The 2011 Israeli Housing Protests: the Occupation of Public Space & the Decentered State

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Abstract: In 2011, a live-in protest was held on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, Israel, to protest against drastically rising housing prices in Israel and the occupied territories. The broad coalition of support this protest garnered was a reflection of the historical saliency of the housing issue for a variety of groups living in Israel. Using Warren Magnussen's theory on the decentred state, and Margaret Kohn's populist view of the public, I argue that the 2011 Israeli housing protests represent a conscious decentering of the Israeli state through the formation of such a diverse coalition, which included Zionist Jews, Palestinian Israelis, and others.

In July 2011, massive protests erupted in Israel, bringing thousands of people to the streets of Tel Aviv, and later to other cities both within and beyond the Israeli state. These demonstrations were in response to the increased cost of living, particularly with regards to housing, which had dramatically grown during the six years preceding the protests. As the protests gained momentum and spread outside of Tel Aviv, a diverse coalition formed around the movement, including Israelis from various political and economic backgrounds, Palestinians, and even notable political leaders such as the mayors of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. The creation of this heterogeneous alliance demonstrated the pervasive nature of the housing crisis, which had negatively impacted most of the citizens of Israel. The pertinence of exacerbated housing costs to both Zionist Jews and Palestinian Israelis can be especially emphasized to depict the scope of this coalition and how its construction reflected the decentering of the Israeli state from the initial demands and tactics employed by this movement. Throughout this paper, Warren Magnussen's 1997 article, "Globalization, Movements and the Decentred State" and Margaret Kohn's 2013 piece, "Privatization and Protest: Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Toronto, and the Occupation of Public Space in a Democracy," will be used to explore how the protests, in their initial form, saw a decentering of the Israeli state from the movement's narrative. This was accomplished by the creation of a large coalition around the issue of housing rights, which transcended boundaries of state-perpetuated, ethnic, economic, and political conflicts. Citizens who had been historically ignored by the Israeli government, notably Palestinian Israelis, were vital to the initial success of these protests, which served to subvert the role of the state in this dispute.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, housing prices had reached an historic low in Israel. However, between 2006 and 2011, the market worsened and housing prices rose dramatically, especially in Tel Aviv.[1] The initial protest was started by Daphne Leef, a 25 year-old film director who was evicted from her apartment in Tel Aviv due to renovations, and could not afford to find another apartment in the same district.[2] Leef posted on Facebook on July 6th, 2011 that she would be tenting in Habima Square, an upscale part of Tel Aviv, in order to draw attention to the increasing lack of affordable housing.[3] The live-in protest was set to

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[1] Sebastian Schipper, "Towards a 'Post-Neoliberal' Mode of Housing Regulation? The Israeli Social Protest of Summer 2011," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39, no. 6 (November 2015): 1140.

[2] Nathan Marom, "Activising Space: The Spatial Politics of the 2011 Protest Movement in Israel," *Urban Studies* 50, no. 13 (October 2013): 2829.

[3] Ibid.

begin on Thursday, July 14th. Leef's Facebook post garnered significant attention on social media, and even in mainstream media. Consequently, the day before the protest was scheduled to begin, Tel Aviv police cordoned off Habima Square, forcing Leef and her fellow protestors to relocate. They instead occupied Rothschild Boulevard, which was just across from the Square.[4] The location was intentionally selected to emphasize the differences in housing based on economic status in Israel — Rothschild Boulevard had been an elite part of Tel Aviv since the city's foundation in 1909.[5] The disparities between the living conditions of the protestors, situated in tents, and the elite of Tel Aviv were displayed in stark, visible contrast at this location. Just two months later, a similar tactic would be used in New York, where the famous Occupy Wall Street protest began.[6] On the night of July 14th, approximately 200 people showed up to Rothschild Boulevard, but throughout the summer the protests grew. The camp on Rothschild expanded to encompass four blocks within Tel Aviv, while other camps were established in Jerusalem, Haifa, Rishon-Lezion, and elsewhere in Israel. In addition, five camps were created by Israelis abroad, in London, Berlin and the United States.[7]

As the movement proceeded to expand, a diverse coalition arose in support of the protests. In her 2013 article "Surprising Alliances for Dwelling and Citizenships: Palestinian-Israeli Participation in the Mass Housing Protests of Summer 2011," Yael Allweil suggests that the housing crisis was an effective catalyst for mobilizing diverse populations within Israel due to the historical connotations the "housing project" had for certain demographics. In particular, she points to Zionists and Palestinian Arabs in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, dating back to the first *aliyah* of Labour Zionists in the 19th century. For Zionists, permanent housing represented the success of the nation-building project, which Jews had dreamed of for millennia following the diaspora. Allwiel argues that part of the Zionist housing project involved "associating national home with individual housing," connecting each individual Israeli to the nation-building project that was effectively achieved in 1948 with the Israeli victory in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and the subsequent unilateral

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 2830.

