Examining the Challenges Faced by the Conflict of Religion and Nationalism in Israeli Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between politics, religion, and identity within Israeli society, with a particular focus on the ultra-Orthodox community and its exemption from military service. The study investigates the historical and contemporary dynamics shaping Israeli politics, highlighting the tensions between secular and religious ideologies. It explores the impact of the "religious status quo" on societal norms and government policies, emphasizing the ongoing struggle to balance religious freedoms with the demands of a diverse population. Examining the Draft Law, which pertains to exemptions for young ultra-Orthodox individuals from military service, the paper elucidates the conflicting narratives surrounding national defense, religious tradition, and societal cohesion. It analyzes the evolving role of religion in Israeli politics and its implications for governance, citizenship, and social cohesion. Through a multidisciplinary approach to social analysis, the paper offers insights into the complexities of Israeli society. It underscores the challenges posed by competing ideologies, demographic shifts, and geopolitical realities, calling for nuanced policy solutions that reconcile religious diversity with national unity. The paper contributes to scholarly discussions on religion, politics, and ideology formation, providing an overview of the religious-secular divide in Israeli society and offering recommendations for addressing the tensions inherent in the intersection of religion and state. The paper serves as a valuable resource for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners seeking to understand the complexities of Israeli politics and society. It sheds light on the enduring tensions between tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, and nationalism and pluralism, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities facing Israeli democracy in the 21st century.

Keywords: *ultra-Orthodox, community, politics, culture, Israel*

INTRODUCTION

Although the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel represents a growing and insular population, little research has been done exploring the nature of parenting beliefs in this community (Ganz, 2023). The ultra-Orthodox community has experienced notable growth and evolution across multiple spheres, including demographics, politics, culture, and community involvement. These shifts have influenced various segments of Israeli society, prompting discussions on the challenges they present. Changes within the community are evident in areas such as consumption habits, employment dynamics, entrepreneurial initiatives, educational pursuits, and levels of civic participation. With these developments and the anticipated further expansion of the ultra-Orthodox community, there remains a persistent necessity for thorough research and public dialogue concerning the diverse issues it encompasses.

Israeli politics has been marked by conflict centered on ideology, particularly regarding the relationship between the state and its identity as a Jewish state. This conflict is the result of differing interpretations and visions of what it means for Israel to be a Jewish state, as well as how this ideology should influence its political, social, and cultural landscape. This conflict over ideology manifests in various political debates and policies, including issues related to religion and state, national symbols, language policies, immigration, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It influences political alliances and voting patterns, as well as public discourse and social movements within Israeli society.

The assertion is that Israel's political history demonstrates the consistent use of religious ideological issues by ultra-Orthodox parties to maintain political power through a politics of conflict. Despite being a minority, the ultra-Orthodox wield significant political influence. In the past two decades, ultra-Orthodox parties have strategically utilized religious issues to gain political power, while secular politicians have capitalized on anti-

religious sentiments among secular Israeli Jews. The primary point of contention lies in the demand for exemptions from military service for ultra-Orthodox religious males, a policy that has profoundly impacted the community.

The study scrutinizes the intricate relationship between politics and religion, focusing on Israel's dual identity as both a Jewish and democratic state. It explores the social and political divisions stemming from the role of religion in shaping the ideology and culture of the Jewish state, examining the political ramifications of the ongoing identity struggle. The study aims to shed light on the most pressing issue in Israeli politics and social relations – the service of young religious who study Tora in the military. This is a key area of contention that revolves around the divide between secular Jews and the ultra-Orthodox community, which has become the central issue of debate following the October 7 2023 attack on southern Israel and the growing security needs.

POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Political ideology presents significant challenges for social analysts, as it involves guiding beliefs that shape both individual choices and communal actions. Ideologies play a crucial role in shaping how people perceive the world around them and influence the decisions they make at both individual and collective levels. Nevertheless, political ideologies pose social conflicts, since these are complex and multifaceted systems of thought that allow various views on economic policies, social norms, cultural values, and governance. Bhambra and Margree (2010) contend that ideology often fosters the creation of exclusive political coalitions based on shared characteristics like religion, race, class, gender, culture, sexual orientation, or disability.

