

Civil Wars in the Jewish Community

Between History and Future Prospects



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Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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Introduction

Theoretical Framework of Civil Wars

Literature on conflict has many theories to explain international conflicts and civil wars including psychological explanations (attributing the matter to the nature of the contradictory psychological makeup of man), economic and political explanations (economic and class competition, tendency to power, contrasting theories and ideologies, etc.), social explanations (theory of Pyramidal Segmentary Structure, minorities, religions, cultural heritage, color, etc.), as well as geo-strategic and geo-political interpretations (linking behavior and geography in its broadest sense). However, the least published are political literature that explain internal conflicts, and in particular civil wars in the same ethnic or religious

group. Moreover, the studies on internal conflicts among the Jewish group are rarer compared to other societies. Thus, we will try to outline the historical features of this conflict to determine its historical megatrend, especially since Israel is currently witnessing internal tension within the Jewish group itself.



Lewis Coser's theory might be the most useful for our topic, as Coser divided social conflicts into two types: external conflict, which is outside the scope of our study, although it sometimes overlaps with it, and internal conflict resulting from the fact that the social system often involves discrepancies in its components, such as the discrepancy in ethnic origins among Jews, and color or class discrepancy. Such differences result in a discrepancy in goals, values and interests. Here, the common factors, such as the Jewish religion which result in individual and societal cohesion and interdependence, interact with the various factors referred to above, causing tension due to disagreements over the order of values and interests. At this point, the strength of the system is tested if it would preserve its cohesion and confirm its legitimacy for those within its framework. Coser warns that internal conflict tends to have violence if two conditions are provided: first, emotional attachment and transcendent goals, that is, the more the individuals are emotionally attached to the desired goal, the higher the odds of violence (due to the absence of logical and rational calculation compared to prevalence of





emotional implosion). By the same token, whenever the desired goals are of a transcendent nature, that is they tend toward absolute values, the possibilities of violence to achieve them increase. This is what we notice in the speeches of the leaders and masses of religious fundamentalism in Israel, in terms of giving priority to emotional discourse on the one hand, and presenting demands of an idealistic and transcendent nature on the other hand. The second condition of the internal conflict is the level of internal interdependence networks across sub-social diversities (religion, language, nationality, color, gender, etc.). Coser believes that the higher the social calcification, the higher the potential for internal conflict, such as the lack of intermarriage, or the lack of joint commercial partnerships, or the geographical contiguousness of the same group to preserve the privacy of its sub-culture, the uniqueness of joint social events

(holidays... etc.). The Israeli army is the institution that cares the most in Israel about social fusion, although some cracks are beginning to appear. The focus on external dangers and the possibilities of wars with multiple sides, such as Iran, the resistance and others, is consistent with Coser's perceptions of employing external danger in curbing internal conflict.² Here, two other perspectives must be combined to understand the dynamics of internal conflict, namely:

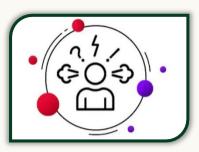


- ✓ a. The Pyramidal Segmentary Structure theory:³ This theory means that the individual belongs to different systems that superimpose one another. For example, in the Israeli society one individual can be Jewish by religion, but Sephardic of Yemeni origins by race, black in color and poor in class. According to this theory, whenever the higher loyalty conflicts with the lower loyalty, the individual often tends to choose the lowest allegiance, which is what drives societies to fragmentation, and the greater the diversity, the more complex the ability to integrate, as is the case in Israel and most settler societies.
- b. Durkheim's theory on the division of labor:⁴ Durkheim's idea is that organic solidarity link individuals based on economic, financial, commercial, or class interests, and mechanical solidarity is based on religious, ethnic, linguistic or sectarian affiliations. Durkheim believes that as the circle of organic solidarity expands, the importance of mechanical solidarity diminishes. This is evident in the fact that 51% of world Jewry live outside Israel and do not hold Israeli citizenship. It is due to the weight of organic solidarity with their original communities, which outweighs the mechanical ties with the Jews of Israel. On the other hand, the continuation of social ghettos within the Israeli society, as evidenced by the construction of border settlements on ethnic





grounds,⁵ reinforces the tendency of mechanical solidarity, hence transforming social relations from a "non-zero game into a zero-sum game," and thus having subsequent social tensions.



