Local Government Rising:
The Emergence of New Regionalism in Israel

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This study examines the rise of New Regionalism within Israel's local government framework, emphasizing its emergence as a response to national and international crises. Crises—whether security, environmental, economic, democratic, or health-related—have acted as catalysts, exposing systemic failures in centralized governance and accelerating the need for decentralization and regional collaboration. Events such as the October 7th 2023 War exemplify these failures, highlighting the urgency of fostering resilient and adaptable governance structures. The research introduces an integrative framework linking crises with evolution of governance, demonstrating how incremental reforms have empowered local governments and fostered regional cooperation. A triad of interdependent reforms is identified as essential to achieving sustainable governance: enacting a Basic Law for Local Government and Regional Governance, institutionalizing regional governance structures, and enhancing human resource capacities. These reforms aim to replace fragmented and reactive approaches with cohesive, strategic shifts towards adaptive, inclusive, and efficient governance models. By situating Israel's governance trajectory within the broader theoretical framework of New Regionalism, the study underscores the paradigm's emphasis on subsidiarity, multi-level governance, and community resilience. These principles are presented as critical for navigating Israel's complex socio-political and economic challenges, offering a pathway to sustainable development and stronger societal cohesion. Policymakers are urged to institutionalize these reforms, transforming crises into opportunities and paving the way for a more equitable and adaptive governance future.

Keywords: *New Regionalism; Israel; Local Government & Governance; National and International Crisis; Public Failure; Inter-Municipal Collaboration; Local & Regional Reform*

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I examine the theoretical underpinnings, the research gap, and the key arguments that position New Regionalism as a critical framework for addressing Israel's governance challenges in times of crisis. New Regionalism arose as a response to the complexities of governance amid globalization and decentralization. New Regionalism diverges from traditional, hierarchical models, emphasizing flexible, localized responses that integrate national priorities with regional needs. This governance framework prioritizes collaboration among local authorities, civil society, and the private sector, fostering adaptive capacities at the regional level. By redefining governance boundaries, New Regionalism seeks to enhance the responsiveness and resilience of public institutions (Hindi, 2018).

The dynamics of governance and regional development in Israel have undergone significant transformations over the past decades, driven by national and international crises. These shifts have catalyzed the emergence of New Regionalism, a governance paradigm characterized by collaborative, multi-level, and multi-stakeholder approaches to managing economic, social, governance, democratic and environmental challenges. I argue that in Israel, these complexities have been amplified by repeated national crises, including economic and societal downturns, military conflicts, governance, democracy and public health crises and emergencies. Central to this discussion is the recognition of crises as critical junctures that disrupt traditional governance models and necessitate innovation. The more the failure or national crisis is harmful and shocking, the more the shift, adaptation and evolvement in local government and regionalism is significant, inevitable and necessary. Thus, considering The October 7th War (2023-2024) as the most severe national crisis Israel has experienced since its foundation, one can expect an extreme reform to come in the area of local government and regionalism. The October 7th War exposed the horrible and devastated limitations of Israel's centralized decision-making apparatus and underscored the necessity for empowering local and regional actors. At the time of writing these lines (January, 2025), even in the midst of the crisis, long before the full damages have been assessed, the investigation completed, and the conclusions laid on the table, the emerging direction is already discernible: as local government and regional clusters stepped in to fill gaps left by the national government, a paradigm shift toward local autonomy and regional collaboration began to take shape.

While New Regionalism has been extensively studied in global contexts, its application in unitary systems like Israel remains underexplored. Most existing literature focuses on federal systems, where regional governance is embedded within constitutional frameworks (Keating, 1998). In contrast, Israel's highly centralized governance structure presents unique challenges and opportunities for implementing regionalism. Crises have often served as catalysts for decentralization, yet the academic discourse has not fully addressed how these moments shape the evolution of regional governance models in Israel. The proposed framework bridges this gap by integrating insights from Israel's recent policy developments, including

the emergence of regional clusters ('Eshkolot', plural of Eshkol in Hebrew). These developments do not reflect a public reform, a regional transformation, but signal a gradual, albeit tentative, shift toward regional autonomy, warranting a deeper examination of their implications for local governance and national resilience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEW REGIONALISM AS A RESPONSE TO NATIONAL CRISES

New Regionalism emerged as a transformative governance framework in response to the limitations of traditional centralized systems. Rooted in theories of decentralization and adaptive governance, it emphasizes decentralized autonomy, place-based policies, and collaborative decision-making (Keating, 1998; Friedmann, 2002). New Regionalism emphasizes collaborative, multi-scalar governance structures that prioritize subsidiarity, community engagement, and adaptive capacity. Unlike traditional regionalism, it focuses on integrating social, economic, and environmental goals within functional regions to enhance resilience and equity (Paasi, 2009).

Key components include collaboration, sustainability, resilience, adaptive governance, and leveraging regional assets. Additionally, New Regionalism emphasizes the role of place-based policies in fostering inclusive and equitable development. By focusing on the unique characteristics of regions, including their cultural, economic, and environmental attributes, this framework supports targeted interventions that address specific regional disparities (Storper, 1997). Collaboration across sectors and levels of governance ensures that diverse perspectives are incorporated, strengthening the resilience and adaptability of governance systems to address complex challenges (Casale Mashiah et al., 2023). Nevertheless, some scholars criticize the practice of new regionalism, for instance, Hadjimichalis (2011) argues that uneven geographical development, a structural feature of capitalism, exacerbates regional inequalities during crises. This highlights the importance of addressing socio-spatial justice and fostering solidarity within new regionalism frameworks, ensuring that marginalized regions are not left behind during policy transformations.

In Israel, for instance, regional clusters were developed mostly in peripheral areas, representing practical applications of these principles, showcasing how municipalities can pool resources and address shared challenges collectively. This approach not only enhances efficiency but may also align local policies with broader national and global objectives, enabling tailored responses to regional needs (Casale Mashiah et al., 2023; Hindi, 2018).

