

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Ideological Cleavage in Israel

Abstract

This chapter demarcates the Israeli right and connects the left-right continuum in Israel and the broader debate between progressive and conservative ideologies. The first central argument is that left and right-wing ideologies in Israel have always been defined based on the aspired borders of the Jewish state and the relationship between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs within them. The second central argument is that left-wing and right-wing forces in Israel draw their ideas from the history of Mandatory Palestine and Israel and from values of progressivism and conservatism that are also found in other countries. The discussion is assisted by an overview of the core ideological and political divisions in Israel and a concise chronology of the ideological cleavage in the Jewish and Israeli communities since the 1920s. The chapter ends with a presentation of the structure of the book.

Keywords: Left-wing; Right-wing; Conservatism; Progressivism; Zionism; The Israeli right; The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

This book goes into the depths of the political right in Israel, as the dominant side of the debate among Israelis on the borders of their state, its identity, and the national conflict therein. The Israeli right is an ideological body that crosses demographic sectors, with shared lines of thought, jargon, plans, and vision. The vision had existed throughout the 20th century, well before the establishment of Israel. Its dominance marks the rise of global conservative political thought, which carries right-wing politics in various parts of the world, challenging the substance of 21st-century representative democracy.

There are many and varied reasons to dedicate a book to right-wing politics. For one, it is an entire, often misunderstood side of every political debate that governs democratic countries a significant part of the time. In Israel, right-wing ideology has arguably reached a hegemonic status during the undisrupted 12 years of Likud governments led by Benjamin Netanyahu between 2009 and 2021. Right-wing ideology influences how Israelis see their society, their neighbors in the Middle East, and the world. It has reshaped Israeli governance for years and was instrumental in Likud's 2023 judicial overhaul. It is playing a crucial role in how Israel conducts

its reaction to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in times of negotiations and, since October 2023, in times of brutal, unprecedented war.

At the same time, the public discussion about right-wing ideas in Israel and beyond is confused and stained with politicization, which obscures the clear and explicit intentions articulated by the political elite. Based on the principle of self-identification and relying on primary sources, a clear description of the Israeli right can precisely define its boundaries. Having a distinct sense of right-wing politics will, in turn, provide grounds to analyze the political implications of right-wing ideology. Understanding right-wing ideology in Israel may also help shed some light on other ideologies. In particular, right and left-wing politics implies a duality. A deep understanding of one side requires recognition of the importance of both sides, which lays the foundations for a parallel investigation of the values and lines of thought of the other side. Hopefully, a convincing account that overcomes analytical obstacles to present one ideology will advance a similar account of all ideologies in the Middle East, particularly those not covered in this book, such as Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim narratives.

From this broad perspective, this introductory chapter is dedicated to presenting the entire ideological divide within Israeli society. It will lay the ground for the following chapters to expand, example, and analyze the arguments attributed to the Israeli right.

Political Right and Left

Open political disputes between ideological camps are a characteristic of modern democracy. As lines of dispute deepen and the competition over public opinion becomes more sophisticated, ideological cleavages are exposed, represented by intellectuals, social movements, and political parties, they cross demographic sectors and create opposing sides. These are the notorious political “right” and “left”.

It is common knowledge that “left” and “right” originated with the birth of modern democracy, in the First French Republic. Political and ideological pluralism has been a characteristic of democracy ever since. In autocracies – whether a single rule or an oligarchy – any significant ideological divide is between the regime and revolutionaries that aim to topple it. There are no genuine left and right on economic, social, or foreign affairs policies because there are no mechanisms facilitating legitimate public disputes on the overall direction of the polity. The development of such institutions requires respect for alternative ways to address social problems and for political pluralism that results in a public debate about how to do just that. Thus, only democracies have genuine ideological disputes,

where two sides (and usually more) compete for the people's support, vote, and empowerment to implement their political vision.

Any social problem has different ways to address it, and these ways are always built upon normative premises. The rift between left and right begins with such value tension regarding a central issue that can relate to multiple social disputes. As the political positions that derive from these values are developed into conflicting agendas to deal with the social problem, the rift deepens and takes the shape of a cleavage. The value competition at its core gives the rift its name – the ideological cleavage.

