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Identity Politics and the Role of Religion in Israeli Politics

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Abstract

Israeli politics has been politics of conflict based on identity politics – the binding connection of the state of Israel and the Jewish state. The most distinctive conflict is between secular Jews and the Ultra-Orthodox community. The Ultra-Orthodox is a minority group fighting for its status in Israeli society, although it has tremendous political power. Ultra-Orthodox parties have always used religious issues as a catalyst to gain political power, and in the last two decades secular politicians have moved to capitalize on anti-religious sentiment among secular Israeli Jews. The main issue in debate is the demand that Ultra-Orthodox religious males would not serve in the military draft, as the exemption from military service became a key tool in the building of the community. The research examines the social and political divisions of the role of religion in the identity and culture of the Jewish state and the political implications of this identity struggle. It is argued that the political history of Israel has proved that Ultra-Orthodox parties have constantly used religious identity issues to maintain their political power through politics of conflict.

Keywords: Ultra-Orthodox, Social Identity, Religious Identity, Israel, political influence.

INTRODUCTION

Identity politics has always been a prominent subject in Israel. The term identity politics as it is implemented in Israel is widely used to describe the division of the internal factions that insist that they represent Israel's best interests. With the influential political role of

Ultra-Orthodox communities, the Israeli political system has become a source of public debate over the role of religion in the social, cultural and political environment of the country. The agenda of the interest groups that promote their traditional culture is based on religion, with the result that the minority community of Ultra-Orthodox has succeeded to influence and determine the undivided connection between political influence and religious control over the social and cultural life of all citizens.

Guided by the social identity theory, the research argues that political conduct involves competition between social groups, since people are more likely to cooperate with members of their own social identity than with other individuals. The theory focuses on how group memberships guide intergroup behavior and influence individual's self-concept. Hogg, Adelman and Blagg (2009) characterized religions as a social group which a person identifies with, subscribes to its ideology and conforms to its normative practices. Social identity is people's sense of who they are based on their group membership, and a social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category (Turner et al. 1987).

As originally formulated by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), the social identity theory introduced the concept of intergroup behavior. They proposed that individuals define their own identities about social groups and that such identifications work to protect and bolster self-identity. Social identities are most influential when individuals consider membership in a group to be central to their self-concept and they feel strong emotional ties to the group. The theory is associated with religious beliefs in group processes and intergroup relations. Originally introduced as an account of intergroup relations, it was significantly extended to focus on issues related to religious grouping, including group norms and leadership. Tajfel (1978) proposed that groups give a sense of social identity and belonging to a group. Once members of the group adopt its identity categorize themselves as belonging to the group, they tend to compare that group with other groups. With this powerful social connection, groups can organize around religious identities to establish powerful political forces – as is the case for the Ultra-Orthodox community in Israel.

The use of identity politics by Ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel can be explained according to the social identity theory and the principle of group identity. The theory provides a firm theoretical ground for exploring religious social identity as an explanatory mechanism for associations between religious participation and better psychological well-being (Park, 2007). Tajfel (1978) proposed that the groups which people belong to are an important source of pride and self-esteem, giving the members a sense of social identity and belonging. Since individuals who identify with a particular social group tend to be associated with their religious community, this support may foster political outcomes (Lim & Putnam, 2009).

As proposed by the research, religious social identity provides a system of guiding beliefs and symbols and can be considered as a powerful force that can determine political processes. The core of the identity policy that dominates the Israeli political spectrum involves the founding objectives of the Jewish state – the connection between statehood and religion. Most of the Jewish population support the links between religion and state and the role of religion and tradition in the public sphere. Most Israelis support the meaning of a "Jewish state" and accept the official stance of the state, which supports Orthodox conversion only. Most Israelis also believe that country can be both a Jewish state that observes religious law and a modern democratic country and feel that they live in accordance with Jewish values. But the conflict of identities regarding the role of religion in Israeli society is demonstrated in the definition the country. Most of those who defined themselves as Ultra-Orthodox identify themselves as Jews first, while most of the secular identify themselves as Israelis first (Arian, 2009).