From National and International Crises to New Regionalism

This chapter delves into the theoretical underpinnings of New Regionalism, investigating the ways in which national and international crises act as catalysts for the evolution of regional governance frameworks. By synthesizing an extensive body of literature, the discussion elucidates the dynamic interplay between crises, governance systems, and the adaptive capacities of regions. Crises, ranging from environmental disasters to economic recessions and political upheavals, have consistently exposed the limitations of centralized governance. Centralized systems are often characterized by inefficiencies, rigidity, and failure to address localized needs effectively (Paasi, 2009; Hudson, 2007). In such contexts, New Regionalism emerges as a paradigm that fosters resilience, adaptability, and cooperation.

The theoretical foundation of New Regionalism is rooted in its departure from Old Regionalism. While the latter was predominantly state-led and hierarchical, New Regionalism emphasizes decentralized, multi-stakeholder governance. It is adaptive, focusing on integrating economic, social, and environmental objectives within cohesive regional frameworks (Hueglin, 1989; Keating, 1998; Friedmann, 2002). For instance, crises such as the 2008 global financial collapse provided opportunities for regions to innovate and adopt economic resilience strategies (Allison, 2008). Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the inadequacy of global and national institutions in managing complex crises, propelling the necessity for multi-level governance (Mizrahi, Vigoda-Gadot & Cohen, 2021). In these frameworks, regions play pivotal roles in mobilizing resources and implementing context-specific solutions, illustrating the relational regionalism described by Amin (2004).

One of the key theoretical contributions of New Regionalism lies in its ability to address crises through adaptive governance. Resilience and adaptability are central concepts, defined as the capacity of regions to absorb shocks, recover effectively, and innovate in response to evolving challenges (Brenner, 2004; Storper, 1997). Adaptive governance frameworks enable regions to leverage localized knowledge and networks, fostering collaboration among municipalities, civil society, and private actors. For example, in managing water scarcity and cross-border environmental risks, regional clusters in Europe and municipal networks in Israel have demonstrated how collective action can enhance resilience and equity (Beeri & Razin, 2015).

Further enriching this theoretical perspective, recent research highlights the significance of civic engagement and trust as cornerstones of regional resilience. Studies on emergency-oriented civic engagement (EOCE) underscore the critical role of community participation in addressing crises (Blitstein-Mishor, Vigoda-Gadot & Mizrahi, 2023). EOCE enables communities to actively contribute to emergency preparedness and recovery efforts, thereby enhancing the adaptive capacity of governance systems. This engagement is particularly salient in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the vulnerabilities of centralized responses and underscored the value of decentralized, participatory approaches.

The sociopolitical dimensions of New Regionalism further enrich its theoretical framework. Crises often accelerate the formation of regional identities, fostering social cohesion and a sense of belonging among communities. This process is integral to the legitimacy and sustainability of regional governance structures (Paasi, 2009; De Frantz, 2008). By strengthening shared identities, regions can navigate internal conflicts and external pressures more effectively. However, these dynamics also underscore the inherent tensions in regional governance. Political rivalries, disparities in resource allocation, and conflicting priorities can undermine cooperative efforts (Allison, 2008). Moreover, the emphasis on regional autonomy may challenge national sovereignty, necessitating a careful balance between local empowerment and national coherence (Brenner, 2004).

The concept of developmental regionalism, as explored by Dent and Richter (2011), provides additional insights into the economic dimensions of New Regionalism. By leveraging sub-regional cooperation, developmental regionalism emphasizes the role of economic interdependence in fostering stability and resilience. This approach aligns closely with New Regionalism's emphasis on integrating diverse objectives within adaptive governance frameworks. Furthermore, Boin and Hart (2003) highlight the critical role of public leadership during crises, emphasizing how regional leaders can bridge gaps left by central governments in ensuring effective crisis management.

New Regionalism also interacts with globalization, positioning regions as critical nodes in the global governance architecture. Crises often reveal the limitations of global institutions, prompting regions to develop localized responses that complement international efforts. This dynamic interplay between local and global governance underscores the innovative potential of regions to act as laboratories for scalable solutions to global challenges (Amin, 2004; Storper, 1997). For instance, the integration of environmental sustainability into regional development policies exemplifies how localized strategies can align with broader global objectives. Martin and Sunley's (2003) analysis of clusters further supports this by illustrating how regional clusters can drive economic innovation while addressing systemic vulnerabilities.

The theoretical insights into New Regionalism underscore its transformative potential in navigating the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century. By positioning regions as adaptive, collaborative, and resilient entities, this paradigm offers a robust framework for addressing crises and fostering sustainable development. As environmental, economic, and political uncertainties continue to intensify, the principles of New Regionalism provide invaluable guidance for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners striving to enhance governance efficacy and equity.

While the theoretical framework of New Regionalism provides a global lens for understanding decentralization processes and multi-level governance, it is essential to contextualize these dynamics within Israel's unique historical and administrative development. In the first twenty-five years following its establishment, Israel

operated under a highly centralized governance model, which, despite its rigidity, managed to sustain a functional and relatively frictionless relationship between the central government and local authorities. This centralized framework was effective in addressing the pressing needs of a nascent state, ensuring rapid development, national security, and social cohesion. Local governments, during this period, functioned primarily as administrative extensions of the central government, implementing policies and managing service delivery with limited autonomy.

However, as the state matured and societal, economic, and security challenges evolved, tensions between centralization and local needs began to surface. The rapid urbanization, demographic shifts, and the growing complexity of municipal responsibilities exposed the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach. Over time, cracks emerged in the centralized model, revealing inefficiencies and growing local demands for autonomy and flexibility. These developments set the stage for a gradual transition towards regional governance models and laid the groundwork for the emergence of New Regionalism in Israel.

This evolving relationship between the central and local governments serves as the backdrop for the fourteen critical national crises and public failures discussed in the following chapter. These events highlight the incremental yet profound shifts in governance structures and underscore the necessity for a more adaptive, decentralized approach to address the multifaceted challenges facing Israeli society.

FOURTEEN NATIONAL CRISES, DISASTERS AND PUBLIC FAILURES: EFFECTS ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND NEW REGIONALISM

This chapter examines fourteen national crises, disasters, and public failures that have occurred in Israel over the past fifty years. The types of crises—security, economy, and society & health— and types of Crises' Impact—strengthening local government and transition to governance and regionalism— presented chronologically in Figure 1, highlight the persistent failure of the existing governance structure in balancing the centralized government's authority with the evolving needs of local communities. Over the years, crises at various spatial scales, from global to local, and across diverse domains have exposed the growing gap between local needs and the centralized government, which remains entrenched in its hierarchical approach. However, the response to these crises has driven a gradual and fragmented shift in governance, fostering not only the incremental transfer of responsibilities to local authorities— primarily in terms of accountability—but also the emergence of New Regionalism as an alternative governance model that facilitates regional collaboration and multi-level coordination.