A Historical View of the Internal Conflict in the Jewish Community

There are no enough indications that the Jewish community has historically revealed more solidarity and interdependence than other societies. Hence, we need to monitor the internal conflict in the Jewish community, throughout Jewish history, to prove that Israel does not fall outside the global pattern regarding internal conflicts. We will employ the conclusion to establish for future hypotheses about the internal conflict in contemporary Israeli society.

First: The Roots of the Internal Conflict in the Historical Formation of the Jewish Group

Jewish history can be divided—according to Jewish literature in particular—into several stages, namely:⁶

- 1. The patriarchal stage: This stage extends from the 19th century BC to the 13th century BC and covers the period of the prophets Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The most prominent aspects of the internal conflict in this primitive stage are represented in the deep family rift between the sons of Prophet Jacob, especially the conspiracy against Prophet Joseph by his brothers, in addition to the attitude towards the sons of the wives of Prophet Abraham, to the extent that Ismail was described as "wild man" according to the Torah (Genesis 16:12).
- 2. The stage of religious establishment: This stage, which begins with the emergence of Prophet Moses in the 13th century BC, can be considered the stage of the establishment of Jewish religious history. After the Jewish exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, the Jews were divided into tribes equal to the number of sons of Jacob, and each tribe bore the name of one of the sons and was ruled by a leader. This phenomenon was called in Jewish history the period of judges, and one tribe, the "Levi tribe," assumed priesthood. Attempts were made to unify these tribes at the hands of Saul, to end up with the formation of two kingdoms after the period of David and his son Solomon. However, internal conflict broke out between the two kingdoms in 928 BC, and the essence of the conflict was "who takes over power," which is a purely political struggle. The southern kingdom, called Judea, was not of great size





or wealth that might generate conflict, and it remained until Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it in 586 BC. As for the northern kingdom, Samaria, internal conflict was its most prominent feature until Sargon II seized it and displaced its population to Assyria in 721 BC.



- 3. The stage of the Hasmonean state, the Maccabees, led by Shimon Maccabee, which expanded from Judea to different regions south and east from 142 to 70 BC. A bloody struggle took place between two brothers over the throne of their mother, Salome Alexandra. A bitter struggle took place between the two brothers (Hircanus II and Aristobulus II) ending with the demise of the state in 63 BC at the hands of the Roman commander Pompey.
- 4. The stage of the emergence of Christ: The Jews' attitudes towards Christ varied until the matter came to his crucifixion, when Judas Iscariot betrayed him. The dispute continued among Jews over Christ and Christianity, as will become clear.

Second: Civil Wars in Jewish History

Ancient Jewish history saw a series of internal bloody conflicts, and despite the divergence of historical sources in determining the beginning of the Jewish religious emergence, and the dispute over the societal divisions of the Jews, the dimension that concerns us is the internal conflict between the Jews, which repeatedly erupted, mainly as follows:⁷

- 1. A civil war arose in the eleventh century BC, between Eli, son of Yafni of the line of Ithamar, and the sons of Phineas. The main reason for this war was the attempt of Eli to usurp the high priesthood from the descendants of Phineas.
- 2. The most famous conflict among the Jews in the eighth century BC was between the Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The two kingdoms were formed after the end of the reign of Solomon and David, peace be upon them, within the tenth century BC. Their war lasted for 17 years. Perhaps the deadliest phase of this conflict was when the conflict was between the King of Judah, Rehoboam, and his opponent Jeroboam in the Kingdom of the North, in which, according to most sources, thousands were killed.
- 3. The Jewish-Samaritan conflict: Another religious-ethnic dispute exists, which is the Jews considering the Samaritans "different" from them. The Samaritans consider their Torah not distorted, as is the case of the Jewish Torah, whereas the Jews see that the





Samaritans are from the tribes of Assyria and not Jews, and their formation began with the Assyrian invasion in the eighth century BC.

Then the problem of intermarriage between the northern Jewish community and the Assyrians arose, which deepened the dispute between the two, and the Samaritans no more recognized any Jewish religious texts except the books of Moses.