Based on the social identity theory, this research examines the relationship between religion and politics in Israel. According to the theory, religion supplies tradition based on identity-supporting content and sense of belonging, and the research argues that the binding connection between politics and religion has long identified Israel, as the profound connection between religion and identity is related to a cultural construction which provides an essential basis of social identity of the Ultra-Orthodox community.

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Politics has traditionally been associated with religion. Scholars have argued for the deep connection between politics and religion as it is implemented through identity politics. More than a century ago, Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) made the classic assertion that religious beliefs and social practices are both a group- and individual-level phenomenon. According to Urbinati and Zampagione (2016), because of their all-embracing character, ideologies often live in a religious belonging power. Olson (2011) found that scholars across disciplines have commented widely on the vital role of culture to understand the relations between religion and politics. Looking at the political system in Israel, Maoz and Henderson (2020) explain that religion is often manipulated by political elites to advance their principal goal of political survival. They propose that when religious and political institutions are closely allied, they can create symbols that become a bone of contention between different segments of society.

The research examines the role of religion in the identity and culture of the Jewish state and the political implications of this identity struggle. The examination is based on the findings of the social identity theory about the importance of group identity. The theory found that people categorize themselves as belonging to certain groups and showed how group memberships guide intergroup behavior. The belief system inherent in religion can explain why members associate themselves with their religious group and the theory recognizes that people's individual characteristics and their group memberships play a significant role in shaping attitudes, values, beliefs and behavior (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987). As demonstrated here, based on the power of religion grouping to gain political influence, religious identity serves as a powerful mechanism that is changing the social characteristics of Israeli society.

Israel is the 99th most populous country in the world. It is the only state with a Jewish majority and the connection of identity and religion is evident in that Israeli Jews are largely united on the need for their nation to be a homeland for Jews. Israeli Jews overall are more religious than U.S. Jews – the second largest Jewish community in the world, because American Jews are mostly Conservative while Orthodox Jews make up a greater share of the population in Israel.

Jews in Israel identify with one of four major religious subgroups: secular, traditional, religious and Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox). According to Jewish Virtual Library, the population statistics of Israel for 2020 show that of Israeli Jews, 43% self-identify as secular, 22% as traditional and 13% as traditional-religious. The largest growing community is the Ultra-Orthodox. According to Central Bureau of Statistics population projections, the number of Haredim reached one million in 2017, representing 12% of the population, and the Haredi sector is projected to comprise 16% of the total population by 2030. Ultra-Orthodox Jews as percentage of population grow steadily - from 10% in 2009 to 11% in 2014 and 12% in 2017. The community has birth rates well above the rest of the nation – Ultra–Orthodox women in Israel have 7.7 children on average, compared to 2.6 children among other Jewish women. They could constitute a third of all citizens and 40% of the Jewish population in 2065. Kingsbury (2020) explains that with a fertility rate that nearly triples the national average and increased political power that accompanies demographic growth, Ultra-Orthodox Jews are becoming an influential social group that can enforce its religious identity in Israel's social and political structures.

The differences in religious commitment among subgroups of Israeli Jews are reflected in their religious beliefs and practices. According to a survey by Pew Research Center (2016), nearly all Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox observe all or most of the Jewish religious tradition, while secular Israelis consistently show lower levels of adherence to Jewish customs and traditions. This is where the conflict of religious identity is dominant. Since by law there is no separation between the state and religion, religious control over the life of the general society is particularly notable. The dominance of extreme religious laws that represent the binding role of religion in the life of every Israeli is achieved due to the political power of the Ultra-Orthodox parties. Although they represent only minority of the population, Ultra-Orthodox are in position to bring down the government if their demands are not met, and governments have historically relied on them to assemble majority coalitions.