Figure 1: National Crises, Disasters, and Public Failures – Their Impact on Local Governmen, Governance and the Transition to Regionalism
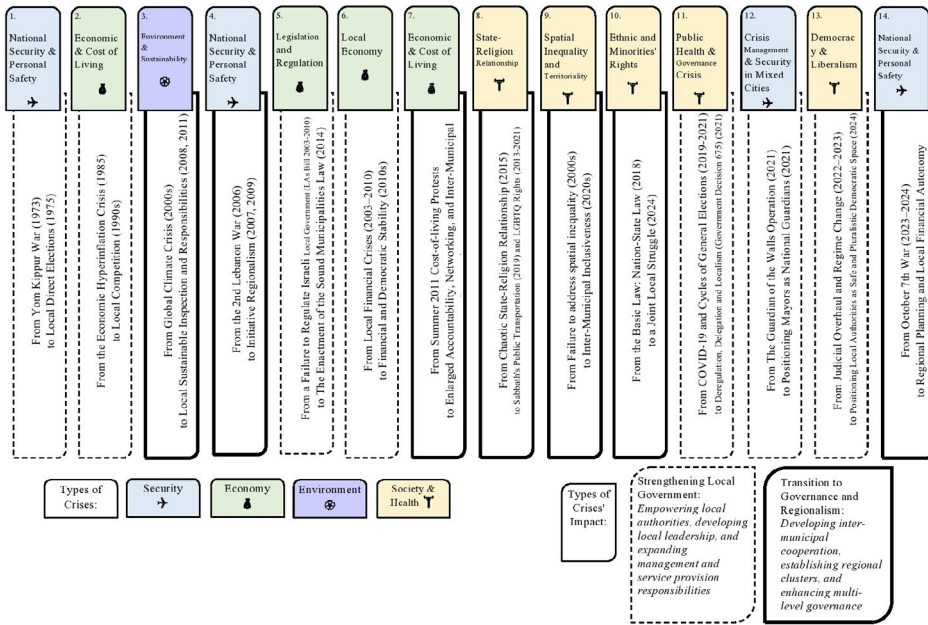
This ongoing transition, rather than a structured top-down reform, has facilitated the gradual formation of regional cooperation frameworks, such as municipal clusters, which enable local governments to devise tailored solutions that address regional characteristics and needs. These developments signify a slow yet steady move beyond traditional local governance toward a more adaptive, resilient, and networked form of governance—New Regionalism. This paradigm emphasizes inter-municipal collaboration, resource-sharing, and strategic regional planning to address complex challenges that transcend municipal boundaries. In this chapter, the crises are categorized thematically to illustrate the varying dynamics within each domain and their impact on Israel's local governance and new regionalization processes.

National Security and Personal Safety

From Yom Kippur War (1973) to Local Direct Elections (1975)

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 represented a critical juncture in Israel's national security and governance, highlighting deficiencies in centralized decision-making processes and eroding public trust in state institutions (Horowitz & Lissak, 1978; Peri, 1983). In response, the Knesset enacted significant electoral reforms in 1975, introducing direct elections for mayors in local municipalities. This reform, influenced by public demands for greater accountability and leadership responsiveness,

enhanced the autonomy and democratic legitimacy of local governments (Maor, 1998). Direct mayoral elections empowered municipal leaders, fostering a closer relationship with their constituents and enabling localized responses to crises. The reform also marked a turning point in decentralization efforts, solidifying the role of local authorities as key players in Israel's governance system. This transformation contributed to the evolution of local governance, enabling municipalities to better address security and safety concerns while improving public trust and resilience in times of crisis. In a wider sense, the fundamental framework of local democracy in Israel has demonstrated resilience, flexibility and self-governance. This adaptability ensures that while emergency measures may temporarily alter operational dynamics, the principles of democratic participation and accountability are not permanently undermined (Razin, 2004).

From the 2nd Lebanon War (2006) to Initiative Regionalism (2007, 2009)

The Second Lebanon War (2006) underscored the vulnerabilities of Israel's local authorities in addressing national security threats and ensuring personal safety, catalyzing a shift toward regionalism and collective municipal governance. The war revealed gaps in emergency coordination, prompting municipalities to adopt collaborative crisis management. This period marked the establishment of the *Forum of 15* in 2007, uniting Israel's largest and most economically independent municipalities to advocate for greater local autonomy, resource allocation, and policy influence. Building on this momentum, the creation of Israel's first municipal cluster, the Western Galilee Cluster, in 2009 further institutionalized regional cooperation. These developments allowed municipalities to pool resources, develop regional emergency protocols, and address shared challenges such as infrastructure, public safety, and economic development. The regionalization efforts strengthened local governance and positioned municipalities as pivotal actors in addressing complex security and societal challenges (Beeri & Razin, 2015; Uster & Beeri, 2024).

From The Guardian of the Walls Operation Riots (2021) to Positioning Mayors as National Guardians (2021)

The Guardian of the Walls operation in May 2021 exposed critical national security challenges and intensified ethnic tensions, particularly in Israel's mixed cities. Local governments emerged as key actors in managing these crises, especially where national responses were perceived as inadequate. Mayors in frontline cities utilized crisis communication strategies to maintain order and public trust. Through platforms like Facebook, municipalities conveyed real-time updates, reassured residents, and emphasized community solidarity (Yavetz & Bronstein, 2023). At the same time, the riots revealed the fragile coexistence in mixed cities, highlighting the importance of local leadership in mediating ethnic tensions. Smooha (2022) underscored the role of municipalities in addressing these divides through inclusive policies and fostering dialogue. This shift toward local governance during crises

underscored a broader trend: the positioning of mayors as primary crisis managers, capable of bridging national gaps, maintaining public safety, and navigating both national and international challenges.

