

Protest and Support: The Dual role of Israel's Civil Society in 2023

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MAECENATA

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Protest and Support

The Dual role of Israel's Civil Society in 2023

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Abstract

The year 2023 was particularly dramatic in Israel. It started with illiberal constitutional change efforts by the new right-wing government and concluded with a brutal attack by Hamas terrorists and the subsequent war in Gaza. Both occurrences galvanized a massive surge of civil society activism. The first was an unprecedented mass protest that impeded the government's undemocratic legislation. The second was a large-scale aid response providing services and goods to a variety of populations that supplanted the failed governmental disaster response.

The paper focuses on the groups and organizations that were active in the protest stage, most of which transitioned overnight from protest to disaster aid. While protest and service provision are two known roles played by civil society in general, and while sometimes a service provision organization takes on the role of advocacy, a transition from protest to aid within the same organization is practically unheard of. The need to change the organizational orientation within a very short period of time is particularly interesting.

We analyze this phenomenon from a serving elite perspective, which focuses on the self-perception of the participants as an elite, with major responsibilities to preserve both the (democratic) nature as well as the security of the society and the country.

Introduction

The year 2023 was particularly dramatic in Israel. It started with illiberal constitutional change efforts by the new right-wing government and concluded with a brutal attack by Hamas terrorists and the subsequent war in Gaza. Both occurrences galvanized a massive surge of civil society activism. The first was an unprecedented mass protest that impeded the government's undemocratic legislation. The second was a large-scale aid response providing services and goods to a variety of populations that supplanted the failed governmental disaster response.

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The paper first briefly describes the dramatic events during the year 2023, especially the transition from protests against the proposed "judicial reform" (which actually constituted a regime change), to the war in Gaza, and introduces the major organizations that were active in both those events. Its Findings section is mostly based on an analysis of in-depth open interviews with 18 leaders of 9 organizations, which were asked to talk about themselves (personal, professional background), the organizations they led and their activities, and additional thoughts they had about the pre-war protest and the Gaza war. An analysis of these interviews reveals five themes that were for our interviewees the major undercurrents for their activities in both the protest and the support efforts. In the final section we analyze these themes from a serving elite perspective and suggest that the events of 2023 gave in fact birth to a new serving elite in-the-making, and, on the basis of our findings, propose a framework to analyze serving elites comparatively.

Serving Elites in Israel

The term “serving elite” puts an emphasis on the responsibilities of this group, not its privileges. This emphasis on the public interest and those who protect and promote it is encapsulated in the concept, which is rarely discussed in academic literature on elites. The elite’s activities in the service of society accords them (or their representatives) certain benefits and allows them to make decisions on behalf of society. In this sense Israel is a good example: Throughout the State of Israel’s existence, the notion of a select group of individuals devoted to national service, in government, the military, business or the religious establishment has been strongly rooted. It manifested itself by certain processes at particular timeframes that gave rise to specific serving elites who saw themselves in leadership positions for society. They were not only preaching specific directions for society’s preservation and development, but also acted, often taking real risks and even willing to sacrifice their lives, setting an example and paving the way for others to follow. This notion of elites is very typical of the Israeli existence. Haim Gouri, a leading poet, in an address in June 2017, had the following definition for the concept “elite”: “An ‘elite’ is a group of individuals that contributes in different ways to culture, to national resilience, and to universal values, and lives a deeply moral existence at the heart of its society” (Jacob, 2023).

An analysis of Israel’s history from a serving elite perspective will disclose two clear examples of this phenomenon, which find their roots in totally different ideological contexts: (1) The Kibbutz movement – a collective egalitarian community, with roots in the Socialist ideology of the late 19th century, which found expression, starting in 1909 (Kibbutz Degania), in hundreds of Kibbutzim in many parts of Israel. In the 1980’s, against the background of an economic crisis as well as processes of individualization, it saw a decline in its role as a beacon for society and its members as a serving elite. (2) The National Religious movement – developed after the 1967 war and received an extra boost after the 1973 war. It finds its roots in the teaching of Rabbi Kook, who saw the victories of these wars as signs of redemption and the upcoming Messianic age, which calls for settling the entire Land of Israel, so as to hasten the coming of the Messiah. Similarly to the Kibbutz movement, whose members settled the land along Israel’s borders, the National Religious movement are building settlements outside of Israel’s official and recognized borders - in the occupied West Bank. We claim that the dramatic events in Israel during 2023 - the attempted regime change and the war in Gaza, mobilized civil society, first to protest, and later to support different affected populations - are in fact the potential birthplace of a third serving elite – a Liberal one.

