

# Political Youth Structures

2013

*Implementing Youth Organizational Structures Based on the Model  
of Junge Union in Israeli Political Parties*

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## The history of Youth Organizations in Israeli Political Parties

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The 1990's were an exciting period in history with the fall of The Soviet Union, wars in the Balkans, the penetration of Internet into every home and timeless rock music. For me, as a young Israeli in middle school, the mid-90's were times of clear political polarization about which everyone had an opinion. The Oslo Accords seemed to change the reality of the Middle East and the political discourse in Israel boiled. The Israeli left wing pushed harder and harder to convince a great majority of Israelis to be willing to make previously unthinkable compromises in exchange for true peace. Israelis of the right wing, however, feared losing control over parts of the Jews' historical homeland and areas crucial to Israel's security. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis filled the streets with massive demonstrations for or against the accords and no one could remain indifferent to the issue. The tension grew to a violent and dramatic climax when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated right after a massive pro-peace rally in the main square in the heart of Tel Aviv, later to be named "Rabin Square".

Nowadays, Rabin Square is a lovely urban space with ecological ponds, European cafés and a renovated City Hall. One can barely remember the rage, the hope and political devotion that were the hallmarks of this location at the end of the previous millennium. The story of this square parallels the story of the Israeli political arena: from firm ideologies and passion about political decisions and the future they may shape, to apathy reflected in low voting percentages and almost zero political engagement by those who do not pursue a political career.

True, one main reason for all that political passion was the fact that a policy that might change everyone's lives was on the table. The Oslo Accords were a matter of life or death to many Israelis. They could either terminate an old historical conflict that had taken a deadly toll on far too many Israelis, or increase violence and fear. In this paper I would like to claim the Oslo process was not the only reason for such vast political engagement. Another reason for the vibrant political discourse of that time was the presence of prominent party affiliated youth organizations which played a significant role in engaging younger activists into politics, mobilizing large audiences into action and shaping the political discourse from the bottom up. The vitality and energy that those young activists brought was the fuel that allowed the intensity of politics.

When the Second Intifada flared up, the Israeli political discourse became more and more monolithic. The debate around the feasibility of a sustainable peace agreement with the Arab world became irrelevant and security became an immediate need. For the majority of Zionist-minded Israelis the differences between the parties almost disappeared and therefore the engagement of citizens in the political process decreased as well. One of the results of this change was a mass pullout of young members from most mainstream political parties.

One might say that it was not important for either sides - youngsters or elected politicians - to maintain vibrant political bodies in the parties for young members. A good example is the Young Likud: the last elected chairperson of Likud's youth organization was former MK Yoel Hasson. Hasson left the Likud for the newly established Kadima party in 2005 and since then no one has been elected to replace him. All young activities in the party stopped and except for few sporadic attempts by individuals who were never officially appointed by any authority, this party has not offered any true platform for young engagement.

Two years ago, on December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011, we officially held the first *Manof* event. *Manof* aspires to bring young Likud members together into an ideological framework where they can shape the discourse within the party, elevate liberal and Zionist thinking and, ultimately, shape policies. The date of founding *Manof* was carefully chosen: it is the official birthday of *Betar* - the youth organization that was established 90 years ago by Ze'ev Jabotinsky himself. Jabotinsky believed that political changes should be led by youth and realized the importance of youth as a crucial part of any political movement. It is only fitting that we celebrated *Manof*'s second birthday and *Betar*'s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday recently with the newest member of our forum - Hadar Jabotinsky, Ze'ev Jabotinsky's grand-granddaughter.

During the first year of *Manof*, we began to cooperate with the *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Israel*. The unwavering partnership with the Stiftung allowed us as a forum and me personally to gain new knowledge, in particular regarding youth organizations in political parties. This proposal of essential practices for any political youth organization was written based on the experience drawn from several meetings with *Junge Union (JU)*, the German Christian Democrats' (CDU/CSU) youth organization, and is meant to offer practices that can be implemented in Israeli political parties in order to empower youth to take part in shaping its own future.

The large public interest in 2011's social demonstration and the resuming of the peace process in 2013 can be a fantastic opportunity to re-engage young audiences in politics, rebuild political

structures, and empower talented young Israelis to infuse the political system with new ideas and creative thinking

I am proud to present herewith three practices or principles that are essential to this process and properly used by the JU. Israel faces some complicated challenges and a growing involvement of younger generations in politics is a key to a better future for this country.

Barak Herscowitz  
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## Three Principles for Engagement of Young Activists into a Political Party

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### #1 - Independence

A political young activist group can be a powerful tool that leads to rejuvenation of ideas in a party that will keep it relevant to the citizens' needs and desires. To this end, the organization needs a good degree of independence from the party's institutions, both officially and in practice.