[6] Margaret Kohn, "Privatization and Protest: Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Toronto, and the Occupation of Public Space in a Democracy," *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 1 (March 2013): 99.

[7] Yael Allweil, "Surprising Alliances for Dwelling and Citizenships: Palestinian-Israeli Participation in the Mass Housing Protests of Summer 2011," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 2, no. 1 (2013): 43.

declaration of the state of Israel.[8] By using housing as the central narrative in the 2011 protests, Jewish Israelis were able to draw upon the citizen-state contract to argue that the Israeli government had failed to fulfill its basic duty of providing Zionist Jews with a place to live in their historical homeland.[9]

However, the ability of the protests to draw support from Palestinian Israelis contradicted historical understandings of housing within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict stemming back to the creation of the state of Israel. The physical location of a Palestinian person's home in 1948 and 1949 determined which state they would inhabit after the First Arab-Israeli War. During the *nakba*, the Zionist housing project actively worked against Palestinians, violently evicting an estimated 750,000 people from their homes in order to make way for Jewish Israelis.[10] This process depopulated hundreds of villages and towns, many of which were repopulated in subsequent years by European Jews.[11] Palestinians who left Israel and the occupied territories during the *nakba* came under Jordanian and Egyptian rule, as those two states occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, respectively.[12] Palestinians who remained in Israel became what Yael Allweil describes as an "enemy citizenry," who were violently oppressed under military rule by the Israeli state for two decades after its establishment.[13] Therefore, the housing question in Israel and the occupied territories was a salient topic for both Israeli Jews and Palestinian Israelis for vastly different, but deeply connected, reasons.

Initially, Palestinians expressed reluctance to join or support the housing protests, arguing that any solution designed to appease the largely Ashkenazi Jewish protestors would come at the expense of Palestinian Israeli citizens, as state-perpetrated housing solutions had

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[8] Ibid., 44-45.

[9] The social contract, which I call here the citizen-state contract to emphasize the reciprocal agreement between the citizens and state of Israel that was being called into question in 2011, is a theory that emerged from European Enlightenment theorists such as John Locke. The theory argues that when a state fails to satisfy its citizens basic rights, the citizens can withdraw their obligation to participate in the social contract that upholds a state or society, and resort to means of protest or violence to regain their rights. In any iteration of the social contract around the globe housing rights are salient, but in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict they have particular deep ties that were emphasized by those participating in the 2011 housing protests.

[10] Martin Bunton, *The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2013): 56.

[11] Allweil, "Surprising Alliances for Dwelling and Citizenships," 47.

[12] Bunton, The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, 58.

[13] Allweil, "Surprising Alliances for Dwelling and Citizenships," 48.

for the past six decades.[14] However, there were several factors that led to the active participation of Palestinian Israelis in the housing protests. The perceived similarities between the contemporary tent camps and Palestinian refugee camps in the wake of the 1948 war — in particular, the use of the tent as a symbol of protest — as well as the rhetoric used by the protestors regarding "a right to the homeland via a right to dwell in one's place of birth," were incredibly relevant for many Palestinian Israelis.[15] Emblematic of Palestinian involvement in the protests was a tent set up in the Rothschild Boulevard camp, which displayed a sign reading 'Tent Number 1948', referring to the *nakba* and the First Arab-Israeli War.[16] This tent existed alongside others which bore banners that protested the Israeli state's "failure to house discharged Israeli Defence Force soldiers."[17] However, the Palestinian involvement in the protests extended beyond the several tents they had erected in larger Jewish-Israeli dominated camps. Explicitly Arab camps were established in Jaffa, Qalansuwa, Lydda, Nazareth, Umm Al Fahim, and elsewhere.[18] Although fewer in number than the camps founded by Jewish Israelis, the Palestinian camps were well-populated and retained many of the same characteristics as the majority-Jewish camps, which was emblematic of their shared commitment to the housing protest.[19] Consequently, Palestinian involvement in the 2011 housing protests defied previous Zionist approaches to housing, which had emphasized the social contract between Jewish Israelis and the Israeli state, and sustained the marginalization of Palestinian citizens living in Israel.

The tent camps that flourished throughout the summer of 2011 represented a decentralization of the Israeli state within the protest movement for several reasons. Although the Jewish Israeli founders of the movement, including Daphne Leef, were explicit in their appeals to the citizen-state contract that the Israeli state had broken by allowing housing prices to incessantly increase, they also rejected the state's approach to the issue. The protestors accomplished this by dismissing the framework of occupation and refusing to comment on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as by avoiding having their movement labelled

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., 48-49.