National Security and Personal Safety: From October 7th War (2023-2024) to Regional Planning and Local Financial Autonomy

The October 7th War (2023-2024) has thrust Israel into its most severe national crises, exposing significant failures in governance, leadership, management, societal and national security systems. This ongoing conflict has underscored the overreliance on central government mechanisms, prompting a reevaluation of local governance structures. Municipal leaders, particularly in large, resourceful cities, have stepped up to fill critical gaps, providing security, coordinating emergency services, and supporting impacted areas independently, as a sort of recurrence of the dynamics seen during the COVID-19 crisis (Zaychik et al., 2024).

Amid this backdrop, the huge recovery of West Negev (local authorities near the Gaza strip) and local authorities located at the north (near the border of south Lebanon), have been led by regional approaches, regional thinking and regional planning, i.e., the administrative divisions of the north ('Minhelet Hatzafon') and south ('Minhelet Tkuma'). In addition, the recently proposed Economic Plan Memorandum for the 2025 budget hints at a significant policy shift toward granting local governments limited fiscal autonomy. For the first time in decades, municipalities are being considered for expanded powers to levy municipal taxes, such as arnona (monthly tax by apartment size), without prior central government approval. Additionally, proposed amendments to the Municipalities Ordinance aim to allow local authorities to lease assets for extended periods under specific conditions, bypassing the stringent approvals previously required (Kimhi, Beeri & Reingewertz, 2022). While the memorandum remains unlegislated, its mere existence signals a possible paradigm shift in the central-local government relationship. Remarkably, even under a right-wing and notably centralized government, this policy direction suggests an openness to enhanced municipal autonomy. Should this trajectory persist, future governments—building on the October 7th crisis—may deepen these changes, potentially ushering in a broader redefinition of local government authority and its role in Israel's governance landscape (Beeri, 2023b).

Economy and Cost of Living

From the Economic Hyperinflation Crisis (1985) to Local Competition (1990s)

The 1985 Economic Hyperinflation Crisis in Israel served as a critical juncture in the evolution of local governance, propelling municipalities into the era of New Public Management (NPM). This period of severe economic instability necessitated fundamental changes in public administration to address inefficiencies and fiscal crises. Inspired by NPM principles, Israeli local authorities were compelled to adopt managerialist practices, focusing on cost-efficiency, performance measurement,

and strategic planning. Municipalities began to operate as autonomous entities, less dependent on central government funding and more entrepreneurial in their approach to service delivery and local economic development (Levi et al., 2020). These shifts encouraged competition among municipalities for resources, investments, and residents, fostering a more dynamic and economically oriented local governance system. By integrating private-sector strategies such as outsourcing, performance-based management, and cost control, municipalities transformed into active players in shaping their economic futures (Hood, 1991; Beeri & Razin, 2015; Rosenbloom & Kravchuk, 2002).

From Local Financial Crises (2003-2010) to Financial and Democratic Stability (2010s)

Between 2003 and 2010, Israeli local governance faced a dual dynamic. On one hand, the central government failed to adequately regulate the financial management of small, economically weak, and peripheral municipalities, leaving them vulnerable to crises. This regulatory vacuum contributed to significant deficits, mounting debts, and a collapse of basic municipal functions in several cases. On the other hand, many local governments demonstrated resilience, learning capacity, and adaptability. Stricter regulatory measures were eventually introduced, including the appointment of external accountants and convened committees tasked with replacing failing leadership and restoring fiscal stability (Beeri & Yuval, 2013). These committees focused on reducing deficits, curbing debt, and enforcing fiscal discipline, resulting in a 40% reduction in municipal debt and a 6% decrease in deficits. This approach served as a catalyst for municipalities to improve economic efficiency and enhance financial autonomy (Levi et al., 2020; Steklov, 2024). While this approach has only temporarily limited local democracy (Beeri, 2023a), it stabilized local governance during crises without harming democracy in the medium to long term. Post-convened committee periods saw improved representativeness, governability, and voter turnout. Thus, interventions enabled recovery while maintaining democratic legitimacy and continuity. In addition, this period highlighted both the shortcomings of centralized oversight and the potential for local governments to evolve into financially independent entities (Finkelstein, 2020; Reingewertz & Beeri, 2017).

From Summer 2011 Cost-of-living Protests to Enlarged Accountability, Networking, and Inter-Municipal Cooperation

The 2011 cost-of-living protests in Israel highlighted the public's frustration with socio-economic inequality, escalating housing costs, and inadequate public services. Additionally, the protests reflected widespread dissatisfaction with recurring systemic crises, significant regional disparities, and pronounced regional inequality, as well as the mismatch between existing centralized governance structures and contemporary needs. In response to these challenges and growing international pressures, including those from the OECD, the Ministry of Interior, in partnership

with the Joint-Alka organization, developed an administrative framework for New Regionalism (Hindi, 2018).

Thus, while the movement primarily targeted the central government, it catalyzed significant changes in local governance. Municipalities, recognizing the growing demand for accountability, transparency, affordable housing and improved public services, began adopting innovative governance strategies, such as enhanced public engagement in local decision-making (Beeri & Saad, 2022). Simultaneously, inter-municipal cooperation expanded, driven by a shared need to optimize resources and tackle regional challenges collaboratively (Levi et al., 2020). Networks of municipalities began pooling resources for regional infrastructure projects, such as shared industrial zones and public transport systems, improving service delivery while reducing costs. These changes reflect a broader trend toward collaborative governance and strengthened local accountability, showcasing municipalities' adaptability in responding to citizen-driven demands for service delivery and managerial reforms (Beeri & Zidan, 2021; Mondey & Beeri, 2023; Uster, Beeri & Vashdi, 2018).

Environment and Sustainability

From Global Climate Crisis (2000s) to Local Sustainable Inspection and Responsibilities (2008, 2011)

The global climate crisis, gaining prominence in 2000s, catalyzed significant developments in local governance in Israel. Municipal authorities became key players in environmental governance, particularly in waste management and urban sustainability initiatives. By 2008, local governments were empowered to manage waste and enforce environmental regulations autonomously, a shift facilitated by reforms emphasizing governance over traditional hierarchical administration (Frisch-Aviram et al., 2018). The 2011 Packaging Act further entrenched these roles by mandating waste separation, aligning local initiatives with national sustainability goals. Policy entrepreneurs, including low-level municipal bureaucrats, leveraged these changes to implement innovative practices, such as green building standards and waste reduction programs (Cohen, 2016). These shifts illustrated the capacity of local governments to adopt proactive roles in sustainability, balancing environmental imperatives with community needs. The transition from hierarchical systems to governance models enhanced collaboration and innovation, positioning municipalities as central actors in addressing global environmental challenges.