The Kibbutz Movement as a serving elite. The Kibbutz concept and its implementation has been the subject of thousands of studies and publications from a variety of academic disciplines throughout

the years. Based on both national and social ideals it attempted to create an exemplary community, serving both the individual and the nation. Achouch (2023) depicts the Kibbutz qualities: “It has been simultaneously a revolutionary movement, a network of rural communities, a town planning alternative distinct from city and village, and an avant-garde of Zionist nation-building” (abstract). Members of Kibbutzim were perceived as pioneers, leaving a comfortable city life, risking their lives by choosing to live in an outpost, often near the border, engaging in physical labor and creating an egalitarian democratic community.

With the decline of the Kibbutz movement and against the background of Israel’s undefined final national borders and unsettled security problems, a new National Religious serving elite developed.

The National Religious movement as a serving elite. Unlike the Ultra-Orthodox community, which in essence does not recognize non-religious Jewish thinking and life, believes redemption will come with the coming of the Messiah, and focuses on fulfilling the personal Torah commandments only. The Religious National Movement has two “legs”: One in the world of the Torah and one in international secular culture. They are involved in politics and business; they serve in the army and are otherwise involved in society. A major aspect of the Movement is its relation to the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel). Accordingly, this is not only the homeland of the Jewish people, but a Holy site, which entails the commandment to settle the land. The Movement was created by Rabbi Kook (1865-1935), who, in the early part of the 20th century, did not only refrain from criticizing the *secular* Kibbutzim, but saw them as a first sign of redemption: The work of those who settle the Holy Land is clearly holy.

This multi-faceted involvement of the National Religious Movement in a variety of aspects of public life is made possible by their political power as expressed by their representation in the Knesset and particularly in the right-wing governments starting in the late 1970s.

In the final analysis, the center of contention in Israeli politics has to do with the Palestinian issue. Similarly to the Kibbutz Movement in the Pre-State era and into the 1970’s, which gave birth to a serving elite that provided an ideal based on social democracy, the National Religious Movement gave birth to a serving elite that does not believe in the partition of the land and sees settlement in the entire land as a process of hastening the coming of the Messiah. For that purpose, they are ready to compromise certain democratic ideals as they deem their religious ideals on a higher level.

The Events of 2023 and the Evolution of a Potential Liberal Serving Elite. In November 2022 Israelis went to the polls for the 5th time in 3 years. The result was a coalition government that was composed of the Likud and three religious parties, which together formed the most right-wing government in

Israel's history. As that government had a small majority, it was totally dependent on its religious partners.

One of the first items on the new government's agenda was a "Judicial Reform", led by the Minister of Justice, which in fact entailed a regime change. His plan was to pass a number of bills and take other administrative measures, which would annul the Supreme Court of its power to criticize the government on the basis of reasonability of its decisions. Additionally, he proposed to change the system by which judges are appointed and give the coalition a majority in the committee which appoints judges. Parallel to these proposals, there were attempts to control processes of appointments of senior public administrators and provide politicians with the power to appoint their senior staff, thus, undermining professional principles in the administration of the public service. The end result of all these proposals would have shaken to its foundations the fragile separation of power between the executive, legislative and judicial branches and create a de facto authoritarian state, similar to Hungary or Turkey, where all the power of the state rests with the executive branch.

On the same week the Minister of Justice announced his plans for his "Judicial Reform", a large demonstration was spontaneously organized in Tel Aviv to oppose it. In the following weeks and months demonstrations were held regularly with hundreds of thousands of participants, usually on Saturday evenings in all parts of the country. The target was the "Judicial Reform", which the protesters termed "Regime Change" and the demand was to scrap it. In addition, other measures were taken by those opposing the government's plans, such as pleas to the Supreme Court, continuous harassment of coalition members near their residences, a blockade of the Ben Gurion international airport and more, involving increasing numbers of protesters.