Identity politics by Ultra-Orthodox parties is related to the extreme role of religious faith. The Haredi leadership lives in a state of threat from spiritual, social, cultural and political phenomena that surrounds the community. These basic assumptions lead the

community in all life aspects: clothing, education, marriage matchmaking and even language. The cultural segregation and sectorial coherency of the community are aimed to protect Jewish culture from western culture and secularism (Cohen, 2006). The community choose to separate itself from mainstream Israeli society, in residential patterns (living in separate neighborhoods), in education (separate educational streams), symbolically, (distinct dress and customs), in cultural life (literature and media unique to the community), in a separate organizational structure, and in the area of political leadership (Israel Democracy Institute, 2018). The religious and ideological gap between the Haredi society and the general society distanced the community from other sectors. Many people in the Ultra-Religious sector live below the poverty line, and the average income level of Ultra-Orthodox workers is 62 % that of other workers. But despite their cultural segregation, the sector has great political influence and thus many young members of the community do not serve in the army and learn Torah with their salary paid by the government.

In examining the role of religion in Israeli politics according to the social identity theory, it is argued that the political history of Israel has proved that Ultra-Orthodox parties assumed political power through identity politics, using it as a vehicle to gain and maintain their political influence and power in the Knesset – the Israeli parliament. The Ultra-Orthodox parties have a significant role through identity politics. Traditionally, the Haredi community members vote as a bloc according to directives of their chief rabbis, and thus have tremendous influence in determining who will form Israel's collation governments. Identity religious politics has been intensified by the growth of the Ultra-Orthodox party politics: in the elections to the 22nd Knesset (2019), the Ultra-Orthodox parties gained 13.5% of all votes, compared with 8.2% in the 1992 elections (Israel Democracy Institute, 2019). The growing power of religious conceptions can be linked to demographic shifts that have widened the basis of voting behavior over the decades. The rate of demographic growth among the Ultra-Orthodox population is the most rapid among all populations in developed countries, including in Israel. With identity politics Ultra-Orthodox parties enjoy very strong representation in local government too - stronger even than in the Knesset (State Comptroller Report, 2015). The significant

representation can be attributed to high voter turnout among the Ultra-Orthodox population and low voter turnout among the general population in local elections (Blander, 2008; Malach, 2018). Strong representation of Ultra-Orthodox parties in local government is also because the interests of the community are more prominent in local elections than in national elections (Ben-Bassat, Dahan and Klar, 2013).

The influential role of religious identity in politics is since Israeli political system is based on the principle of proportional representation and Haredim vote is committed to their identity party politics. At election time, votes from the entire country are tallied up and parties are represented in the Knesset in direct proportion to the percentage of votes received. This system facilitates the presence of many small parties and makes it virtually impossible for any one party to muster the 61 seats (out of 120) required to pass legislation and to govern. The resulting need to form coalitions comprised of several parties gives disproportionate power to smaller parties that can make or break a potential coalition. Religious parties have been partners in almost every coalition, largely because their primary concerns have not centered on crucial foreign or economic policy, but rather on the religious nature of the state. This made the religious parties' convenient partners who sought only to safeguard religious interests and guarantee that the state would maintain a Jewish character.

Since Israel has been ruled by coalition governments and no political party has ever had a parliamentary majority, the Ultra-Orthodox parties are important players in coalition building and party politics and this gives them important leverage and political power disproportionate to their size. These parties have had a central role in Israeli politics, maintaining a balance between the left-wing and the right-wing blocs, and their influence has far exceeded their relative size. This instrumental influence may raise a red flag however, since the idea of religious identity as a driving force behind intergroup conflict can lead to fundamentalism, as competition between social identities might be resolved by one identity asserting dominance over the others (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Fisher (2016) explains that fundamentalist movements that participate in secular political systems can gain prominent political positions that allow them to impose their extreme ideology on the entire society. In the case of

Israeli Haredim, he found that the more political power that fundamentalists accrue the stronger is their tendency to promote their religious agenda. Looking at the fundamental principles of their political policies, Haredi parties are focused on sectorial concerns, not showing much interest in external political issues, but they have important political support for the government. They have been in almost every government and succeeded in exploiting their power over legislation regarding issues relevant to religion, state, and budgets (Shalev, 2019). As a result, creating changes about the status quo governing religious practice is very difficult to achieve, and repeated legislative efforts to weaken the power of smaller parties have largely been unsuccessful. Given the deep sensitivity towards religion-state issues in Israel, mainstream parties and politicians have favored the "status quo" on such issues, rather than attempting any changes (The Jewish Federations of America, 2017).