In Israeli society, which is immersed in value-based disputes, there has been a decades long identification of the ideological cleavage with positions about Israel's security borders. The duality between "right" and "left" is sometimes studied in conjunction with opposing concepts in foreign affairs and security, such as a competition between "hawks" and "doves".¹ Alternatively, left and right are synonyms for conflicting positions over the status of the territories under Israeli control since the 1967 War.² Even the terminology used to name the West Bank territories, and the tendency to either address them as integral or separate from Israel proper, are a matter of debate. This political divide became not only the main cleavage in the country but also a characteristic of Israeli politics, which has determined most of the country's election cycles, heading to the constitutional crisis that resulted in five general elections between 2019 and 2022.³ Even in periods when it seems other ideological disputes gain presence, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains the ground zero for analysis.⁴

While for decades there was a consensus about the importance of this ideological cleavage in Israel, it is far from flawless or exhaustive as there are sociological cleavages that may be just as salient. However, when considering how both the political elite and the general population in Israel self-identify, the traditional way to analyze the ideological cleavage in Israel remains fundamental to understanding Israeli politics. As illustrated both in this introduction and the next methods chapter, the nucleus for how Israeli rightists and leftists define their political agenda continues to be strongly correlated with two related existential issues: Israel's

¹ Reifen-Tagar et al., "When Ideology Matters", p. 118; Doron, "Right as Opposed to Wrong as Opposed to Left", p. 43; Ben-Porat, "Netanyahu's Second Coming", p. 232; Cohen, "The Israeli Left", p. 865 [Hebrew]. On the decision to translate rather than transliterate Hebrew titles and how they are distinguished from English titles, see "A Note on Translation and Transliteration."

² Naor, "The Political System", p. 77; Ben-Porat, *Global Liberalism, Local Populism*, p. 147.

³ Arian and Shamir, "A Decade Later, the World had Changed, the Cleavage Structure Remained," p. 688; Yuchtman-Yaar and Peres, *Democracy and Peace in the Israeli Mind*, 67; Peres and Ben-Eliezer, *Cleavages in the Israeli Society*, p. 35 [Hebrew].

⁴ Talshir, "Which 'Israel Before All'?", p. 898.

political claim over the West Bank and the ethnocultural relations between Jewish Israelis and Arab Palestinians within these unresolved borders.

Although one should not conclude an absence of conflicting positions in other fields in Israel, this conceptualization of “left” and “right” emphasizes the long-standing relationship between the framework of the ideological divide in Israel and competing political visions for Israel’s borders. Many other contemporary debates, especially those that address Israel’s self-definition, its national identity, its constitutional obligations, and its relationship with the international community and international law – are all interlinked with the primary dispute over the territories it has controlled since 1967. The conflict bears dramatic consequences on the mere definition of Israel, its character, its system of government and its very existence. The dispute on the subject also reveals how advocates of right and left-wing politics understand the place of the State of Israel in the Middle East, its connection to the Zionist movement, and its future in the 21st century. With that appreciation, we can move to look at the core divide of this cleavage, which also introduces the primary positions of its different sides.

The Core of the Cleavage

An effective way to become intuitively acquainted with the ideological divide in Israel and its opposing sides is with the help of a triangle, representing Israel’s Jewish majority, Israel’s democratic system, and the one-state reality from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River (Figure 1). This triangle has been invoked from time to time by local writers and scholars of the ideological cleavage, as an outline for the entire political controversy in Israel.⁵ However, they all assumed the divide between left and right is on which side of the triangle Israel must compromise, whereas the main point of disagreement in Israel is about the very need for compromise at all.

The Israeli left identifies the Greater-Jewish-Democratic Israel as an impossible equation, which obliges giving up on an entire side and imagining Israel without it. The Israeli left’s united ambition is to preserve and develop the state’s democratic nature, which also relates to progressive ideas that unify left-wing voices on governance, economic, and social issues. However, there is a deep internal disagreement within the Israeli left on whether to compromise on the idea of one political entity between the river and the sea or to compromise on Israel’s Jewish majority.

⁵ Naor, *Greater Israel* [Hebrew]; Elitzur, *Of Sound Mind* [Hebrew]; Arieli, *All Borders of Israel* [Hebrew].

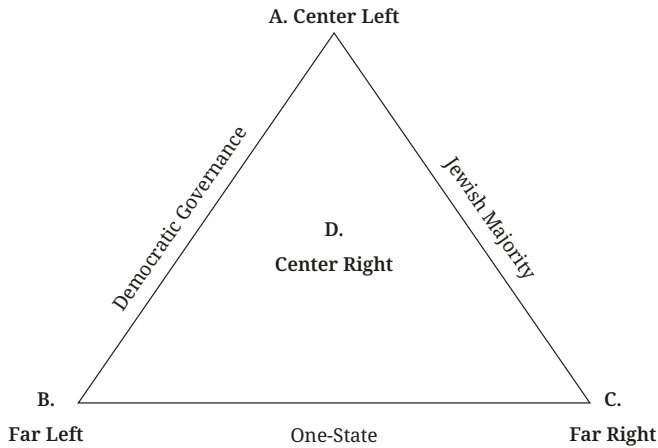


Figure 1: Israel's Ideological Cleavage

For decades, an overwhelming majority within the left, which included those who identify as “Zionist left” and “center-left”, proposed a territorial compromise in which Israel separates from the West Bank and its Palestinian population. This means the practical relinquishment of the integrity of the land, marked A in Figure 1. At its end point, this proposition has become to be known as the two-state solution. It is supported not only by many in the Israeli left but also by many among the Palestinian and Arab citizens of Israel.