An analysis of the participants in these activities over time reveals an interesting picture: While there were obviously many protesters who came as unaffiliated individuals, the majority of them came on the basis of belonging to specific groups and organizations, wearing their shirts and congregating together in the demonstrations. The most significant ones were *Brothers in Arms* – consisting of veterans from the Army, Navy and Air Force as well as from other security agencies; these in turn were subdivided into specific units – artillery, infantry, etc. which consisted of "buddy systems" – friends with long term close relationships; *Building an Alternative (Bonot Alternativa)* – a feminist organization, *No Academy without Democracy* – academics, *No Education without Democracy* – teachers and parents of schoolchildren, *The White Coats* – doctors and health professionals, *The Black Gowns* – lawyers, *The Hi-Tech Protest* – entrepreneurs and personnel in startups, *LGBT for Human Rights* – members of this population and more. All of these groups protested on the basis of the danger of the proposed judicial measures to their professional and personal existence in an

undemocratic context. While many of these organizations did not exist before and were established in response to the “Reform”, they turned out to be well organized, based on WhatsApp communication and were able to call on members to attend activities on the spur of the moment. They stressed the fact that they do not use violence and indeed, clashes with the police were minimal throughout the protest period (January - September 2023).

An additional layer of the protesters was the local or regional one. While the focus was the big demonstration in Tel Aviv on Saturdays, there were some 50 centers of local demonstrations around the country, with local persons responsible for their operation (choosing the speakers, building a stage, putting loudspeakers etc.). For all this operation there was an overall Coordinating Committee – consisting of former politicians, funders and other public figures, which were mostly engaged in fund-raising for the protest efforts, and by and large were kept out of the limelight, but in no way were they managing the events, which were based on individuals’ initiatives, based on a communication system within WhatsApp groups.

On Saturday, Oct. 7th, at the end of the Jewish High Holiday Season, the plan was to have yet another series of big demonstrations around the country. The events of that morning changed those plans. In a most dramatic turn of events, the protesting groups, with the leadership of *Brothers in Arms*, changed their orientation overnight and already on Sunday morning opened headquarters in a big shopping center. Within days that headquarter, subdivided into specific specializations, started collecting different items and providing a variety of services, which developed gradually in light of the different needs that were expressed: One branch collected personal equipment for the reserve soldiers that were drafted and clothing for the evacuees from the towns and Kibbutzim around Gaza Strip and from the North; another managed a system of transportation for individuals who needed to be evacuated and organized residences for them; still another was involved in identifying from different sources, the individuals who were kidnapped or missing; another mobilized volunteers to help farmers who lost their (foreign) workers that left the country, to name a few of those initiatives.

This immediate change of orientation of civil society organizations focused on protest into those who provide services to a variety of populations in different locations is indeed remarkable. It may not be surprising that during times of emergency, the public sector is slow to react, and civil society often takes its place, at least at the initial phases (Eikenberry, Arroyave, and Cooper 2007). This was clearly the situation in Israel, where the government not only failed to protect the lives of its citizens around Gaza, but also failed to provide immediate support for those affected by the Hamas attack. Obviously other civil society organizations, not part of the protest, were also involved in the efforts to serve those in need because of the war, and similarly there were some organizations involved in the protest

which refused to provide support for the affected population, claiming this is the duty of the government. Still, what we find significant is the orientation change of those who moved from protest to support, which is at the focus of our paper.

Looking at these events and processes from a *servant elite* perspective, undoubtedly, in 2023 Israel experienced two very significant crises, which called upon a massive mobilization of civil society, first to protect the democratic nature of society and then to provide needed materiel and services to different populations, when the public sector was slow to react to the situation. Given the centrality of civil society, which “performs key functions in liberal democracies” (Johansson & Meeuwisse 2024, 2), we argue that the groups that protested for 9 months in defense of democracy and later moved to protect different populations affected by the war, are the basis of a new *servant elite* – a liberal one – that has a major role in shaping the nature of the post-Gaza War Israel. An analysis of the groups that participated in these two processes shows that it consists of people who lead the economy and security of the country, as well as the professional world. They are indispensable for the survival of a democratic, progressive society, part of the Liberal Western world. These civil society groups are in effect a *Liberal servant elite in-the-making*. The values they promote - human rights, equality for all, personal freedoms, protection of democratic institutions, as well as finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - the values that called them to action in 2023, should be the base of that would-be elite.