Society and Health

From a Failure to Regulate Israeli Local Government (Local Authorities Bill 2003-2010) to The Enactment of the Sound Municipalities Law (2014)

The failure to pass the Local Authorities Bill in 2003-2010, intended to replace outdated governance structures, reflected the tension between central control and

local autonomy in Israel (Blank, 2004). This legislative attempt aimed to formalize local government structures, establish uniform operational standards, and enhance fiscal accountability (Beeri, 2020). However, its neoliberal approach, framing municipalities as corporate entities rather than democratic institutions, encountered widespread opposition (Blank & Rosen-Zvi, 2009). As a result, local authorities continued operating under fragmented and inconsistent regulatory frameworks. In contrast, this legislative failure led to the enactment of the Sound Municipalities Law in 2014 that marked a pivotal shift. This law provided well-managed municipalities with greater fiscal independence and autonomy, enabling them to enact policies and manage budgets with minimal central oversight (Beeri & Razin, 2015).

From Chaotic State-Religion Relationship (2015) to Sabbath's Public Transportation (2019) and LGBTQ Rights (2013-2021)

The complex and often contentious relationship between state and religion in Israel reached a critical point in 2015, as national policies failed to address escalating tensions over public spaces and religious pluralism. This vacuum in centralized decision-making created opportunities for local governments to assume a more prominent role. By 2019, several municipalities initiated public transportation services on the Sabbath, effectively bypassing national restrictions (Times of Israel, 2019). This local autonomy highlighted the ability of municipal governments to balance the demands of secular and religious populations, ensuring equitable access to essential services (Davidovitz et al., 2023). Simultaneously, local authorities began advancing LGBTQ rights, with significant developments between 2013 and 2021 (Forman-Rabinovici & Beeri, 2024). For instance, municipal by-laws in cities like Tel Aviv and Haifa provided same-sex couples with equal access to municipal benefits, including daycare and tax discounts. Such actions showcased the growing capacity of local governments to innovate and lead on issues where national policies lagged, reflecting the critical moderating effect of municipal characteristics on public attitudes toward morality policies (Davidovitz et al., 2023; Cravens, 2015).

From Failure to address spatial inequality and Territoriality (2000s) to Inter-Municipal Inclusiveness (2020s)

Spatial inequality in Israel stems from entrenched socio-political structures that have perpetuated disparities in land, resource distribution, and development opportunities, particularly in peripheral and Arab-majority municipalities (Yiftachel, 2001; Tzfadia and Gigi, 2022). Historically, government mechanisms, such as ad hoc boundary commissions, often favored stronger municipalities, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities. However, since 2016, regulatory changes have fostered a shift toward inter-municipal inclusivity through permanent "geographic commissions" that adopted a regional rather than a municipal framework. These commissions have begun redistributing land and tax revenues to support weaker municipalities and promote socio-economic equity (Beeri, Aharon-Gutman & Luzer, 2024).

Inter-municipal collaborations have emerged as key tools for addressing inequality. Initiatives like shared industrial zones and coordinated urban planning have preceded the work of the state committees and allowed municipalities to pool resources and reduce disparities (Urbanologia., 2024).

From the Basic Law: Nation-State Law (2018) and its impact on Ethnic and Minorities' Rights to a Joint Local Struggle (2024)

The enactment of the Basic Law: Nation-State Law in 2018 intensified ethnic and social divisions in Israel, particularly among minority communities such as the Druze and Circassians. The law's emphasis on the Jewish character of the state marginalized these groups, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and political unrest (Jabareen, 2021). In response, the local government sphere became a pivotal platform for addressing these grievances, as municipalities led by the Federation of Local Authorities, under Haim Bibas, formed coalitions advocating for minority rights. These efforts culminated in June 2024, when approximately 120 mayors, including members of the Forum of 15, sent a unified letter to the Prime Minister demanding an end to discrimination against Druze and Circassian communities and the allocation of adequate resources for their development (Urbanologia, 2024; Ynet, 2024). This rare political alignment, which included right-leaning Likud-supporting mayors, marked a significant departure from national policies (Walla News, 2024). It demonstrated the capacity of local governments to mediate societal conflicts and foster solidarity across ethnic divides. By challenging the legislative authority of the Knesset, including constitutional-level legislation, the municipal sector underscored its evolving role as a critical actor in advancing social equity and inclusivity at the local and national levels.

From COVID-19 and Cycles of General Elections (2019-2021) to Deregulation, Delegation and Localism (Government Decision 675) (2021)

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant shortcomings in Israel's centralized governance, particularly through its delayed and inconsistent national response. This highlighted the agility and resilience of local governments, which quickly emerged as frontline actors in addressing the crisis. Municipalities adapted by establishing situation rooms, enhancing digital data management systems, and implementing community-specific health policies. These localized actions underscored the importance of proximity and tailored governance during crises (Zaychik et al., 2024). Programs such as the central government's Traffic Light Program allowed municipalities to adapt national guidelines to local needs, decentralizing decision-making and improving efficiency. Studies have demonstrated that innovative crisis management strategies, such as prioritizing social cohesion and leveraging collaborative networks, significantly improved public trust and health outcomes (Tselios & Tompkins, 2017; Kuhlmann & Franzke, 2022).

During the same period of instability, marked by five cycles of general elections, local authorities became a beacon of stability, functioning effectively amidst national dysfunction. Haim Bibas, Chairman of the Federation of Local Authorities, repeatedly emphasized the operational capabilities of local governments, second only to the Israel Defense Force, and their efficiency in addressing local needs and national and international crises. Regional clusters (eshkolot) gained momentum, fostering cooperation among municipalities and reducing reliance on the central government. This momentum, coupled with political pressure and the high functionality of local authorities during COVID-19, led to the Bennett-Lapid government initiating legislation and reforms: Government Decision 675, adopted in November 2021, aimed to reduce regulation and transfer limited but symbolic powers to local authorities. This decision strengthened local governments' ability to address community-specific issues independently of national oversight. Though the immediate scope of the delegated powers was modest, the move represented a critical shift in Israel's central-local relations, marking a transition from centralism to localism. The experiences of 2019-2021 showcased the potential of decentralized governance to ensure resilience, enhance public trust, and enable more effective crisis management.