[16] Yael Allweil, "The tent: The uncanny architecture of agonism for Israel-Palestine, 1910-2011," *Urban Studies* 55, no. 2 (2018): 318. Accessed through SAGE.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Allweil, "Surprising Alliances for Dwelling and Citizenships," 52.

[19] Ibid.

as politically "left" or "right" wing.[20] The inclusion of Palestinian Israelis in the protests meant that the movement was actively working against the Zionist housing narrative that had been perpetrated by the Israeli state for decades. By decentering the prevailing narrative of the Israeli state in their operations, the protestors began to decentre the state from their demands, relinquishing claim to the citizen-state contract, which only existed between the government and Jewish citizens. By including citizens who were marginalized by the Israeli state in their protest narrative, the movement explicitly showed that the state's approach to this crisis could not satisfy all of the demands being made by the broad coalition of protestors.

This inclusion of citizens who are neglected by the state also raises questions pertaining to the "social order", which is perpetuated and upheld by the state.[21] As Magnussen remarks: by questioning the social order in a state, the domain of that state is called into question, expanding the field of politics beyond the state.[22] By including internally marginalized citizens in the housing protests, Leef and her fellow organizers were actively engaging in the decentralization of the Israeli state, despite initially basing their protest on the citizen-state contract. In addition, the microcosmic nature of the tent camps, which became largely self-sustaining, represent the state-decentralizing force of urbanism that Magnussen discusses in his article.[23] He states that the idea of urbanism decentres any state, as citizens of the world live in a global city that is distinguished from the state, and calls into question the previously defined boundaries of the state's jurisdiction.[24] While the tent camps were not global and all-encompassing in the way that global cities are, many of their characteristics reflect this idea described by Magnussen. Although the tent camps were occupied by several distinct factions of Israeli society, they shared several similarities and effectively represented an urbanist microcosm of society. Such similarities included distinctive domed silver tents, nighttime entertainment, and the provision of community support in all of the camps, which allowed them to be self-sufficient regardless of whether they were located in Tel Aviv or elsewhere. Additionally, the deliberate foundation of these tent camps within established cities, as

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[20] Schipper, "Towards a 'Post-Neoliberal' Mode of Housing Regulation?", 1142.

[21] Warren Magnussen, "Globalization, Movements and the Decentred State," in *Organizing Dissent: Contemporary Social Movements in Theory and Practice, Second Edition* ed. William Carroll. Toronto, University of Toronto Press (1997): 103.

[22] Ibid., 104.

[23] Magnussen, "Globalization, Movements and the Decentred State," 110.

[24] Ibid.

opposed to rural areas, demonstrates the significance of urbanism to 21st century protest movements.[25] As previously discussed, such positioning emphasizes the difference between the housing available to the elites and the inhabitants of the tent camps. The Israeli housing protests called into question the boundaries of the Israeli state through the demographic composition of the coalition, as well as through the creation of analogous protest camps throughout the country, reflecting Warren Magnussen's theory of urbanism.

Margaret Kohn's populist view of the public suggests that, in the context of the Occupy Wall Street protests in New York and Toronto, the public was reclaiming a space they already owned rather than illegally privatizing public space, as was argued by numerous courts in legal cases surrounding the Occupy movement.[26] The same argument can be applied to the Israeli housing protests, as the occupation of public space by a diverse coalition of individuals, including marginalized citizens, criticizes the private ownership of land and housing opportunities. Such occupation emphasizes the disparities between the privileged few who restrict housing opportunities for the diverse, underprivileged greater populace that made up the protest movement. In Kohn's view of the public, it is this larger group that is already in possession of the public land, as the more accurate representation of "the public."[27] The occupation was accomplished by erecting tent camps in wealthy areas such as Rothschild Boulevard, which served to reclaim the land for the collective while emphasizing the vast differences in the quality of available housing.[28] By being inclusive of the various groups inhabiting Israeli territory, the protestors represented the Israeli state's citizenry more accurately than Israel's legislative body, the Knesset, where Arab parties are perpetually excluded from the governing coalition.[29] The occupation of public spaces in Israel during the 2011 protests can therefore be seen as a legitimate reclamation of public land because it was perpetrated by members of both groups inhabiting the state's territory, who each have longstanding historical claims to the land.[30]

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[25] Magnussen, "Globalization, Movements and the Decentred State," 110.

[26] Kohn, "Privatization and Protest," 100.

[27] Ibid., 99-102.

[28] Kohn, "Privatization and Protest," 99-102.