On the other hand, the far left or “egalitarian left”, which also represents many Palestinian citizens of Israel, supports abolishing the Jewish state and strengthening the democratic identity by turning Israel into a country where Jews, Muslims, and Christians coexist with equal rights in all respects, including national rights. This proposition either takes a binational Zionist-Arab approach or another one-state arrangement in which all the residents of the country can be included. Therefore, there is no need for a border change or a territorial compromise. It is marked B in Figure 1.

The deep disagreement within the Israeli left poses difficulties in working together politically. The goal of the Zionist left is a democratic state that is a safe haven for the Jewish people, which is at odds with the revolutionary vision of the egalitarian left. While egalitarian leftists consider terms like “Jewish and democratic” and “Zionist left” to be an oxymoron, the mere association in one left-wing camp pushes moderates towards the ambiguous center. As centrists become indifferent to the ideological divide, they increasingly cooperate with the Israeli right on other issues, ironically proving the far-left’s point. In this cycle, the pragmatic behavior of the center-left encourages leftists to advocate an even blunter one-state ideology, refusing to accept the possibility of left-wing Zionism.

This fundamental disagreement within the Israeli left can be perceived as an enlightened practice of ideological pluralism. However, it also prevents the presentation of a cohesive and coherent left-wing position on the most significant political discussion in Israel. And because in Israel the values of the ideological divide are important for obtaining the public's trust in voting in general elections, the inner rapture of the Israeli left can be perceived as a lack of ideological confidence, which can also explain its gradual decline and the notable difficulty of this camp to establish a governing alternative to the Israeli right.

In stark contrast, the political right in Israel is structured around a unified way of interpreting the triangle diagram, with an absolute majority rejecting a compromise on any of its sides. The Israeli right is characterized by the ultimate conservative view, according to which the State of Israel can be simultaneously Greater, Jewish, and democratic. As Israel currently self-identifies as both fundamentally Jewish and democratic (an identification discussed in multiple chapters of this book) and as it effectively controls almost the entire areas under dispute, Israeli right-wing Conservatism starts by maintaining this status quo. The initial focus is on rejecting proposals to fundamentally change it.

The right rejects the left-wing conclusion, according to which the three sides of the triangle cannot be applied and the attempt to do so is dangerous. The vast majority of right-wing advocates present the opposite view, marked D in Figure 1: a vision of Greater Israel, Jewish but also democratic, that spreads over the entire triangle without renouncing any principle and with minimal adjustments on each of the sides.

However, considering the substance and content of democracy, there is a vocal and growing minority within the Israeli right that effectively calls for giving up Israel's democratic identity, marked C in Figure 1. An explicit anti-democratic right-wing aspiration is still more commonly phrased as a criticism of the Israeli right. But in 2021, a specific stream of marginalized and outlawed Jewish extremism called Kahanism had reemerged, gained legitimacy, tripled its electoral power, and crossed the electoral threshold in the 2022 elections for the first time since the late 1980s. As it benefited from the democratic game, its leaders obscure their anti-democratic agenda to become a significant current within the Israeli right.

The starting point of no compromise over any of the triangle's corners has allowed the right not to deepen its internal debate and to emphasize a broad common denominator, a big ideological tent labeled "the national camp". On the one hand, the anti-democratic voices are blurred within this wide-ranging label and forced to put on the guise of moderation. On the other hand, center-right leaders avoid internal strife, which also means overlooking the democratic challenge within its ranks. The ability of the Israeli right to establish a flexible conceptual framework that allows essential contradictions for the sake of political pragmatism is another area of resemblance with conservative politics.

As shall be elaborated in the third chapter of this book, the broad common denominator of the political right is not based on pure pragmatism but on a practical agenda item. Striving for Israel to strengthen its grip on all sides of the triangle is expressed on a practical level by supporting the gradual annexation of the West Bank. Moreover, the Israeli right has a unified way to refer to key political concepts. In the language of “the national camp”, the West Bank is called Judea and Samaria, reflecting both the territories’ biblical heritage and the Israeli right’s hostility towards the international conceptualization of the conflict. These themes in the narrative of the Israeli right which underline its annexation propositions, will be analyzed in the fourth chapter of this book.