In addition, following the COVID-19 crisis and the local government's response to it, the ethos of local governance improved, and positive public opinion soon followed. Public trust in local government has risen significantly and is considerably higher compared to trust in the central government (Hermann, 2023).

From Judicial Overhaul and Regime Change (2022-2023) to Positioning Local Authorities as Safe and Pluralistic Democratic Space (2024)

The judicial overhaul, constitutional crisis and governance reform attempts in Israel during 2022–2023 ignited intense societal polarization. While some viewed these measures as necessary legal reforms, others perceived them as threats to democratic principles and liberal values (Fuchs, Benvenisty & Dagan, 2024; Navot, 2022). These debates also underscored broader issues concerning the relationship between religion and state, as proposals sought to alter kosher certification, marriage laws, conversion processes, gender segregation at public events, public transportation on Shabbat, and women's rights (Kretzmer, 2023). These tensions spilled over into the municipal realm, as local authorities increasingly became arenas for addressing such conflicts, particularly in the public and urban space (Beeri, 2023b). As the 2023 local elections (later postponed to February 2024) approached, campaigns and public discourse reflected these national debates, positioning local governments as key actors in managing societal rifts (Chilai, 2024; Golan-Nadir, 2024). This shift emphasized the capacity of municipalities to regulate, adapt, and mediate unresolved national conflicts, particularly around religion-state issues, solidifying their status as pluralistic and democratic spaces within an increasingly divided society.

Lessons Learned and Emerging Trends

The examination of the fourteen crises presented in this chapter underscores a consistent pattern of gradual decentralization and the growing role of local and regional governance in Israel. Over the past five decades, each crisis, whether security-related, economic, environmental or social & health—has progressively exposed the structural limitations of the centralized governance model. While some crises led to immediate changes in policy and governance structures, others triggered a more gradual and implicit transition toward local autonomy. The collective experience of these events highlights the increasing reliance on municipalities and regional clusters to fill gaps left by the national government, demonstrating their evolving capacity to manage crises, deliver services, and respond to localized needs with greater efficiency and agility.

A key takeaway from these crises is the evolving interplay between the central and local governments. The analysis suggests that although local authorities have become more proactive and capable over time, the central government has often been hesitant to fully embrace decentralization. Instead, it has employed a mix of control mechanisms—such as fiscal oversight, regulatory constraints, and political influence—to maintain its grip on local governance. Despite these barriers, municipalities have leveraged crises as opportunities for institutional learning, capacity building, and the formation of collaborative networks across regions. This ongoing transformation signals a shift from a traditionally top-down governance approach to a more balanced, multi-level framework where local and regional authorities play a more prominent role in shaping policy and service delivery. However, the transition remains uneven, facing challenges related to political resistance, resource allocation, and disparities in local capacities.

These trends point to the critical need for a structured and well-orchestrated approach to decentralization, where the lessons from past crises can inform future governance reforms. As Israel moves forward, the challenge lies not only in institutionalizing regional governance models but also in addressing the structural and cultural barriers that have historically impeded their full realization. The following chapter builds on these insights by proposing a comprehensive framework for implementing New Regionalism in Israel—one that is both adaptive to emerging challenges and responsive to the evolving needs of Israeli society.

'THE DAY AFTER'—FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: IMPLEMENTING NEW REGIONALISM IN ISRAEL

The October 7th War has unleashed profound security, social, economic, psychological, and political ramifications for Israeli society. Socially, the war disrupted community cohesion and exposed vulnerabilities in marginalized groups, especially children and youth, whose mental health and development are at significant risk

due to prolonged exposure to trauma and insecurity (Sabag, Reznikovski-Kuras and Arazi, 2024; Taub Center, 2023). Economically, the mobilization of over 300,000 reservists and the suspension of critical industries, including construction and tourism, have inflicted unprecedented damage on the national economy, compounded by long-term challenges to workforce participation and fiscal stability (Flug & Porat Hirsch, 2024; Taub Center, 2023). Politically, the war has amplified debates over governance and preparedness, highlighting systemic weaknesses in crisis response at both national and regional levels (Marciano et al., 2024; INSS, 2023). Security-wise, the scope of the conflict has revealed strategic vulnerabilities and underscored the need for decentralized crisis management frameworks to enhance resilience and local autonomy. These challenges collectively demand an integrated response to rebuild societal resilience, restore economic vitality, and reform governance structures (Sabag, Reznikovski-Kuras and Arazi, 2024; INSS, 2023).

Beyond the previously discussed aspects, the events of October 7th inflicted a profound blow to the national ethos. First, they created a deep rupture and crisis in the unwritten contract between the state and its citizens, accompanied by the sobering realization that the state failed to fulfill its most fundamental commitment: ensuring personal and national security. Broadly speaking, Zionism, embodied in the State of Israel, faltered in delivering liberty, justice, peace, and security—a home for the Jewish people. Among many survivors, evacuees, and others affected, voices have likened the horrors of October 7th to the greatest national disaster experienced by the Jewish people since the Holocaust.

The responses to this crisis were swift. Beyond the domains of national security and multi-front warfare, an existential need emerged to protect the liveliness of the nation. At the same time, following years of integrated crises, there was a growing recognition within the Israeli government of its centralized power limits. This has fostered a shift, albeit partial, from an ego-system to an eco-system. Unexpectedly and with some reluctance, the government opted to address the immense challenge of recovery through a regional, though centralized, approach. The North Authority and South Authority (Tkuma) were set up. While their establishment and operations are fraught with challenges and shortcomings, the emerging thinking regarding the revival of the south and north is regionally oriented and deserves commendation.

While these crises have incrementally advanced local governance reforms, their fragmented and reactive nature underscores the need for a unified, strategic framework. Beyond all these challenges, the Iron Swords War represents the ultimate, most severe, and painful crisis that Israeli society has ever faced. Consequently, the response to this crisis, embodied in the rise of New Regionalism, is expected to be the most profound, decisive, and justified transformation to date. The development of regional clusters and the advancement of New Regionalism serve as a counter-response to the fraught power relations between the central and local governments, and to the central government's coercive, unprofessional, self-serving, egoistic and

dysfunctional centralization. Therefore, fostering regional clusters and strengthening regionalism are not merely administrative changes; they constitute a core pillar in the national recovery of Israeli society, the public service, organizational structures, public institutions, and public administration in Israel.