This new *Liberal servant elite in-the-making* can also be seen as a counter elite to the *National Religious servant elite*. Activities of the former on the two fronts – the protest and the support, reflect its contestation (Johansson & Meeuwisse 2024, 12) of the values promoted by the latter, which were backed by the government in 2023. In that sense, the ideological conflict between the two reflects the political rift in the population.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative research method based on open interviews.

We interviewed 19 leaders of 12 organizations during January 2024, with one to two interviewees per organization. In addition, before and after the interviews, we read written material of and about the organizations we covered. The interviews were carried out by videoconference when the interviewee was at home or at the workplace. The duration of the interview was one to two hours, most of the interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. Researcher 1 led the interview, Researcher 2 asked supplementary questions and took field notes. The interview began with the introduction of the researchers and the background to the study and its purpose. Verbal consent was obtained to participate in the study and to record the interview. The recording was made using Zoom's built-in recording system. In some cases, when available, we used the interviewee's previous recorded interviews in the media.

Opening question: Tell us about your organization from the beginning until October 6th (the protest phase)? Follow-up question: And what happened since 10/7 (the start of the Gaza war)? Follow-up question 2 (as needed): What are the plans for the organization from now on? We let the interviewees speak freely, and if necessary, they interrogated us using clarifying (examples) or expansion (examples) questions.

Transcription: Computerized using AI (The Transcriber) and human review.

Analysis of the interviews' data: Thematic analysis according to the Clark and Brown model. Computerized content analysis in order to locate common themes, common word patterns and networks in the strategies and activities of the different organizations.

In addition to the interviews as a major methodology, the study is also based on the researchers' participation in both the protest and the support activities of some of the target organizations and their own impressions of these.

List of Organizations whose Leaders were Interviewed

(For a detailed description on the organizations and their activities see appendix)

Brothers and Sisters in Arms (Achim La’Neshek)	Organization of reservists from the IDF as well as other security forces
Women Building an Alternative (Bonot Alternativa)	A feminist activist organization that seeks to promote gender equality, empower women and raise awareness to violence against women
No Academy without Democracy	Academic leaders from all universities, colleges and other scientific institutions
No Education without Democracy	Organization of educators, parents and students who demonstrated outside educational institutes
White Coats Health Professionals	An organization of doctors, nurses and other health professionals, led by the chair of the doctors’ union
High Tech Protest	Leaders of the Hi-Tech community, concerned about the consequences of the “reform” to the future of that industry
Anti-Judicial Reform Local Centers (2)	In over 60 locations, outside of the main cities, regional nuclei of protest were organized at the same times as in the main cities, basically with the same type of content
Crime Minister	Protest against Prime Minister Netanyahu, focusing on the fact that the prime minister is on trial, and it accused of corruption
Black Flags	Started as a protest against PM Netanyahu with a focus on his corruption, later renamed Kaplan Power

Findings: Thematic Analysis

In analyzing the responses of our interviewees, we identified 6 major themes that, according to our respondents, were the forces that pushed them and their organizations and characterized their activities. These can be divided into three dimensions:

A. Personal Traits

- (1) Personal and professional identities
- (2) Ability to accept plurality of ideas

B. Belief Systems Underlying Activity.

- (3) Guiding values and ideologies
- (4) Attitude towards occupation

C. Commitment to Society and Country

- (5) Leadership - preparedness to contribute to the public in a variety of ways
- (6) Patriotism

The overall picture that comes out of this analysis paints a very clear portrait of the organizations' leadership that took part in both the protest and the support effort during the war. The first dimension portrays a belief system that characterizes liberal populations, supporters of democratic regimes, those who care about human rights, equality etc. and reject authoritarian systems.

The second dimension has to do with these populations' strong personal (e.g. gender, sexual orientation) and professional identity, which defines them. These identities can be in jeopardy in an authoritarian regime and therefore must be protected; in the war crisis the professional responsibility does not permit an indifferent attitude to events.