RELIGION AND STATE

One of the main issues that identity politics research has looked at is the relations between religion and state. Kuo (2017) explains that issues of identity and nationhood have combined as a pervasive organizing theme in democratic politics. As social identity provides a system of guiding beliefs and symbols, religion identification offers distinctive functions of group membership (Yesseldyk, Anisman and Matheson, 2010). But social identities do not exist in isolation, and religious identification might interact with other identities (Muldoon et al., 2007; Shechtman & Tanus, 2006; Simon & Ruhs, 2008; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007).

The issue of dual identities of religious and nationalism has identified Israeli politics since the establishment of the country. The ethno-religious conceptions of state and nationhood were built into the Zionism's objective of creating a "state of the Jews", highlighting the important role played by collective threats (Fritsche, Jonas and Kessler, 2011). The perceptions of existential threats that identify Israel have been dominated by prevailing view that the country is facing existential threats, with the ultimate objective of its enemies to bring about the destruction of the "Jewish state." (Heler (2019). The central role of Jewish history in the construction of Israeli and Jewish identity was followed by deep sense of insecurity that was built into

the Jewish-Israeli collective experience of the ongoing conflict with its neighbors. This conception reinforced the role of religion in Israeli society and culture (Zerubavel, 1995), while the challenge of state-building and absorbing successive waves of new immigrants meant that religious challenges received scant attention from the public and policymakers (Kimberling, 2001). In the last decades, religious parties adopted an ideological position of Israel as a nation-state based on religion, with a dominant perception of the right-wing sphere of the Israeli public, as they shifted the entire discourse of the right-wing bloc which advocates for increased nationalism and religious extremism (Talshir, 2019).

Israeli politics is a perfect example for identity politics based on religion. With the dominance of religious groups, there is no constitution that separates between religion and state. The country is defined in its Basic Laws as a Jewish and Democratic state, and the origins of this definition is in the Declaration of Independence (1948), which states that Israel is a 'Jewish state'. The Law of return (1950) declares the Jewishness of the State, open to the 'return' of all Jews. According to the Law of the Rabbinical Courts (1953), all Jewish Israelis must marry and divorce according to the rule of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, even though most Israeli Jews do not practice Orthodox Judaism. Other sectors of Judaism have no legal authority in relation to the Israeli state and must meet the Orthodox criteria used by the Chief Rabbinate to define Jewish identity. Miller (2014) explains that with such close relationship between religion and politics, this connection becomes integral to the state's political identity. Israel is a unique structure, which protects religious freedom but rejects separating religion and state, and the Orthodox Jewish Rabbinate officially dictates many matters of family law.

The important role played by identity politics of Israel as a Jewish state has been demonstrated in the policy advocated by the right-wing bloc to pass a law that legally identified Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. The Basic Law: Israel - the Nation State of the Jewish People, was passed by the Knesset on July 19, 2018. The law determines that the Land of Israel is the historical homeland of the Jewish people; the State of Israel is the nation state of the Jewish People, in which it realizes its natural, cultural, religious and historical right to self-determination; and that exercising the right to national self-determination in the State of

Israel is unique to the Jewish People. The law also deals with the State's symbols and official language, the status of Jerusalem, the State's connection with the Jewish People and the Ingathering of Exiles.

The triumph of the political identity of the right-wing bloc and the religious communities provides a testimony to the superiority of the Basic Law over other laws. As explained by the Knesset transcripts, because the law is the product of the Knesset acting as the Constituent Assembly and the definition of a "basic law", one may conclude that it is constitutionally superior. But although the law represents a clear ideological discourse, the research attempts to understand the need of the government to adopt a policy of religious identity in redefining an already existing shared national identity of the connection between religion and state.