✓ 4. The Hasmonean-Samaritan conflict, 113–110 BC. In 113 BC, Hyrcanus embarked on a massive military campaign, during which he invaded Samaria, destroyed it and enslaved its people. His campaign continued north towards Shechem, which he transformed into a village after fighting there; then, he headed towards Mount Gerizim and destroyed the Samaritan Temple. This war lasted about three years.

- ✓ 5. The call from some Jewish movements, most notably the Zealots, to overthrow the Roman Empire, in the first century CE, was the subject of intense debate and disagreement between this movement, particularly its extremist wing "Sicarii" (the daggermen), and other movements, most notably the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. Their differences also included the Law of Moses and the attitude towards Christ. These three Jewish religious sects disagreed with each other on issues like the restoration of the Kingdom of David by the Pharisees, and the throne of Judea by the Herodians, and these differences dominated the Jewish political community in the first century CE.
- ✓ 6. The Sicarii and Zealots, 6-73 CE. The Sicarii were a splinter group of the Jewish Zealots, who used violence against Jews and Romans in the Roman province of Judea. The Sicarii incited the population to war against Rome. They destroyed food supplies, used starvation to force people to fight against the Roman siege and even raided the Hebrew villages that wanted to negotiate the Romans and massacred hundreds of their inhabitants to force them to fight against the Romans. This is consistent with some studies that describe them as groups specialized in assassinations, and there are studies linking them to the Masada citadel, which many contemporary Jewish archaeologists and historians are skeptical about, asserting that it was not a mass suicide, but rather the Jews killed each other.
- 7. The period of the Roman commander Komanos (48 CE): which witnessed attacks by the Samaritans on some Jews, while they were on their way from Samaria to Jerusalem. The Jews responded by burning the Samaritan villages, and Kumanos confronted them, killing many and capturing others. Although some Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were able to conclude a truce between the two sides, a kind of gang war continued between them, and the differences between the two kingdoms centered on some religious rituals, such as: traveling to Jerusalem, offering sacrifices and some religious worship.





8. Bar Kokhba was one of the Jewish leaders who revolted against Rome, and that led him to clash with Jewish groups that accepted some Christian texts, such as the Ebionites and Nazarenes who fled to Jerusalem because of the persecution by Bar Kokhba's supporters.

Third: The Interrelationship Between Internal Violence, Past and Present, in the Jewish Community

Rabbi Lance J. Sussman⁸ says that Jewish history confirms that "internecine conflict, not communal unity, characterizes much of the Jewish experience." The disintegration and conflict between Samaria and Judea, along with the dispute over the position towards the Romans, not to mention the dispute over the position on Christianity, are indications that community solidarity was not at the level that the Jewish narrative has been trying to promote. Sussman justifies his opinion by referring to Torah's portion, Vayechi, which concludes the Book Genesis, and points to substantial tensions among the Hebrew tribes and contain violent descriptions of some tribes as "unstable as



water" or describe kinship between some of them as a "weapon of violence" and some of them as "serpent" and others as wolves (Genesis verses 4-27). He concludes that the Torah hardly offers a picture of familial harmony on the eve of liberation from Egyptian slavery or of peaceful coexistence in (ancient) Israel, and links all of that to the discrepancy over the definition of the Jew in contemporary times. Then, he links the inclusion of far-right-wing politicians like Avi Maoz of the Pleasantness party, Bezalel Smotrich of the Religious Zionism party and Itamar Ben-Gvir from the Jewish Power party, to the widening circle of the current tension, not only about the preservation of even a modicum of Jewish unity, but about the democratic (and secular) nature of Israeli society. This leads the Thinker and Author Yehuda Kurtzer to conclude that it is "less surprising that Jews experienced conflict with one another throughout their history than it is that any point or on any issue they were able to mount anything close to a consensus."9 It is sufficient to reflect on any controversial issue, such as the conflict between the forces of contemporary Israeli society over the fate of the settlements, Judaism, political settlements, borders, the definition of the Jew and other issues.¹⁰



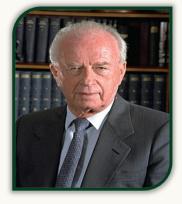
Fourth: Israel Between Historical Legacy and Contemporary Manifestations of Internal Violence

It is necessary to consider two incidents that have their significance in modern and contemporary Israeli history:

- ✓ 1. The first incident: In June 1948, the Irgun Zeva'i Le'umi (abbr. Etzel) organization, which was led by former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, brought the Altalena ship,¹¹ which was loaded with weapons and immigrants and was coming from France. The Ben-Gurion led government demanded that weapons be handed over to the state, desiring not to provoke Britain with which it agreed on some security measures. However, Begin refused to hand over the weapons insisting to provide his organization with some of it. Sea chases and battles took place between the Israeli army and the Etzel forces ending with the killing of 19 Israeli soldiers and Etzel members.