The Israeli right had always pushed for expanding Jewish settlements beyond its internationally recognized borders, tightening Israel’s security grip over the territories, and fighting against any sign of non-Israeli sovereignty. In the second decade of the 21st century, groomed by a relatively stable right-wing government led by Benjamin Netanyahu, official annexation proposals started to accumulate. Notwithstanding the inner debate around which area to annex first, how much of it, and when is the right time to do so, the entire right-wing elite in Israel expressed support for annexation.

Perhaps surprisingly, a similar right-wing consensus had suggested that Israel would gradually accommodate the Palestinians living in the annexed territories. However, less surprising is that right-wingers stipulate and delay handing out Israeli citizenship to millions of people they regularly address as hostile enemies. However, unlike the Israeli left, the right shows no recognition that this will fundamentally change Israel’s ability to maintain a Jewish majority in a democratic state. The same goes for the third line of the triangle. Annexation of some territories may be perceived as giving up the rest of the territory. But the right-wing consensus is that any annexation is a mere first step in a more comprehensive process of gaining sovereignty over all the territories west of Jordan. Many also suggest significant Israeli intervention in the Palestinian Authority, particularly when the era of the current Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, who approaches his 90th year, ends.

The Palestinian Authority is the creation of the 1993–1995 Oslo Accords. Those series of bilateral agreements had established a broad Palestinian autonomy, which includes an independent police force of around 15,000 armed policemen controlling Palestinian cities and towns that spread across roughly 40% of the disputed territories of the West Bank. While it is responsible for the social and cultural policies of Palestinians, its taxation system and overall economic feasibility are completely dependent on Israel’s economy. The existence of such a Palestinian autonomy does not contradict the one-state vision of the Israeli right, provided that it abolishes its strive for political independence and accepts Israel’s overarching security control.

However, the Oslo Accords were signed based on Israeli recognition of Palestinian nationhood. It was part of a mutual recognition that included

Palestinian recognition of Israel's right to exist as a sovereign country. The creation of Palestinian autonomy was based on a territorial compromise from Israel and represented an Israeli willingness for further compromises. Not only did it give the Palestinian Authority the ability to establish its own governmental institutions but also symbolic sovereignty such as the right to raise its national flag and sing its national anthem. Thus, "Oslo" is considered a national disaster for every right-wing person in Israel, as well as a cornerstone in the political solution of the Zionist left.

One of the reasons that this is a deep ideological rift is that there is no way to bridge the two sides. It is impossible that Israel would compromise on the triangle and also keep it intact. That is a simple, straightforward logical contradiction, known as having the cake and eating it too. And since the dispute involves not a delicious pastry but the very identity of a country, each side recognizes the other side's ideas as an existential threat.

The Zionist left warns that unilateral annexation will create a detrimental obstacle to a future territorial compromise. Alternatively, it will significantly increase the price of compromise so that even the illusion of two states cannot exist. In a solidified one-state reality, in which a large percentage of the inhabitants are deprived of basic political rights, let alone other civic and group rights, Israel will cease to be a democracy. Meanwhile, granting citizenship to millions of Palestinians will force Israel into the far left's vision that may be democratic but will eventually cease to be a Jewish state with a Jewish majority. Ironically, the latter annexation scenario can create a path in which the far left in Israel takes solace in the policy proposals coming from the far right. In a one-state reality, especially when this state sees itself as democratic, it is more straightforward to demand civil equality.

However, the Israeli right rejects the approach of the Zionist left and claims annexation will not harm the Jewish and democratic character of Israel. Their supporting claims are first that the official count of Palestinians is fundamentally false and that about a million fewer Palestinians are living in the territories. Secondly, they repeat that annexation is a gradual process so that when millions of Palestinians eventually become Israeli citizens, it will still have a two-thirds Jewish majority. Such future scenarios, as articulated by the right-wing elite in Israel, will be discussed in detail in the third chapter of the book.

So, is it possible that at the Western front of the Middle East, there will be a country named Israel that is both Jewish and democratic and spreads from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea? An overwhelming majority of international spectators will argue such a situation is, at best, unsustainable and will have irreparable consequences for the region. Nevertheless, this question is at the heart of the debate between right and left in Israel, the most fundamental ideological question for Israeli society, a dichotomous dispute that will decide its future.