The research assumes different conclusions as advocated by scholars that investigated religious national identities. Awan (2008) argues that transitions to fundamentalist religion is predicted by socioeconomic deprivation, political disaffection, and impaired constructions of identity. According to Rieffer (2003), the development of religious national identities often entails the identification of "alien others" who are portrayed as a threat to the vitality of the nation. Simon (2008) found that the implications for social integration of politicization driven by dual identification can lead to the shift from involvement in normative politics to radicalization. As Laurence and Vaïsse (2006) explain, religion and national identity commonly contributes to perceptions of religious minorities as disloyal and unwilling to adopt the values and customs of the national community. McGregor, Reeshma, & So-Jin (2008) explain that according to social identity theory, individuals should be more inclined to identify with groups if they experience a sense of uncertainty. According to Wellman & Tokuno, 2004), religious identity threat could be perceived as paramount and can build the politics of identity more than any other force.

The research examines the same question according to the Israeli case. Alonso (2008) looks at the Jewish State at a definition that unites national character and the belonging to a religious community in one single term – the only case in which religion defines the boundaries of just one geographically dispersed national community. Ben-Porat (2013)

argues that religion remains instrumental to the national discourse, although ethnic groups hold different perceptions of religion and attach different importance to religious rituals. Leon (2014) found that fundamentalist religious interpretation of elements of Israeli national identity seeks to view Jewish law as a source for the conservation and maintenance of Jewish identity. Lehmann (2012) explains that the political struggle leads the state to favor Ultra-Orthodox observance and criteria of belonging, even though that is a minority strand in the country. Yadgar (2020) argues that the lack of a political definition of Jewishness in a state that is premised exactly on the notion that Jewishness is a matter of political identity. He maintains that Zionist ideologues could not give a proper alternative to the religious framework from which they were seeking to break free, and the state failed to tackle this problem. Instead, he says, it tasked the rabbis with the role of "national gatekeepers", confirming the rabbis' insistence on what secularist discourse sees as primitive notions of religion in the understanding of Jewish identity. Smocha (2002) examined the model of ethnic democracy of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. According to him, contrary to its self-image and international reputation as a Western liberal democracy, Israel is an ethnic democracy in which the Jews appropriate the state and make it a tool for advancing issues like national security and culture while extending various kinds of rights to its Arab citizens who are perceived as a threat.

Another explanation for the extreme role of religious identity in the national heritage and political system is that traditionally religious fundamentalism comes as a response to a modern threat (Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, 2003) and the answer of Israel's Ultra-Orthodox to the crisis of modernity is primarily focused around increased isolation in closed communities, thereby protecting Jewish identity from global influences (Zandberg, 2018). Sharabi (2014) describes Haredi as being in competition with the modern world and maintaining a belligerent ideology. In their battle between modernity and secularism, the Haredi community have successfully maintained political influence (Etinger and Leon, 2018).

In examining the way Ultra-Orthodox Jews view the character of the country as a source of Jewish roots, it can be concluded that religion is granted excessive role in the public and private spheres of Israeli society. Former Knesset Member, Yossi Yona (2012) explains

that Israel's national definition derives its symbols, flag and the national anthem from religious sources. Jewish religion plays a crucial role in Israel's Basic Law of Return, which recognizes the right of Jews worldwide to become citizens of the state provided that their mothers are Jewish or that they converted to Judaism and belong to no other religious affiliation. Religious courts are granted almost full monopoly over the determination of personal status (marriage, divorce, alimony, maintenance, burials and conversions), and religious restrictions are imposed in many fields of life, including the operation of the means of public transportation on Sabbath and other holy days. This situation reflects a broader conflict with secular segments, because the Ultra-Orthodox run a separate network of schools, support large families on taxpayer-funded handouts and enforce a public status quo that has enraged the secular majority (Ketchell, 2019).

