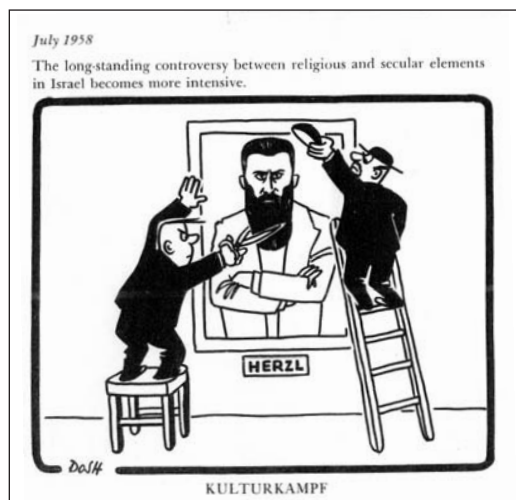# THE ISRAEL DEMOCRACY INSTITUTE: PURSUING DEMOCRACY IN "THE JEWISH STATE"

Randy L. Friedman

In his review of *National Security and Democracy in Israel* (1992), a collection of essays mostly stemming from an Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) conference, Ira Sharkansky reminds us that "there is no obvious explanation for Israel's democracy. Most of the population came from societies of central and eastern Europe or the Middle East where democracy was weakly established if it existed at all." Add to this poor economic conditions and cycles of violence and war, and Israeli democracy is quite impressive, he concludes. It "says much of significance about the politics of a country that is often wracked by issues demanding immediate decisions that [it remains] sensitive both to the nuances of democracy and to the ugliness of violence." The conflict between security and democracy is one of many issues pursued through research and conferences at IDI, or by politicians, academics, economists, diplomats, or religious figures affiliated in one way or another with the Institute. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find a leading political scientist in Israel who has not or is not currently involved with IDI. The main goals of IDI, listed on the English version of its homepage, are: "to promote structural, political, and economic reforms; to be a source of information and comparative research for the Knesset and government authorities; to serve as an advisory body for decision-makers and the general public; and

to promote public discourse about issues on the national agenda."

The range of books, papers, and studies published by IDI now covers almost every possible topic of concern in an emerging democracy, as well as issues specific to life and government in Israel (disengagement, creation of a constitution). Series include The Army and Society (such as *The

July 1958

The long-standing controversy between religious and secular elements in Israel becomes more intensive.

HERZL

KULTURKAMPF

Reprinted from *To Israel, with love*, by Dosh [pseud.]. New York, T. Yoseloff, c1960.

Israel Defense Forces and The National Economy of Israel [2004], *Morality, Ethics and Law in Wartime* [2003]); Policy Papers (such as *On the Role of Jewish Law in Matters of Religion and State* [2004], *Inequality and Poverty in Israel* [2002]); The Annual Economic Conference (such as *Economic Challenges Facing Israel in the New Millennium* [2000]); The Public Council (such as *Anchoring Civil Rights in the Constitution* [2003]); and many others. Books and papers appear mostly in Hebrew, though some titles (and

many abstracts) are available in English. IDI occasionally publishes Hebrew translations of relevant English texts (e.g., Robert A. Dahl's *On Democracy* [2002]).

In a piece in *Israel Affairs* (7.4, 2001) on the history and function of IDI, founder and President Aryeh Carmon describes his participation in negotiations among six members each of Likud and Labor that produced the 1997 Beilin-Eitan "Document of the National Agreement on the Principles of the Permanent Settlement with the Palestinians." He wonders whether his involvement was "natural." Was there a line crossed that goes beyond an effort to provide the most reliable professional help to decision-makers? When does the work of policy think tanks cross the boundaries of professional research?" He asks a similar question of IDI's involvement in a broad-based discussion of secular-religious relations including members of IDF, jurists, clergy, and academics. "Does involvement in a profound social-religious conflict as an active agent of change alter the role of a public policy think tank?"

Not surprisingly, Carmon concludes that active engagement in policy formulation (and reform) as well as outreach to the politically sophisticated Israeli public (through forums and publications) are responsible for IDI's success. Two projects in particular represent the approach and interest of IDI: "constitution by consensus" and a secular-religious dialogue now known as "Gavison-Medan."