There is a wide diversity of political ideologies ranging from liberalism and conservatism to socialism, anarchism, and fascism, among others. Each ideology comes with its own set of beliefs, which may overlap or conflict with those of other ideologies. This diversity adds layers of complexity to the analysis of political phenomena. Heywood (2007) delineates core ideological values as a framework for envisioning a better future and constructing a more just society. Ikenberry (2018). introduces ideological tenets linked to cultural norms, including public morality, traditions, regulations, continuity, prudence, reform, acknowledgment of imperfections, liberty, ownership, voluntary community participation, limited governmental authority, and a balance between progress and tradition.

Political ideologies evolve in response to changing social, economic, and cultural conditions. New ideologies may emerge, existing ideologies may adapt, and the relative popularity of different ideologies may shift over time. Gjorshoski (2016) explains that aspects of ideology are related to democratic ideals, such as upholding the democratic system, safeguarding citizens' rights and liberties, and promoting public morality. political ideology presents challenges for social analysts due to its complexity, diversity, dynamic nature, influence on behavior, and interaction with other social factors

There is a fundamental tension that exists within political theory and practice on the complex issue of ideologies. These tensions refer to a set of beliefs, values, and principles that shape an individual's or a group's understanding of politics and government, and include varying ideas about the proper role of the state, the distribution of power, economic systems, social justice, and more. The tension highlights the difference between practical politics and political ideology, mainly due to the wide range of broad ideas, like liberalism, conservatism, and socialism, or more specific ideas, such as libertarianism, feminism, or nationalism. On the other hand, practical politics involves the day-to-day realities of governing, which often require compromise, negotiation, and adaptation to changing circumstances. As a result, politicians and policymakers must navigate complex and dynamic political landscapes, making decisions that may not always align perfectly with their ideological beliefs but are deemed necessary for achieving practical goals or maintaining stability.

Although political ideology is a collection of ideas about the preferred form of government, the historical tension between the power and consistency of ideology and the pragmatism and flexibility of practical politics is a recurring theme in political theory. Bhambra and Margree (2010) argue that the challenge with identity politics lies in how the traditional concept of identity supplants practical politics. They contend that effective practical politics should acknowledge that the identity of a political group arises in response to a specific situation, and maintaining the identity claim becomes obsolete when the underlying need is no longer present. Gjorshoski (2016) highlights the nature of political ideology, which he considered "the most elusive concept in the whole of social science. " As he explains, ideologies identify themselves based on their position on the political spectrum while also conflicting with other crucial issues within their political camp.

RELIGIOUS IDEOLOGY

In the absence of a formal constitution, the interplay between religious and political spheres has been governed by a historical agreement known as the "religious status quo." This arrangement signifies a political understanding between secular and religious factions, committing not to alter communal arrangements regarding religious matters in a largely secular society. The status quo model recognizes the primacy of religious demands in certain domains, reflecting a societal and political compromise rather than a principled decision. This model continues to wield influence in Israeli society today, underscoring the conflicting identities of the secular and religious communities. The unique structure it represents safeguards religious freedom while rejecting the complete separation of religion and state (Ettinger and Leon, 2018). The persistence of the religious status quo exemplifies the ideology conflict between the secular majority and the ultra-Orthodox minority regarding the role of religion in society, encapsulated in the decision to maintain a comprehensive political compromise rather than making a definitive choice.

The reference to the compromise on the religious status quo during Israel's political system illustrates the intersection of academic research and practical politics. In the face of challenges related to state-building and the absorption of new immigrants, policymakers prioritized maintaining stability and cohesion by giving minimal attention to contentious religious issues (Zandberg. 2018). This historical example underscores how real-world political considerations can shape decision-making processes, often in alignment with the insights provided by academic research.