According to the above conclusions on the employment of the shared national identity of the connection between religion and state, the research maintains that the success of Ultra-Orthodox political influence on religion and state relations is related to the consistent commitment to sectorial issues. The successful implementation of religious identity is compatible with an inescapable conclusion drawn from decades of political behavior research, that group identities are central to politics (Huddy 2003). However, the political effects of national identity depend on its meaning (Wong 2010), as group identification is typically more pronounced among members of minority than majority groups (Brewer, 1991). Looking at the political strategies of religious communities in their identity struggles, we can see that traditionally Judaism was deemed socially significant in identity-based struggles for recognition and claim that the modern cultural and religious pluralism is part of a broader system of class reproduction (Kaplan and Werczberger, 2015). The traditional Ultra-Orthodox religious politics objects to modern issues that are crucial in shaping political discourse and changing the electoral arena worldwide. It is based on fundamental cultural and religious issues that Israel was founded on, while objecting to modern aspects of globalization, including global politics, global economy, global culture and global technology – issues that Israel as a high-tech nation cannot ignore.

CONCLUSION

The research examines the relations between religious and politics in Israel based on the social identity theory and the use of religion as a tool for identity politics by the minority group of the Ultra-Orthodox community. According to the theory, individuals can develop two principal identities: a personal self, which encompasses unique, idiosyncratic information about themselves, and a collective self, which encompasses information about the groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1978). Berger (1967) explained that "it is clear that religion is intimately bound up with people's identity, their sense of who they 'really' are". According to Hobsbawm (1989), the core idea of identity groups is that the members are about themselves, for themselves, and nobody else (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell, 1987). The Ultra-Orthodox is a minority group fighting for its status in Israeli society and the religious and ideological gap between them and the general society has distanced the community from other sectors. The most distinctive and on-going identity conflict is between secular Jews and the Ultra-Orthodox community, and this conflict creates a major constant political debate. But although Ultra-Orthodox are segmented from the general population, they have a lot of political influence. Since the community grows swiftly and maintains its social identity status, it has tremendous political influence through identity politics. Members of the community use the political support of Ultra-Orthodox parties, which maintain a high level of representation in the government. The main influence of the community is in maintaining communal advantages and the binding connection between the Jewish religion and heritage and the state of Israel through their political power.

The integration of the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) sector into the general Israeli society has been at the center of public debate for decades and this issue has now moved to the top of the political agenda. The trigger for the last three consecutive elections held in Israel (two in 2019 and one in 2020) was the role of the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community in modern life. A debate over whether Ultra-Orthodox Jews should be exempt from mandatory military service was heated with the fatal result that no government could be established after the April 2019 election, sending Israelis back to the polls in September, for the second time in the same year, and for the

third time in March 2020. It was only due to the Coronavirus epidemic that a new government was established, although the pressing issue of military draft was not resolved. The paper predicts that the social, political and religious conflict that identifies Israel since its establishment is going to continue with full force in the years to come, since it serves the social aspirations and the political interests of different parties.

The main political argument is the demand that young members of the Ultra-Orthodox community would not serve in the army and learn Torah with their salary paid by the government. This issue has provoked a major political crisis, since secular groups claim that there is a correlation between the low rate of employment of Ultra-Orthodox men and the low rate of army service. Thus, the conclusion of the research is that the divide between secular and Haredi society would continue to widen because of the bridges that have been built between the Haredi world and the rest of Israeli society. No legitimate debate is possible so long the Ultra-Orthodox parties use identity politics and one-sided portrayal of the fundamental cultural and religious issues that make up the Israel society. As the research claims, there are many issues about the role of the Haredi community in modern Israeli life that need to be debated, but no compromise can be reached because the social bridge between secular and Ultra-Orthodox identities serves their social and political goals.

The main conclusion of this study is that Israeli politics has been politics of conflict and was widely used by different parties to gain political influence. Looking at the Israeli case, it can be concluded that although the country can be considered a liberal democracy, it is not a secular democracy, since religious political parties are structurally part of the democratic system and there is no separation between State and religion.

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