The high level abilities of the JU lie in the fact that it is not officially subordinate to the politicians. Obviously such an organization can only be critical to a certain degree, since many of its young members aspire to develop within the political system and do not want to be considered too vehement an opposition, as that might hinder their political advancement. Nevertheless, the possibility of a young leadership organization's being able to

- critique elected officials and infuse party discourse with innovative ideas and concepts,
- challenge the decision making system and
- liaise between officials and public sentiment

serves to safeguard the entire party as an organically developing body.

In order to enable such independence, first of all one must allow for budgeting taken from party institutions, and this should happen wholly independently of the nature of the relationship between the young leaders and the party leaders. The budget can be calculated as a certain percentage of the entire party budget for any given year, or in direct proportion to the number of young members in the party.

Legally speaking, the JU is completely separate from the CDU party. A person up to the age of 35 can be a member of the party only, of the young organization only, or belong to both. The organization receives a certain budget from the party, which might change, but remains more or less stable in relation to the party budget, and in addition may raise money from additional sources (membership fees or donations).

In Israel it is also recommended to officially separate the young leadership organizations from the parties themselves and create them as separate legal entities. The party must define in its constitution a budgetary section to be calculated according to a formula that takes into account the number of younger members of the party (this will further motivate the leaders of the young activists to encourage party membership) and the overall party budget in order to make sure the party leader cannot "punish" the young leaders for being oppositional.

## #2 - The social element

"Of course everyone is an has a world view, is socially involved and wants what's best for the country and for society", said a senior member in the JU in our conversation during the past year, "but most of them joined because of the parties and trips". Undoubtedly one must not neglect the element of ideology in party activities, but many of those who join young leadership organizations are also looking to realize social needs that are not provided in other settings.

Many young leadership organizations in Germany in particular and in Europe in general offer a range of social activities that will attract people from different groups, mainly on the basis of locale and nucleus. The organizations develop organic groups of members in different cities who meet at parties and on trips, and conduct a social life on social media (WhatsApp, Facebook etc.).

Even though members for whom the social element is either the only or the primary consideration for their activities are considered much more critical of the party and less loyal to the political activities, the fact that the young people are drawn into party activity through the element of fun does not mean that fun is the only reason they stay. Well-developed local leadership can recognize those who join for social reasons and know how to rally them around an ideological platform - giving them responsibility, empowering their skills of expressing their opinion and showing them a model for professional-political advancement that will motivate them to remain in the young leadership organization for other reasons.

For us as well at *Manof*, I can testify that a number of people join for social reasons. At every annual seminar we make sure to combine an element of fun (evening parties, social meals, games) with the ideological and ideational debates and strive to make the social joiners committed to taking part, even at a lower level of intensity, by contributing to the political and ideological discourse. One can clearly see the development of some of the activists in the forum and the strengthening of their ties with the organization as they succeed in meeting more and more of their needs by participating in the forum.

A party-affiliated young leadership organization in Israel must realize two principles in this context: the first – knowing how to introduce the element of "fun" as part of the work program. There has to be someone in charge of social activities with a budget for parties, trips and social events and a Gantt chart with fixed social anchors. The second – developing local leadership (perhaps mainly on the campuses, since here it is easier to recruit people for political party activities during studies after the army), with people who will know how to identify and empower the social joiners.

### #3 - Transitional interfaces to national politics

Many young people join these organizations in order to advance in politics. This is both natural and proper. The party must be able to absorb these young people into its ranks. This reciprocity will enrich both sides. On the one hand, the young leadership organization will be perceived as an attractive institution since it can serve as a springboard for professional joiners. On the other hand, the party will benefit from an invigoration of its ranks with relevant ideas and concepts and young human resources to compete with the existing elites and push them, in fact, to update themselves.

My experience in the Likud, unfortunately, was a bitter one. On several occasions I saw intelligent, talented and highly motivated young people pushed out of political activity simply because they did not have the right family connections or the right luck. On the other hand, many of my peers in the German counterpart organizations grew parallel to myself and reached highly desired positions and decision-making intersections right before my eyes over the years. Thus it is not surprising that both Likud and Labor, two veteran parties in which talented young people have virtually no possibility of advancing in the conventional manner, continue to lose mandates and lose the support of the broader public, while the CDU and, to a lesser extent, the SPD (both of which have very successful young leadership organizations with excellent interfaces for promotion into politics) achieved great results in the 2013 elections.