[29] Ibid., 103.

[30] As Kohn mentions in her article, one of the criticisms directed towards the North American leaders of the Occupy Wall Street movement was that their reclamation of the land in the name of the public was erasing the history and ownership of Indigenous peoples over the land. The involvement of both Palestinians and Israelis in the 2011 housing crisis absolves the protestors of this issue and emphasizes the uniqueness of the broad coalition the housing issue managed to garner. Kohn, "Privatization and Protest," 107.

While demands from the protestors in the tent camps became increasingly radical and anti-state, the coalition supporting the movement continued to expand and in fact served to impede the decentralized state narrative.[31] Although, the tent camps had initially rejected the support and aid of government figures — at one point going as far as pelting the mayor of Tel Aviv with cold water when he tried to visit Rothschild Boulevard — they eventually were forced to accept the solutions being offered by state representatives.[32] In August 2011, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu set up the Trajtenberg Committee, headed by Professor Manuel Trajtenberg, former chairman of the National Economic Council, to address the demands of the protestors.[33] The recommendations of the Committee primarily served to address the demands of the middle-class Jewish Israelis who initially organized the protest and still, few of the Committee's recommendations were ever implemented into law[34] This led Daphne Leef and her fellow organizers to attempt to reignite the protests in the summer of 2012. Upon doing so, they were arrested by Tel Aviv police, and were consequently unsuccessful in restarting the protest movement. Although the government's response to the housing protests did not meet the demands of the protestors, and the recommendations of the Trajtenberg Committee produced few tangible outcomes, the 2011 Israeli housing protests were initially based upon the public occupation of space, decentralizing the dominant narrative of the Israeli state, and developing a broad coalition of support to sustain the tent camps.

The fact that the entire protest movement was originally predicated on making certain demands of the Israeli government — by asking them to uphold the citizen-state contract and provide affordable housing for its citizens — is a significant argument against framing the 2011 Israeli housing protests as a movement which seeks to decenter the state. However, by rejecting exclusive narratives perpetuated by the Israeli state in order to broaden their coalition, Leef and the other leaders of the housing protests relinquished their claim to the state-centric approach and empowered the participation of marginalized groups in their movement, including Palestinian Israelis, Mizrahi Jews, and migrant workers.[35] This

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[31] Marom, "Activising Space: The Spatial Politics of the 2011 Protest Movement in Israel," 2833-2834.

[32] Ibid., 2829.

[33] Ranit Nahum-Halevy, Zvi Zrahiya and Adi Dovrat-Meseritz. "Trajtenberg Committee Getting Down to Work." *Haaretz* (8 August 2011).

[34] Avi Bar-Eli, Meirav Arlosoroff and Ora Coren. "Despite PM's promises, most Trajtenberg recommendations never became law." *The Marker - Haaretz* (15 August 2011).

[35] Schipper, "Towards a 'Post-Neoliberal' Mode of Housing Regulation?" 1142.

rejection of the state-centric narrative is encompassed by a quote from one of the protest organizers, Stav Shafir: "We are not asking to change the prime minister. We are asking to change the system."[36] Although this was one of the only obvious criticisms of the broader system articulated by the housing protest organizers, the actions and existence of the initial tent camps represented both Warren Magnussen's theory on the decentralization of the state and Margaret Kohn's theory about the occupation of public space by the public.

Ultimately, the occupation of Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, along with many other tent camps throughout Israel and beyond, represents an inclusive attempt to mobilize diverse factions of Israeli society to better respond to growing issues of inequality. Although it was unlikely the original intention of Daphne Leef, the lead organizer of the first tent camp in Tel Aviv, the protest grew to represent a decentering of the Israeli state from the housing narrative, at least initially. The inclusion of Palestinian Israelis, Mizrahi Jews, migrant workers, and citizens on both sides of the political spectrum, redirected the narrative away from a reliance on the state-citizen contract to provide housing, and towards a more inclusive approach that was capable of benefitting Israeli society as a whole. The occupation of public space for protest, in particular, elite spaces that provided a stark contrast between the living conditions of various people in the same state, in particular between the elite Jewish citizens of the Israeli state and marginalized individuals included within the broad coalition of protestors. Although these narratives faltered as the protests gained recognition from the media and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, they were nonetheless prevalent in the early stages of the movement. The broad coalition that defined the early stages of the 2011 Israeli housing protests represented a rejection of traditional Zionist narratives surrounding the Israeli citizen-state contract, as well as a more comprehensive understanding of a populist public in a state where land occupation and ownership have longstanding saliency for all groups involved.

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[36] Isabel Kershner, "Protests Grow in Israel, With 250,000 Marching," *The New York Times* (6 August, 2011).

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