The current regional clusters could serve as pilot programs to test the feasibility of decentralized governance models, allowing for scalable implementation based on demonstrated success. However, the transition to a regionalized governance model should not be perceived as a panacea that will be readily embraced without resistance. The path toward meaningful decentralization is fraught with significant political, institutional, and cultural barriers. The central government, historically reluctant to relinquish authority, faces structural and political constraints that hinder its ability to "let go" of control over local affairs. Bureaucratic inertia, vested interests, and concerns over resource distribution inequalities further complicate the transition process. Moreover, the varying capacities of local authorities, particularly in peripheral and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, raise questions about their readiness to take on expanded responsibilities without adequate support and capacity building.

Additionally, the implementation of regional governance models must navigate complex inter-municipal dynamics, conflicting interests, and potential disparities between affluent and weaker municipalities. Without careful design and oversight, regionalization efforts risk exacerbating existing inequalities rather than bridging them. There is also the challenge of ensuring public buy-in; citizens may view regionalization as another layer of bureaucracy rather than a solution to local challenges, leading to potential opposition and skepticism.

Despite these challenges, a well-structured and incremental approach to regionalization remains a viable path forward. To achieve profound, systemic recovery and resilience, three central reforms are required—legislation, regional governance, and human resources development. These interconnected reforms aim to create an adaptive, efficient, and inclusive governance framework, balancing the need for local empowerment with the realities of national cohesion and control. The following sections outline these critical reforms in detail.

Legislation: The Enactment of a Basic Law: Local Government and Regional Governance

Israel's governance system has long been characterized by extreme centralization, a model that has increasingly proven inadequate in addressing the diverse and complex challenges faced by local and regional communities and national crises alike (Beeri, 2020). Centralization caused inefficiencies, inequitable resources, and overreliance on the central government (Abramzon-Brosh, Prawer and Ehrlich, 2023). October 7th events amplified these systemic vulnerabilities, revealing a deep rupture in the state-citizen social contract. The failure to ensure basic security and resilience at national, regional and local levels has necessitated a radical rethink of

governance structures, with decentralization emerging as a critical solution (Flug & Porat Hirsch, 2024; Taub Center, 2023; INSS, 2023).

Basic Law: Local Government and Regional Governance is crucial to this transformation. For the first time, such legislation would establish a formal foundation for local government and regional governance in Israel. It would enshrine the autonomy of local authorities and regional entities, empowering them to legislate, tax, plan, and implement policies while independently managing services—all within a framework aligned with national priorities. By incorporating the principle of subsidiarity, the law would decentralize decision-making, bringing it closer to communities and enhancing responsiveness and adaptability. Moreover, it would achieve a vital alignment between responsibility and the corresponding authority and resources, ensuring efficient governance. Additionally, the law would foster regional collaboration through structured clusters, facilitating resource sharing and coordinated planning to tackle cross-regional challenges effectively. These provisions resonate with the principles of New Regionalism, emphasizing multi-level governance, local empowerment, and resilience.

The proposed legislation is not only a response to structural inefficiencies but also a forward-looking measure to rebuild trust and strengthen the state's governance capacity in the wake of repeated national crises. The 'Day After' of October 7th presents a unique window of opportunity to enact these reforms to correct longstanding deficiencies. By empowering local governments, the Basic Law would create a more equitable, resilient, and adaptable governance framework, capable of addressing the complexities of contemporary Israeli society and its future challenges.

New Regionalism: Leading Principles for Regional Governance

The October 7th War underscored the urgent necessity for structural changes in Israel's governance framework. Existing centralized models, long critiqued for inefficiencies and limited adaptability, were exposed as inadequate in addressing the complex, multi-scalar crises that characterize the contemporary Israeli context. This has catalyzed a unique moment of opportunity to transform Israel's intergovernmental system through the principles of New Regionalism. Building on the evolving model of municipal clusters and regional collaborations, this transformation envisions a governance structure that emphasizes resilience, adaptability, and inclusivity, effectively addressing the challenges exposed by repeated national crises.

New Regionalism decentralizes decision-making, aligning it with regional and local needs. This shift is particularly relevant in the Israeli context, where regional disparities and socio-political fragmentation demand a tailored, place-based approach. Key principles of this framework include subsidiarity, collaborative governance, multi-stakeholder engagement, and adaptability. By institutionalizing these principles, New Regionalism seeks to empower regions as dynamic units capable of addressing localized challenges while contributing to broader national objectives.

The events of October 7th highlighted the critical need for adaptive governance structures capable of mobilizing localized responses to security, economic, and social challenges. Regional governance can bridge the gaps between central oversight and local implementation, fostering coordinated responses that leverage regional strengths and address cross-regional vulnerabilities. The proposed framework envisions clusters as semi-autonomous entities equipped with legislative authority, fiscal independence, and strategic planning capacities. These clusters would coordinate resource-sharing, infrastructure development, and public service delivery across municipalities, reducing inefficiencies and enhancing resilience to future crises.

New Regionalism emphasizes the integration of diverse sectors, government, civil society, and private entities—within regional governance frameworks. This multi-stakeholder approach fosters innovation and sustainability, aligning with Israel's broader policy goals. The regional authorities established post-October 7th – 'Minhelet Hatzafon' and 'Minhelet Tkuma' – demonstrate the potential of regional models to respond to crises effectively. The effectiveness of these regional authorities lies in their ability to provide tailored, locally driven responses that address the unique needs of affected communities more efficiently than centralized mechanisms. Their decentralized structure allows for faster decision-making, improved coordination among municipalities, and better resource allocation based on real-time local demands. Moreover, these models foster collaboration between local stakeholders, enhancing resilience and long-term recovery efforts by leveraging regional expertise and shared capabilities. However, these efforts must be formalized and expanded through comprehensive legislation to ensure consistency and accountability. However, these efforts must be formalized and expanded through comprehensive legislation to ensure consistency and accountability. Furthermore, it could be argued that instead of establishing 'Minhelet Hatzafon' and 'Minhelet Tkuma' as new entities, they should have been integrated into the existing inter-municipal clusters in these regions.