Like many nationalistic movements throughout history, the Israeli right cares mainly about the opinions of Israelis and gives strategic importance only to Israel's perceived allies. However, international spectators of the Middle East should be interested in the political propositions of prominent right-wing voices in Israel, and not only because of their dominance and dramatic consequences. As this book aims to show, right-wing annexation in Israel is merely the practical part of a deeply entrenched worldview. Both the concrete agenda and its more abstract rationale proceed from primary assumptions about the nature of society and politics common to other right-wing movements in the Western world. In ascertaining these deeper layers of right-wing thought in Israel, a dual reflection may arise: On its ideological opponents and global right-wing ideological trends.

The Underlying Ideological Premises

Unlike other books on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this book does not take a chronological structure to the events it covers. It is less about the historical development of right-wing ideas in Israel and more about the argumentation of a political movement, as illustrated by its political elite. Therefore, it takes a thematic structure based on the argument it uncovers. The Israeli right's one-state solution is a set of tangible policy agenda items that stem from a specific worldview. Chapters 3–4 analyze these two layers respectively. By moving from the more concrete to the more abstract elements of right-wing ideology in Israel, the book attempts to gradually delve deeper into the mindset of its advocates, decoding their rationale and reconstructing their inner logic.

As will be qualified throughout this book, but mainly in chapter 4, there are four ideological pillars to the Israeli right's perception of reality. These pillars are consensually held by the entire "national camp", both the center and far right, from which advocates of the Israeli right draw justifications for their one-state agenda. Fittingly, the Israeli left bears four opposite pillars, establishing a completely different perception of political reality, which explains their political solutions. These are, therefore, the underlying foundations of the ideological divide in Israel. In this introduction to the divide, one can find a concise summary of the two by four ideological pillars, with equal reference to the ideology of the left.

The first pillar of the left is the premise of universality, a loyal companion of many progressive positions in the democratic world. Simply put, it holds that since all people have the same basic needs and desires, all peoples have an equal right to self-determination.

In Israel, this premise has led the left to acknowledge the reciprocity between the national rights of the Jewish people and the Palestinian people, regardless of their different characteristics. Although the Jewish people are based on an ancient

ethno-culture religion and maintain a unique language, their national aspiration is legitimate because of the universal laws of all nations. Their right to self-determination is not greater than the Palestinian people, notwithstanding their affiliation with the Arab nation. From that simple root of equilibrium, the Israeli left – whether Zionist or not – recognizes the legitimate demand of the Palestinians for a nation-state.

On the other hand, the first pillar of the Israeli right is national uniqueness, manifested politically in the total rejection of Palestinian nationality. Right-wing advocates in Israel set high standards, perhaps tailor-made, for national determination, and identify Palestinians by their Arab-Muslim implications. The Israeli right blatantly concludes that the “Palestinian people” is an artificial invention, a conspiracy designed to undermine the very existence of the nation-state of the Jewish people.

Followers of the Israeli right base their national righteousness on the conservative guide of cultural nationalism, upon which a nation is defined not only by shared values, geopolitics, and civic status but also by deep historical ties and unique local traditions. Frequently invoking historical events, the Israeli right perceives the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians as inseparable from the Jewish-Arab conflict. Avid ideologues would even avoid the phrase “Israeli-Palestinian conflict” which implies equality between the sides and often set the beginning of the conflict decades before 1967. The suggestion is that this dispute cannot be resolved with territorial compromise.

The appeal to history establishes a second conservative pillar: a rejection of political solutions that have no historical precedence. For the Israeli right, history not only details the different national characteristics of Israelis and Palestinians. It also serves as a reminder of the continuous conflict between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East.

The counterpart of right-wing skepticism due to the past is the Israeli left’s future-oriented “ideal justice”. The foundation of ideal justice is optimism about human nature’s ability to confront its weaknesses with creative planning and cooperation. Ideal justice challenges people to overcome their lusts, forgive the past, take fate into their own hands, and focus on reaching a compromise. From here, the Israeli left plans a fair, rational, detailed, and complex bilateral contract, a consensual solution addressing the claims of both parties, and striving to create a reality based on values of freedom and equality, recalling the principle of universality.

The progressive perception of man stems from enlightened ideas, according to which all human beings are equal in their natural rights. Whether human rights are the product of evolution, a divine will, or a social contract, their promotion is the promotion of good. That is how Israeli leftists may recognize a clear difference in the identity of Jewish-Israelis and Arab-Palestinians but assume that they can live side by side, either as neighbors (according to the Zionist left) or even brothers (according to the egalitarian left).