The tension surrounding the ideology of a Jewish state reflects deeper divisions and debates about the country's historical legacy, future direction, and the rights and status of its diverse population (Leon, 2014). Although the notion of a Jewish state is central to its founding principles and national identity, the interpretation of this concept varies widely among different segments of Israeli society. This conflict emphasizes the importance of maintaining Jewish cultural and religious traditions, preserving Hebrew as the national language, and ensuring a Jewish majority population. Others see it as inclusive of Israel's diverse population, including Arab citizens, and advocate for a more secular understanding of the state's Jewish identity (Kimmerling, 2001).

While the ultra-Orthodox community remains largely isolated from mainstream Israeli society, its significant political clout stems from its strong religious commitment. This prompts consideration of whether this political impasse can persist amidst ongoing social changes within Israel. This examination corresponds with studies on the status quo, as religious factions have adopted an ideological position framing Israel as a religiously grounded nation-state. This change in rhetoric promotes heightened nationalism and religious extremism within the broader right-wing segment of Israeli society (Talshir, 2019).

The ultra-Orthodox community illustrates the tension between religious traditionalism and modernity. This deeply devout group, committed to upholding traditional values like gender segregation, faces the dilemma of integrating into mainstream society while remaining faithful to its religious principles. Fundamental aspects of life within the Haredi community, such as attire, education, marriage customs, and language usage, are deeply influenced by entrenched traditions. Historically, the community has resisted secular communication channels, avoiding mediums like radio, television, and computers.

Despite their resistance to certain technological advancements, the Haredi community has struggled to resist the pervasive influence of the internet and mobile phones. The need to interact with the modern world, especially concerning issues like living conditions, healthcare, social welfare, and income, has compelled Haredi leaders to navigate a delicate balance between adopting elements of contemporary society and preserving their unique way of life. This delicate balance has resulted in intriguing contradictions, such as Haredi political factions participating in government alliances despite the religious divergence of the community from the secular majority (Sharabi, 2014).

The religious status quo, established by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, aimed to address the broader tension between civil law and Jewish religious law through various measures. These included designating Shabbat as the official day of rest, aligning family law with Jewish law, ensuring government-supported institutions adhered to kosher standards, and granting the ultra-Orthodox community autonomy over its educational institutions. However, these compromises have presented challenges, such as the lack of public transportation on Shabbat disproportionately affecting those without cars. Issues like marriage and divorce were subject to Orthodox Jewish law, affecting inter-faith and same-sex couples. Additionally, the exemption of young ultra-Orthodox individuals from military service has exacerbated existing disparities (Malchi, 2018).

Religion continues to wield significant influence in Israeli politics due to the deeply rooted religious convictions prevalent among the ultra-Orthodox community. Initially confined to religious circles with common objectives

and met with secular indifference, religious involvement in politics has gradually evolved into a politicized compromise known as the status quo, enabling the government to navigate between secular and religious interests (Ben-Porat, 2013). Within this compromised framework, religion exerts a pervasive influence across both public and private spheres of Israeli society. Illustrated by religious underpinnings, the Basic Law of Return underscores the central role of Jewish faith in determining citizenship. Religious courts, holding a monopoly over personal status matters, and imposing religious constraints contribute to tensions with secular segments. Additionally, the ultra-Orthodox community's distinct school network, reliance on state funding, and insistence on upholding a religious status quo further exacerbate divisions with the secular majority (Ketchell, 2019).

The different conceptions of religious and nationalistic affiliations have been integral to Israeli society since its inception. Religion has been a cornerstone of Jewish identity and it continues to hold significance. Many aspects of Israeli society, culture, and governance are influenced by Jewish religious traditions, laws, and beliefs. For a significant portion of Israelis, their religious identity is central to their sense of self and community. This religious ideology encompasses various denominations within Judaism, including Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism, each with its practices and interpretations of Jewish law (Lehmann, 2012).

Nationalism, particularly Zionism, has been another defining aspect of Israeli society. Zionism emerged in the late 19th century as a political and ideological movement advocating for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in the historic Land of Israel. It aimed to unite Jews worldwide under a common national identity and promote Jewish self-determination. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 realized the aspirations of the Zionist movement, providing a homeland for Jews from around the world and solidifying the nationalistic identity of Israeli society (Fisher, 2016).