The proposed framework for New Regionalism in Israel offers a forward-looking response to governance challenges revealed by recent crises. This transformation is not merely a reaction to past failures but a proactive step toward a sustainable and inclusive governance paradigm.

The implementation and establishment of New Regionalism in Israel, in practice, should be guided by several key principles. This involves an integrated and gradual application of decentralization and New Regionalism principles, tailored differentially to meet the diverse needs of various regions. Specifically, the aim is to create functional regions encompassing the entire territory of Israel, with their establishment involving the unification of administrative boundaries, government districts, and national agency divisions.

A distinction should be made between four functional regions characterized by dense urban areas led by metropolitan cities—Jerusalem, Tel Aviv-Yafo, Haifa, and Be'er Sheva—and their surrounding cities, and more peripheral regions that include

medium-sized cities, local authorities, and regional councils. While the allocation of a local authority to a region would be mandatory, there should remain an element of municipal voluntarism in participating in regional projects and areas of regional service provision.

Regional governance would function as a managerial body, consisting of a lean headquarters staffed by a few dozen high-profile senior employees. It would act as a hub and platform for regional roundtables involving officials from the local authorities it encompasses. In essence, this body is not intended as a source of unnecessary job creation but as a strategic entity primarily tasked with planning, budgeting, and executing limited powers. Approximately 80% of its authorities, currently held by government ministries and national agencies, should be transferred to sub-national, local, and regional entities. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that many regional staff will be drawn from existing government and local employees.

Importantly, the rationale for the existence of a functional region is administrative, spatial, economic, and service-based, rather than political-representational. This means the region is not an additional political entity positioned above local authorities or between the central and local governments; it does not involve regional elections or a coalition-opposition representation system. Instead, a functional region would primarily be subordinate to the local authorities within it and the elected local political leadership, which would serve as its board of directors and rotate its leadership, akin to the cluster model. Nevertheless, this entity could serve as a critical bridge for mediating the interests of minorities and ethnic groups vis-à-vis the central government, enabling them to better realize their community and local rights, which are currently challenging to achieve under the existing system.

Capacity Building: Human Resources Reform

The implementation of New Regionalism and the establishment of a Basic Law for Local Government and Regional Governance are ambitious reforms that require complementary human resources reform to ensure their success. Without a skilled, capable, and strategically equipped workforce, these structural changes risk being undermined by inefficiencies and gaps in execution. National crises, such as those highlighted by the October 7th War, have exposed the critical need for well-trained leadership and operational capacity at the local and regional levels. This underscores the urgency of comprehensive human resources reform as a cornerstone for building resilience and adaptability in governance.

The reform enhances human capital through professionalization, leadership, and workforce planning. This initiative calls for a dual approach: on one hand, promoting advanced academic education, including relevant degrees and research studies, and on the other hand, establishing a nationwide training academy for public sector employees. The academy will provide specialized programs tailored to the unique needs of regional governance, emphasizing strategic planning, crisis management, inter-municipal collaboration, and financial oversight. This combination of

academic rigor and practical, on-the-job training is essential for equipping local and regional leaders with the comprehensive skill set required to meet the challenges of decentralization and regional governance.

Additionally, the reform prioritizes creating competitive recruitment and retention systems to attract and retain high-caliber professionals. This includes improving salaries, offering clear career pathways, and fostering a culture of innovation and accountability. Addressing existing salary disparities is critical to building a motivated workforce. Enhancing mobility within local government structures will further support talent retention and development.

The reform also seeks to balance governance structures within local governments by empowering council members and professional management, ensuring more equitable leadership dynamics. This will involve embedding strategic planning and accountability practices, alongside regular employee evaluations, to cultivate a culture of efficiency and self-regulation. Establishing a dedicated implementation unit to oversee these changes will ensure the reform's effective execution.

By aligning the quality of human resources with the expanded powers and responsibilities granted by the proposed reforms, this capacity-building initiative bridges the gap between policy and implementation. It ensures that local and regional authorities are not only structurally empowered but also operationally equipped to deliver high-quality services, foster regional resilience, and navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing governance landscape.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how crises—whether security, environmental, economic, democratic, or health-related—serve as pivotal moments that expose the limitations of centralized governance and create opportunities for transformative reform. The October 7th War stands as the ultimate crisis in Israel's recent history, accelerating the need for systemic changes in the governance structure. These events underscore the urgent necessity for a decentralized, resilient, and inclusive governance model, rooted in the principles of New Regionalism.

Despite progress in governance and New Regionalism, these crises alone cannot provide a solution. The evolution of governance in response to these challenges has been slow, fragmented, reactive, and incremental rather than a unified, planned, and coherent administrative, regulatory, and strategic initiative. The analysis has shown that a triad of reforms is essential to address these challenges: enacting a Basic Law to formalize the autonomy of local and regional authorities, institutionalizing regional governance structures to enhance collaboration and resource sharing, and investing in human resources to ensure the operational capacity of local and regional institutions. Together, these reforms present a holistic and sustainable pathway to address Israel's governance deficits and foster societal cohesion and adaptability.

Nevertheless, despite their potential, these reforms face challenges such as political resistance, fiscal constraints, and disparities between local authorities and regions. Addressing these obstacles requires sustained political commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and adaptive mechanisms to ensure equitable implementation.

The proposed transition from centralism to a regionalized governance model is not merely a response to current challenges but a strategic framework for the future. By empowering regions and local authorities, Israel can ensure more equitable service delivery, strengthen democratic participation, and build resilience to future crises. This shift represents a significant step toward restoring trust in public institutions and creating a governance system capable of addressing the complex realities of a dynamic and diverse society. Policymakers must act decisively to institutionalize these reforms, ensuring they are not relegated to reactive measures but are embedded as foundational elements of Israel's governance system. This transformative agenda represents an opportunity to rebuild trust, foster resilience, and secure a more inclusive and sustainable future. New Regionalism in Israel shows governance evolving through adversity, offering a blueprint for immediate needs and sustainable development. By committing to these reforms, Israel can transform crises into opportunities, ensuring a stronger, more cohesive, and resilient society for generations to come.

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