Finally, both these dimensions provide the base for the third dimension that characterizes them: Their social and political activism on behalf of the Israeli society, both in the protest and the war. This activism, despite the very different orientations of their involvement, receives equal weight and is perceived as patriotism.

The quotes by the interviewees are presented based on their organizational affiliation.

A. Personal Traits

(1) Personal and professional identities

We, in the academic headquarters, are closely connected to the doctors, the mental health professionals, “the Black Robes” (lawyers’ organization) - the people who are organized on the basis of professionalism. It was a good way to make friends. I also now work a lot with high-tech activists, but it's under my academic hat.

The Protest of the Academy

Democracy experts explain how the proposed “judicial reform” could have greatly weakened democracy. A strong democracy is an important component of national security, similarly to the high-tech people who declared that a strong democracy is important for high-tech development and investments.

Brothers in Arms

A major common denominator for membership in the groups active in the protest was their professional identity that defined them and gave justification for their protest. Indeed, a non-democratic regime suppresses creativity and freedom of expression, which will obviously harm professional thinking and identity.

A lot of men who consider themselves liberals, don't put women around the decision-making tables. Sometimes the chauvinist men on the right are easier to identify. The men on the left are more sophisticated. They pretend to be enlightened, but in fact they do not meet the full definition of liberalism. Our overarching goal is political, feminine, liberal, activist power. The sub-goals are female representation, financial and personal security. It hasn't changed, these things are guiding us.

Building an Alternative

This is obviously also true of personal identity. In a society guided by religious principles, women have an inferior position, which needs to be countered by social and political action. The quote regarding other women’s organizations not joining the protest is aimed at those organizations that provide services to women (and are supported by the government) but do not engage in political action to protect their status as women.

The “legal reform”, the “regime change”, whatever you want to call it, caught me in a place where I realized, not immediately, but within a few weeks, that if this resolution will pass, I would not be able to live my life as I have lived them until now, not as a woman, not as Lesbian, not as a professional.

The High-Tech Protest

This person is combining her personal and professional identity in assessing the dangers from the proposed “judicial reform”.

We as doctors, we all possess a beautiful soul, I want to believe that. This is something that seems to be part of me, part of my identity. Therefore, at the end, I found more of a home in the White Coats than in other organizations.

The White Coats

Finally, a respondent who tries to analyze the phenomenon and characterize its participants, points out at the *elite*, without which a modern progressive knowledge-based society could not function.

I must, however, as a sociologist, give some kind of general socio-demographic characterization to this nucleus, one that is made up of a very strong population: Academics, professionals, high-tech entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, psychologists, leading businessmen, quite a few media people from TV and cinema. A good representation of the liberal elite.

Local Centers

(2) Ability to Accept Plurality of Ideas

The divisions in the Israeli society – ethnic, religious, class, level of religiosity, etc. are marked, but the activists understand that those divisions, which were stressed by the government to enable its survival, need to be reconciled, at least to a degree, to enable an Israeli existence.

It's not that we're pushing some agenda here - we didn't rescue any families from Sderot (which was attacked on Oct. 7th) because we wanted to "convert them" to our political camp. One idea that attracts me is to do a march, one that originates in different regions, and all go up together to Jerusalem for a demonstration of a million! This can be a very strong statement that will demand elections soon. Last month I met with many rabbis to convince them to support this idea.

You have to understand that we are not on the left side, nor on the right side. In the end we are in the middle, we must live together and within this framework, love your neighbor like

yourself, equality, equal duties, equal rights - guided by our Declaration of Independence. Because of this activism we will solve these problems; I am very optimistic.

Brothers in Arms

A problem we will have to deal with is that there was no representation (in the demonstrations) for all the factions in the Israeli public. We should embrace everyone with both hands.

Black Flags

I was impressed in our conversations with the religious population, that the community there is very strong because they meet every Shabbat in a synagogue, and therefore a lot of their volunteering activities come through the community and through the synagogue. I have a friend here who says: "the demonstrations are the synagogue of the seculars". I saw an interesting phenomenon in our activity at Or Akiva (a low-income level town), where there was a complete distrust in our intentions; they saw us from day one as demonstrators, not as people who came to talk. Demonstrations in Or Akiva is perceived against; as soon as you demonstrate against the government, and I voted for the government, it is perceived as if you are demonstrating against me. This means total identification with the government. And so, there was a whole process, which is still present, of building trust and legitimacy with the ability to be there, to be friends. Many people talk about unity, but they think about unity of opinion, unity with those who agree with me - not unity for a common goal despite our diversity.