Zionism's aim to establish a "state of the Jews," propelled by collective anxieties, embedded ethno-religious notions of statehood and nationhood (Fritsche, Jonas, and Kessler, 2011). Perceptions of existential threats, perpetuated by ongoing conflicts with neighboring states, have reinforced the societal role of religion, fostering a collective sense of vulnerability (Zerubavel, 1995). The persistent challenges of nation-building and assimilating waves of immigrants have relegated religious matters to the fringes of public and policymaker attention (Kimberling, 2001).

These two conceptions of religion and nationalism intersect and overlap in Israeli society. For many Israelis, being Jewish encompasses both a religious and a nationalistic dimension, with a strong attachment to the land of Israel and a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. However, there are also tensions and complexities inherent in navigating the relationship between religious and nationalistic identities. For example, debates arise over the role of religion in public life, the status of non-Jewish minority groups, and the balance between Jewish religious law and democratic principles in governance.

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THE DRAFT LAW

The central issue dominating debates in Israeli politics revolves around the Draft Law, which primarily concerns the exemption of young members of the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) community from military service. The contentious argument centers on the demand that these individuals be allowed to dedicate their time to Torah study, with their expenses covered by the government. This issue has sparked a significant political crisis, and secular groups contend that the low rate of employment among ultra-Orthodox men correlates with their exemption from army service (Kingsbury, 2020).

Haredi leaders justify these draft exemptions by emphasizing the value of Torah study, which they believe safeguards the Jewish people from spiritual and physical extinction. They argue that military service poses a threat to their religious culture and way of life (Yadgar, 2020). Initially, the exemption was granted to a small fraction of strictly religious communities. However, the ultra-Orthodox community has since grown rapidly, with approximately 80,000 young men now exempt from military service.

This social and political struggle highlights the clash between different narratives within society. While secular and national religious communities endorse the principle of a people's army, the Haredi community views Torah

study as central to its identity and seeks exemption from military service to maintain its distinct way of life (Sharabi, 2014). However, opposition among secular and national religious alike claims that equal burden sharing is necessary to balance the growing feeling among the Israeli middle class that the increasing tax burden falls mostly on its shoulders they are required to maintain an entire community that does not participate in burden sharing. There is a perception among the wider public that the draft exemptions perpetuate poverty in Haredi society because they provide an incentive to remain in the yeshivas and rely on government support rather than seeking employment. These claims were intensified after the Supreme Court prohibited the state from transferring funds to yeshivas whose students were required to enlist. Another reason for the secular perception against the ultra-Orthodox is that under the arrangements a yeshiva student who applied for a service deferment had to devote all his time to Torah study and could not engage in any work or occupation for which payment is customary, thus preventing students from joining the workforce until they received their final exemption.

The position of the religious representatives was that a Jewish state should have Jewish laws. The competing religious and secular claims have been dealt with through a series of informal convocational arrangements, which over time became entrenched in the political landscape (Shinar, 2021). These arrangements, as a compromise between religious and secular leaders, still effectively determine the non-separation between religion and state, including the recognition of the Sabbath as the day of rest, the prohibition of public transportation on the Sabbath, traffic, and road control during the Sabbath, the flag and emblems expressing Jewish tradition, kosher food in state institutions, and the army, and most importantly, the institutionalization of a pluralist personal law system, an independent Orthodox educational system with the autonomy for religious schools, the transfer of state money to religious schools (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim), exemptions from military service for ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) yeshiva students and religious women, and state-appointed and funded clergy and religious services. But the most infamous example of Israeli enmeshing of religion and state is the exclusive Orthodox jurisdiction over Jewish marriage and divorce through the lack of civil marriage and divorce. Israeli law subjects all male and female Israeli citizens and residents to a military draft, although ultra-Orthodox Jews have traditionally been exempted from the draft. The draft deferral provided to Haredi yeshiva (Jewish Orthodox institutions of learning) students has been the subject of multiple public debates and Supreme Court decisions.