Menachem Begin

2. The assassination of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin: In November 1995, an extreme right-wing youth, Yigal Amir, assassinated Prime Minister Rabin in protest against what he considered concessions by Rabin on "Jewish rights." Israeli studies indicate that the "religious edicts" of Israeli rabbis that call on Israeli soldiers to refrain from evacuating settlements, and that justify the killing of Rabin as he practiced policies that harm the Jews, reinforce the idea that religion is a central factor in resorting to domestic violence in the Israeli society.¹²



Yitzhak Rabin

Fifth: Determining the Historical Trends in the Internal Conflict

From the facts we have referred to, it is clear that the "central" reason for the violence among Jews is religious, whether due to different interpretations of Jewish religious texts, or the Jewish religious position towards other religions, or the role of religion in daily life and its relationship with the state. The seriousness of this is that religion is the only common among Jews as they are different in color, race and class. If the common factor is affected, the severity of the originally disparate factors will naturally increase. In general, religion has caused international and civil wars throughout history. The Encyclopedia of Wars estimates it at about 6.87% of the total wars in history.¹³





The religious forces are clearly increasing in the Israeli society, especially since 1977, hence the central variable of internal conflict have a role now, as it did in ancient Israeli

history (the civil wars we referred to), and as it has been having in contemporary events. Its manifestations are increasing as we indicated in a previous study.¹⁴ If we add to this the primacy of power in the Jewish values, this means that internal solidarity in the settler society is threatened,¹⁵ which contradicts some Israeli academic theses on the harmony between religion and state in the Israeli society.¹⁶ Eight years ago, former President of Israel Reuven Rivlin delivered a seminal address in which he talked about future transformations to the Israeli society, calling the new situation, the "new Israeli order." The most prominent features of this new system are:¹⁷



Reuven Rivlin

- 1. While there was a clear and firm secular majority in Israel from its founding to the end of the 20th century, this majority will dwindle and be replaced by a "new Israeli order."
- 2. This order is composed of four major identity groups that are fairly equal in size with no clear hegemonic center.
- 3. These four groups are: the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews, national religious (a.k.a. Modern Orthodox) Jews, secular Jews and Arabs.
- 4. These groups are associated with three strategies based on the narrative in which the group itself is framed. These strategies are:
 - ▶ a. Compartmentalization: It is manifested in national and religious fragmentation.
 - b. Alienation: It is embodied in the ultra-Orthodox alienation by moving away from the Zionist project and the state.
 - c. Abdication: It means a manifestation of rebellion against traditions, and rejection of the exile that characterized Ben-Gurion's orientations and his generation.

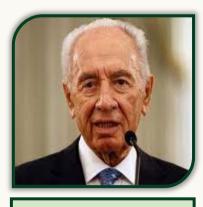
The three strategies have permitted each group to adhere to its own framing narrative without having to deal with the implications of the narratives of the other groups for Israeli collective identity. During the first 30 years of Israel's establishment, these strategies were relatively successful. At that time, Israelis made an effort to maintain a broad consensus among the different groups and were careful not to drive others out of that consensus. However, since then, the tradition of consensus has been crumbling and the pressure on each of the three above strategies has been intensifying.