The complementary thing that jumps out is the issue of social identity. We are in an age where before listening to what you say, look at who is saying it. The more limited our social identity is, namely we only belong in one group, the strength, the bond with the group increases, because otherwise we will be lost. Someone said, "If you have nowhere to go back to, then you really have nowhere to go."

Local Centers

B. Belief Systems underlying Activity

(3) Guiding Values and Ideologies

When talking about values, our interviewees realize that the proposed “judicial reform” is the tip of the iceberg, and those promoting it have a broad agenda, which needs to be countered not only by protest but by changing an incomplete democratic state infrastructure (i.e. constitution), which needs to be accompanied by an educational effort.

We wanted to build some kind of infrastructure that would guarantee a Jewish and democratic, liberal Israel for generations.... In the future, we want to influence (this reality) through education or preparatory schools. We said that even if we succeed in disrupting the “reform” We will not go out of business. We saw how fragile (our democracy) is, and how much we have fallen asleep in guarding it and how much we need to strengthen and protect it in the form of a constitution as well as education. We define ourselves in the long run as a civic organization that wants to be a partner in changing conditions in Israel, in the direction of a liberal democratic state, and this is what we do today.

Brothers in Arms

The idea that the defense of democracy comes from people who have served in the army and security forces has to do with the fact that the Israeli army is based on reservists, namely citizens who may also hold senior positions in the economy and society. They are concerned about introducing major structural changes in the regime without having broad popular approval and the implications of such measures on society and the army.

I come from an ultra-Orthodox family, so the environment of my values was very religious; I left this world but what I really liked and still like about that world: The values of giving, the idea of community (rather than individualism), the idea in Judaism that you must leave this world better after you. This is something that is terribly Israeli. It is not religious; it is this idea of *Tikkun Olam* (Repairing the World).

The High-Tech Protest

That comment is indicative regarding the many faces of Judaism. While the Orthodox and the National Religious movement stress a narrow definition and interpretation of Judaism, it is important to remember that Judaism has a universal message.

Our title was the desire to work for the preservation of democracy in Israel and for the preservation of an education that is liberal, humanistic, egalitarian, and pluralistic; that knows how to defend itself against homophobes, Messianics, fascist racists.

Our slogan: "There is no education without democracy" gave us the possibility to present messages that are easy to digest. Which parent does not want a liberal, humanistic, pluralistic, egalitarian education for their children?

Local Centers

(4) Attitude towards Occupation

While the issue of occupation is clearly related to human rights, democracy, equality etc., it is a controversial one and not all of those who participated in the protest were ready to support a slogan condemning the occupation. Banners criticizing the occupation were held by some groups during protests, but speakers during demonstrations usually avoided touching on this subject. It was clearly an underlying issue that, needless to say, will come up in the aftermath of the war.

Many of us have the same opinion against occupation. It is an issue that was often controversial during the protests, because of the fear that it will drive away activists and harm the protest.

The Academy Protest

We fear a Halachic state (driven by Jewish religious laws) and the legitimacy of the settlements.

The Black Flags

C. Commitment to Society and Country

(5) Leadership - preparedness to contribute to the public in a variety of ways

It seems that the “judicial reform” has touched a sensitive nerve in many people. It awakened not only their opposition to that proposed regime change but their level and volume of activity in the public sphere in general. The following quotes indicate the necessity and readiness to invest more in contributing to society rather than focusing on oneself.

There are people who didn't contribute anything to society until a year ago, and now they will come and say: “I do one day a week for this or that purpose. I must be a partner”. Now everyone will have to find what to do, with whatever suits them. I will not go into politics, there are those who will. At the beginning we had the protest: Stopping the planned coup d'état by the Netanyahu government. People mobilized for this goal. We thought two or three months and it would be over. No one planned to be a social activist. Suddenly, on October 7th, a lot of people realize that there is a long-term mission here.