Israeli law requires citizens to enlist in the army at 18 years old. However, the Jewish Ultraorthodox community has a longstanding agreement with the state that members of this community will not have to enlist in the army, given its spiritual leaders' strong opposition (2023). An IDF plan to increase the amount of time conscripts and reservists serve in the military as it prepares for a long war in the Gaza Strip generated fierce backlash among lawmakers from across the political spectrum, with many renewing calls to end the de facto exemptions for the ultra-Orthodox community to make up manpower shortages.

The proposed changes include raising terms for male mandatory army service and female soldiers in combat and raising the age for retirement from reserve duty. The amount of time required by reservists to serve per year would also go under the plans. Lawmakers from both the opposition and coalition said the increased burden of military service should fall on the Haredi community rather than being added on to those already serving. The coalition includes ultra-Orthodox parties which are opposed to forced conscription.

The ultra-Orthodox have long enjoyed exemptions from military service, seeing integration with the secular world as a threat to their religious identity and community continuity. But the heavy assault by Hamas on October 7, 2023, changed the public agenda – making the draft of young ultra-Orthodox a critical issue, due to the need for additional fighting forces. the attack, which included about 3,000 armed terrorists that breached the border security fence separating Gaza and thousands of missiles launched at Israel, was a turning point for Israel, emphasizing the perception of the permanent security alert that all parts of society should undertake.

The conflict is not only social and political but also legal. The High Court of Justice ordered the government the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) to pass a law to force the draft of draft ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students or explain why the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) should not begin drafting such men. The Court's instructions now place the burden of proof on the government to explain why its resolution should not be legislated and indicate that it is taking the petitions very seriously. The Court justices expressed considerable skepticism over the legality of the government resolution which was approved to stop the IDF from drafting ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students while the Knesset formulates and passes new legislation on the highly combustible issue. The political turmoil is complicated, since a law granting blanket exemptions was previously denied by the Court as a discriminatory measure that violated the principle of equality before the law, and the government was instructed to pass a new law that would lead to greater ultra-Orthodox enlistment.

CONCLUSION

This paper explores the interplay between politics, religion, and identity within Israeli society, with a specific focus on the ultra-Orthodox community and its exemption from military service. By delving into historical and contemporary dynamics, it has unraveled the complex tapestry of Israeli politics, shedding light on the tensions between secular and religious ideologies that shape the nation's socio-political landscape.

The religious representatives advocate for Jewish laws in a Jewish state. Due to the absence of a formal constitution, religious and secular claims have been addressed through informal arrangements of the religious status quo which developed as compromises between religious and secular leaders, dictate various aspects of Israeli life, including the recognition of the Sabbath, kosher food provisions, and the Orthodox monopoly over Jewish marriage and divorce.

The examination of the Draft Law, which revolves around exemptions for young ultra-Orthodox individuals from military service, has brought conflicting narratives surrounding national defense, religious tradition, and societal cohesion. This analysis has underscored the evolving role of religion in Israeli politics and its profound implications for governance, citizenship, and social cohesion. The study has critically scrutinized the influence of religious ideology on nationalistic sentiments, revealing broader implications for Israeli identity and democracy, and providing insights into the complexities of Israeli society. It highlights the challenges posed by competing ideologies, demographic shifts, and geopolitical realities, calling for nuanced policy solutions that reconcile religious diversity with national unity.

This paper makes significant contributions to scholarly discussions on religion, politics, and identity formation in Israel. By offering a comprehensive overview of the religious-secular divide and proposing recommendations for addressing the tensions inherent in the intersection of religion and state, it has enriched our understanding of Israeli society's complexities. It is imperative for Israeli policymakers to carefully consider the insights presented in this paper as they navigate the intricate dynamics of religion, politics, and ideology. It concludes that by fostering dialogue, promoting tolerance, and embracing diversity, Israel can chart a path toward a more inclusive and resilient democracy that reflects the rich tapestry of its society. Through collaborative efforts and a commitment to democratic principles, Israel can overcome the challenges posed by religious and ideological divisions, forging a brighter future for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

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2Enlisting in the army in the Jewish Ultraorthodox community and the consequences for wellbeing