In order to implement this principle in Israel, a party must maintain a close formal relationship (a spontaneous one is inadequate) with the young leadership organization with defined programs for advancement. Such programs might include:

- Paid internship as a parliamentary aide to veteran members
- Additional political internships: in the office of the party's legal counsel and in Knesset committees in which there are MKs of the party
- Promoting young people from the organization to entry-level positions in party-related institutions: party-affiliated workers' organizations, its research institutes etc. (e.g. the Jabotinsky Institute in the case of Likud; centers and institutes at Beit Berl identified with the Labor party).
- Positions for young people on the election campaign that will provide advanced professional experience for the young members (spokesperson's office, new media, field work and volunteer management)
- Creating party oriented "legal clinics" to be run by volunteers or students who will receive a scholarship, the aim of which is to generate and propose laws to elected officials coming from the young members and relating to issues of interest to them (employment, parenthood, economy, education)

Such programs should be funded by the party, be binding for MKs and be managed transparently. Instead of only enabling cronies to obtain internship positions or similar jobs, a transparent and open public committee should be set up to discuss the placement of young

activists according to clear criteria, help candidates prepare for interviews and put together their resume in a manner that maximizes their possibility of merit-based promotion. The CDU bylaws (Statut der CDU Deutschlands) for instance determine that the JU chairperson is automatically an advisory member of the CDU's national board. (If the chairperson was elected member of the CDU's national board by the national party convention, he/she is of course not just an advisory member, but a regular member of the board.) The important point is that young party leaders are thereby facing older/more senior party leaders at eye level within the official structures of the party. The same is also happening at the local and regional party levels.

There should be special emphasis on involving young political activists during election campaigns. This period offers a window of opportunity for players in the political arena: successful campaigns leverage different political groups and involvement in campaigns (whether it be party primaries or national elections) enables talented young people with experience in areas such as publicity, field work, digital media, design, content or finance to demonstrate their skills, gain an in-depth understanding of the party structure and to advance. The JU, for example, was closely involved in Angela Merkel's 2013 campaign. The internet "television" initiative (CDU-TV) and campaigns focusing on the young (such as "Cool bleiben und Kanzlerin wählen", the main message of which was: Stay Cool and vote for Angela Merkel) succeeded in making the party particularly attractive to a huge audience of young people all over Germany. Thus the conservative party, which traditionally had difficulty with the younger audience, remained relevant because of the involvement of members of the party's young leadership organization while they, in return, gained experience and political advancement using the brief but intensive window of opportunity provided by the election period.

## Conclusions

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It appears that in the past several months Israel's veteran parties have awakened from their ideological slumber and as a consequence, so too the party institutions. For example, the Labor party has begun preparing for new elections for their young leadership with the intention of invigorating party activists. Young activists in the Likud are forcing the party into similar elections. Creating strong frameworks for young people within the parties will bring the parties closer to the citizenry and the citizenry closer to the parties.

Basing myself on my analysis of organizations of young people in German politics which have generated party renewal, I suggest three important principles that must be implemented in order to build party institutions composed of young people:

1. Young people must be given a great deal of autonomy in order to best exploit their distinctive energy. Autonomy of this nature has a price that politicians who expect total obedience from young people must pay. Politicians prefer to see young people as window dressing for the campaign or as do-as-you-are-told activists in the field. But in the long run, such autonomy will strengthen the party, provide it with relevance and significance regarding the voting public and enable new blood to join the ranks of the party. Such autonomy can be achieved by legislative means – a party constitution creating an official partition between the young guard and other party institutions – as well as by economic means – providing a budget which is not dependent on this or that politician.
2. Strengthening the social element at the local and national levels. Young people are attracted to places that are fun and interesting, especially if they are expected to devote many hours of volunteer activity. Without serious thinking as to how to build the organization as a family or as a social meeting place, similar to the party branches that existed in Israel in the past, it will be difficult to sustain large reserves of activists over time.
3. Strengthening the interfaces of advancement of young people within the party. Many young people want to move up in the party hierarchy. If they are unable to see this at least as a possibility, if they do not have access to apparatuses they need use to climb the ladder of influence, the parties will lose many potential leaders. These advancement apparatuses might include internship programs, the suitable integration of qualified young people in political campaigns (both primaries and general elections), allocation of specific safe places on the party lists and various other party institutions as well as the integration of young people in Zionist organizations identified with the party. All of these are necessary for success in enlisting young people in party activity.

It sometimes feels that many citizens in western democracies have lost faith in the entire political system. Politicians are seen as being detached from the society they are supposed to represent and the political parties seem like closed, private clubs for people with the

proper connections more than political movements with ideas designed to improve the country. Building frameworks for young people that the parties will support by giving them autonomy, budgets and paths for advancement in the political arena, in addition to a well developed social element, can be a powerful driver towards ongoing renewal of the parties and their connection to the current reality by harnessing new activist forces.

## About Manof



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Manof is a young right wing intellectual and political forum in Likud that aims at increasing the connection between moderate liberal thinking and national ideas within the Likud party.

*Manof* advocates democracy and human rights, pluralism, Zionism and free market economy. Its courses of action consist of a wide variety of methods, from discussions and meetings with politicians and intellectuals to forming and lobbying policy documents and law proposals.

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