Brothers in Arms

I think I've always had this part of me, of wanting to contribute. I was in the Girl Scouts, an officer in the army, I was very socially involved when I was younger. I have an urge to go back, leaving the rat race to make money and making sure that in the end, it will be a good place to live here. So, the sense of mission, the desire to feel that you are doing something good is very significant for me, but I can't tell you if I'll be active in an NGO, or perhaps moving to the public sector, possibly becoming an official in the Treasury Ministry. I think this idea that the state needs us is creeping up in my generation. They were privileged and powerful and could say: “I paid my dues when I served in the army, now I'm going to the business world to make money”. Suddenly we woke up and are saying: “We left the arena and look what happened. It's our turn to build Zionism 2.0”. What is it? I don't know yet, but I'm sure there will be major changes here.

Building an Alternative

I personally had a dilemma a few months ago. It has always been clear to me and to everyone around me that I will be a member of the Knesset one day, so, in the context of my activity in the protest, the question was: did the time come? One guy said to me: “Yes, you should, once you decide (to run), talk to your wife and hire a public relations person”.

The Black Flags

I believe that what happened to us now is this realization that if we don't become activists we simply won't be here. We clearly have already won, and we just must continue and develop it. We set an example for our children, who must be activists too. One more thing, I was in Bnei Akiva (youth movement of the National Religious movement); I saw Gush Emunim (the settlers' movement) and how they promoted their ideas that they have to reach positions of control everywhere: In the army, the police, the public administration.

The High-Tech Protest

All this activity is done while everyone who is involved in a protest also must keep a job and build a career and a family. A huge advantage are the people you're exposed to - the real activists. That in itself should be a reason to keep fighting and not give up.

Local Centers

I think that if we want it to improve this country, the academy should be more involved and knowledge-based decisions need to be made in state institutions. There is an opportunity for correction. I hope we will succeed because I have a daughter in the army. If I were to move to the US now, she wouldn't come with me, so I'd better stay here.

The Academy Protest

(6) Patriotism Expressed in both Protest and Support Activities

This country is important to us, and we need to mobilize. Now it's more complex. There is war, there are hostages, people have different feelings about what should be done and when. But we agreed that what is happening in the country cannot be ignored, and we need to support the populations that need help.

My job now (in the civil headquarters that coordinates the support to evacuees) is not to provide civil assistance to needy populations. It is to bring the country back to sanity, and that means replacing the government as much as I can influence it.

The Academy Protest

The idea that both the protest and the support are motivated by the same sense of patriotism is intriguing, but the finding here is very clear: The feeling of the need to protect the country and society from internal and external threats is not untypical of Israelis.

We are patriotic Israelis, and this is what motivated us to protest. We said it even then that we do it out of the fact that we are patriotic Israelis who come to defend the country. So, this

is where we come from and it seems to me that it is easy to explain why from this stance, back on Saturday morning (Oct. 7th) we decided in minutes that now we are doing everything to help, and we moved immediately to discuss the ways we can help.

Brothers in Arms

The dilemma of supporting the government's domestic responsibilities during the war, a government against which one protested yesterday, is a real one; some organizations we interviewed (i.e. Crime Minister) chose not to be engaged in the support efforts. Others could not stay idle in light of the major potential implications to society and engaged in building a whole infrastructure of support and did so out of patriotism.

True, as soon as we help the evacuees, we help the government. When we opened a kindergarten for evacuees in a hotel on the Dead Sea, who cares who opened it? If a kindergarten is not opened, the evacuee will criticize the government. So why do we help? Let's not help! If we behave like this, it will be against our DNA. We see people who are in distress, we are willing to help them; it is impossible for us to stand by.

Brothers in Arms

In every conversation I have, everyone is defiant against us. What are you saying now? I, who was a combatant in the army for twenty years, reservist in all wars and all operations, you tell me that I don't like my country? But I don't believe in wars as a way of life, and in fact most of the activists found themselves in a crazy void.

The Black Flags

What is special about "Brothers in Arms" is that in the end they are not politicians. Civil society activists are people whose hearts are in the right place, people who pulled the country out of the mud, once in a protest which saved the country's regime, and once in a war. So, there is a very clear patriotic thinking here, and to say that they should not have provided the aid is not to understand their way of thinking.