One of the central objectives of IDI has been to foster the creation of a written constitution for the State of Israel. The project "Constitution by Consensus" (occasionally described as "constitution by broad consensus") includes the development of an education curriculum entitled "Kids in Search

of Common Ground: the Education System Writes a Constitution" and the organization of numerous conferences to address the various aspects of constitution building. IDI lists a series of political-social problems that it hopes to address in and through the process of developing a constitution, including what it sees as a still unclear "collective identity, and the relationship between Judaism, nationalism, and democracy." IDI has been concerned that ideological (and religious) rifts in Israeli society threaten to tear apart the country's developing democratic culture, and, indeed, the democratic system itself. Corollary projects have included studies and reform of Israel's electoral system, and the pursuit of structural changes in the legislative and executive branches of government.

Secular-religious relations are also the focus of the Gavison-Medan Covenant ("a comprehensive proposal for dealing with issues of religion and state in Israel") worked out under the auspices of the Shalom Hartman Institute and the Rabin Center with support from IDI (which published the Covenant). The goal of the Covenant is "the creation of a public and educational climate, underlying which is the notion that our commonalities must prevail over our differences. Recognition of this fact will enable the creation of an operative framework for devising solutions, and discourage a particular side from forcing defeat on the other." The main work involved a lengthy series of dialogues between Professor Ruth Gavison, the Haim Cohn Chair of Human Rights in the Law in the Law Faculty of the Hebrew University, and Rabbi Ya'acov Medan, who teaches at the Har Etzion Yeshiva and the Ya'acov Herzog College in Alon Shevut. The discussions required three categories of inquiry: "legal-civic, theoretical-universal,

and theological-halakhic." The Covenant, written under the supervision of Gavison and Medan runs more than 100 pages, and covers, among other issues, the Law of Return, "personal status" (marriage and divorce), religious dietary laws, burial, and national service.

May 1952
The numerous parties conduct bitter campaigns for representation in the Second Knesset.

PARTY LISTS

DOSH

ELECTION EVE

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IDI has received a certain amount of criticism. In an article entitled "Jewish and Democratic? The Price of a National Self-Deception" that appeared in the *Journal of Palestinian Studies* (Winter 2006), Nadim M. Rouhana specifically addresses the project of creating a constitution for Israel. She concludes that "to be effective, voices that reject the 'Jewish and democratic' campaign must be consistent and unwavering; they must be assertive in their demand for the state's transformation from an ethno-religious Jewish state (whether it defines itself as democratic or not) to a genuinely, and therefore obviously, de-Zionized, state (whether with a Jewish majority or not)." Rouhana directly criticizes the approach of IDI, accusing it of defining "consensus" as "Jewish consensus," since Israel's Arab citizens, though comprising more than 16 percent of the population, have been left out of the constitutional debates. IDI, which has lately played a leading role

in the constitutional movement, embodies this exclusion. Though sometimes it does invite Arabs to its conferences and activities, Rouhana says, "they are essentially used to provide cover for the effort to consolidate a Jewish consensus on Israel's 'Jewish and democratic' claim." In a footnote to this claim, Rouhana adds "this charge about the IDI cannot be made lightly. Obviously it requires some investigation into IDI's constitutional activities and the role it assigns to Arab participants." She points to her own "'Constitution by Consensus': By Whose Consensus?" *Adalah Newsletter* 7 (November 2004), and "The Jewish Institute for Ethnic Democracy: A Response to the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI)," *Adalah Newsletter* 9 (January 2005). Amir Avramovitz, the General Director of "Constitution by Consensus" at IDI, has responded to Rouhana ("Constitution by Consensus, Including, Certainly, the Consensus of the Arab Minority in Israel" in *Adalah Newsletter* 8 [December 2004]), by reiterating the broadly inclusive goals of the project and rejecting Rouhana's claim that Arab participation in the process served as a "fig leaf" for the majority Jewish participants.

The challenges facing IDI are the same challenges that face Israel as a whole, a collective fraught with inter- and intraethnic and religious tensions and conflict. Through its many conferences, publications, and research, IDI engages these tensions, and continues to work at the development of Israeli democratic culture.

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