of the last Lebanon war in summer 2006 and the current Lebanese political instability accentuate regional tensions along with the American “crusade” against Syria and Iran.

Israel is thus located within a complex and unstable regional and international framework that influences its internal civil society. In nearly thirty years pro- and antisettlement movements have intensified