The White Coats

Discussion: A New Serving Elite in-the-Making?

The study was conducted against the dramatic events of the year 2023 in Israel, which saw first a massive mobilization of protesters, for 9 months in all parts of the country, in defense of democracy, in light of plans by the government to change the rules and create a de facto authoritarian regime. Many of the same civil society organizations that mobilized protesters, changed their orientation overnight after the Oct. 7th Hamas attack and turned into a system of support that collected needed items and provided needed services to a variety of affected populations during the war. The transition, within one day, from protest to service delivery is unique and deserves to be studied from a variety of angles. In this paper we chose to study the leadership of the organizations that took part in this dual effort, their identities, their values, their commitment to society and their preparedness to invest in it. We use the concept of “serving elite” to do so.

As we show, the idea of an elite in a modern society entails first and foremost *responsibilities* rather than privileges. In a social context, somebody has to make decisions on behalf of the collective – a meritocracy, where the idea is that the best people should be in a position to make those decisions. Very often credit is given in such choices to people who have proven themselves and deserve trust, based on their deeds for the collective. In certain ideologies, this includes readiness to be put in dangerous positions and risking one’s life.

We present the concept of serving elite within the Israeli context, both in a historic and a contemporary perspective. It started with the Kibbutz movement in the early 20th century - that established Kibbutzim, beginning in the Ottoman era. That movement set an example for the Israeli society by its conduct, which was based on equality, democracy, and patriotism. It was also expressed by its unproportional share of soldiers killed in the Israeli wars. Based on these facts, their representatives filled a large number of Knesset and Cabinet seats. The Kibbutz movement as a serving elite declined in the 1980’s and was gradually replaced by the National Religious movement, which is based on a Messianic belief. Their members’ exemplary behavior focuses on settling in the entire Land of Israel/Palestine, which is considered holy. The focus is on the West Bank that is a dangerous territory as the settlers come in daily contact with the Palestinian population and risk their lives. Similarly to the Kibbutz movement, they have an unproportional share of soldiers killed in Israeli wars as well as an unproportional number of members in the Knesset, the cabinet and public administration.

While the protests of 2023 focused on the “judicial reform”, the government that intended to pass it, was in fact maneuvered by the National Religious political forces. Thus, the protest was not only

against the “reform” but against the danger of a National Religious ideology taking over and controlling the society. Thus, the main argument of the paper is that the protest of 2023 has created a foundation for a new serving elite - a Liberal one, composed of professionals, academics, high-tech entrepreneurs (leading the Israeli economy), former security forces personnel, etc. – the foundation on which a modern liberal society and economy are built. This can be seen as a *counter elite* to the National Religious one, as it deals first and foremost with values that govern society. Their activities during the first part of the year showed their devotion to preserve Israel’s democratic character. This caused a lot of accusations by the government supporters defining them as “anarchists” and accusing certain leading protest personalities as “traitors”. Their activities since Oct. 7th, when they ceased to protest and moved to support populations affected by the war, in many instances replacing the public sector, showed their levels of responsibility to society at large, in fact their patriotism.

The would-be Liberal serving elite is a loose coalition of categories of populations, that in times of crisis found themselves fighting shoulder-to-shoulder for ideals they considered self-evident, which were suddenly in danger of being dismantled. The findings of our study are starting to paint the characteristics of the would-be serving elite – their identities, backgrounds, values, commitment to the public etc. It seems that they would need to push forward their ideals long after the Gaza war is over. Unlike the previous two, this would-be Liberal serving elite is not engaged in settling the land, which takes away the aspect of endangering/sacrificing one’s life. Fighting for a liberal democratic way of life entails primarily education. As the collision between the religious-Messianic and the democratic-liberal ideologies move to the political arena, the confrontation between those two serving elites will clearly determine the nature of the Israeli society for generations to come.

The use of the “serving elite” concept in the Israeli context can, as we show, help understand an important societal dynamic with major implications on many dimensions. Yet, we believe that the concept, which is not frequently discussed in the literature on elites, has validity in other contexts as well. A comparison of its specific attributes in other contexts would clearly help solidify it.

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