In this context, it is necessary to return to the studies of David Passig, the most prominent professor of future studies in Israel. In his writings, he tries to define historical trends in the developments of the Jewish society and their role in the failure of the Jews to transform into a sovereign nation, as is the case in his book "The Fifth Fiasco."¹⁸ He then seeks to determine how to avoid a recurrence of the Jewish failure in the future, based on addressing the imbalance in the historical trend, as is the case in his book "2048," which involves a future view when Israel reaches its 100 years. It seems that Passig was unable to solve the historical dilemma of the Jewish political existence. On the one hand, he realized the role of the religion, historically, in recurring conflicts in the Jewish community, but on the other hand, he realized the technological development and monitored its future effects on religious systems, especially the growth of secularism as a historical megatrend. Thus, if Israel clings to the historical religious system, it will

contradict the contemporary and future international environment, while when Israel develops its contemporary mental and technical systems, it will gradually strip the society of its the historical Jewish bond.¹⁹ Accordingly, David Passig searched for the "preferable" future, thinking strategically for the Jewish benefit. Passig's concerns about the future might be the same of former Israeli President Shimon Peres, who expressed his fear for religious culture from the effects of the "screen" or technology in general, and believed that screen culture would outpace Bible culture.²⁰



Shimon Peres

Conclusion

In presenting the theories of social conflict, we referred to the mechanisms of internal conflict in the social system. According to Jewish history in particular and world history in general, it seems that the intensity of the external conflict and the level and recurrence of the internal conflict are inversely proportional. While the Arab danger has greatly disappeared in the Israeli mind, amplifying and focusing on the Iranian danger and resistance organizations can constitute a successful mechanism for absorbing internal tension. This approach can be reinforced by anti-Semitic arguments, which would perpetuate the image of the hostile international environment, thus strengthening internal solidarity.





The Israeli society is not immune from internal conflict leading to civil war, which has been shown in articles and studies asserting the increase of this possibility, especially with the new government led by Benjamin Netanyahu and the religious forces supporting him. Since the beginning of March 2023, military and political leaders and thinkers in Israel have been warning against civil war.²¹ In 2021, professor David Passig warned of the possibilities of this war and even did not rule out the possibility of its eruption after the assassination of an Israeli figure, comparing Israel with countries that witnessed civil wars, after the laxity of cohesion and solidarity factors during the next



Benjamin Netanyahu

three or four decades following their creation.²² Opinion polls also indicate that 35% of the Israelis believe in the possibility of a civil war, while 60% believe that there will be any kind of violence among the Jews.²³

In light of these historical and contemporary facts, the Israeli scene, in the short term, may witness these three possibilities:

- ✓ 1. Absorbing internal tension through an external military action commensurate with Israel's estimates of the depth of internal tension. This means the greater the depth of internal tension, the greater the possibility of absorbing it with external military action.
- 2. Going to new elections that restore balances between the political forces with the aim of returning to stability, especially if the differences within the existing government exacerbate, given that there is no sufficient harmony among its components.



3. Preliminary indications of resorting to internal violence by Jewish segments may evolve, especially by those of extremist religious orientations. Matters may also escalate.

Based on the foregoing, decision makers and resistance forces must have plans to respond to the repercussions of each of these three possibilities.





Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
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- ³ T.V Sathyamurthy, Nationalism in Contemporary World (London: France Pinter, 1983), pp. 74-77.
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- ⁶ Despite the emergence of some serious Arab studies regarding the "Jewish religious phenomenon," which question the geography of the religious history of the Jews and seek to prove that there is no basis for the prevailing theories about the Jews' connection to Palestine, and that the roots and development of Judaism in the early stages were concentrated in the Arabian Peninsula, especially Yemen. These studies establish their categories based on inscriptions, antiquities, languages, names and different interpretations of religious texts.
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- However, we will focus in this aspect on the prevailing Jewish narrative, especially the political manifestations on the one hand, and the social conflict among Jews on the other hand, based on Western and Israeli texts. See for these aspects, Peter F. Bang and Walter Scheidel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 180-185; and History of the Israelites: Did the Curses of Musa (PBUH) come to pass?, site of Al-Injil, 22/9/2012, https://al-injil.net/2012/09/22/history-of-the-israelites-did-the-curses-of-musa-pbuh-come-to-
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- ⁸ Internecine Conflict in Jewish History, site of The Jewish Exponent, 4/1/2023, https://www.jewishexponent.com/2023/01/04/internecine-conflict-in-jewish-history; Patrick Cockburn, Ancient battle divides Israel as Masada 'myth' unravels, site of The Independent, 30/3/1997, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/ancient-battle-divides-israel-as-masada-myth-unravels-1275878.html; and site of Bible Gateway,
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- ²¹ Will a civil war break out in Israel?, site of Middle East Monitor, 17/1/2023, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230117-will-a-civil-war-break-out-in-israel
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