Navigating the Complexities of Identity: is there an Accelerated Israelization of Religion?

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ABSTRACT: This research aims to explore the dynamics of Israeli politics, particularly regarding the interplay between religion, democracy, and identity. By delving into this complex landscape, the research unravels the multifaceted nature of Israeli politics, shedding light on the various factors that shape its political landscape. This includes examining the influence of religion, the functioning of democratic institutions, and the diverse identities within society. A key focus is to analyze the role of religion in politics, including its impact on governance, policy-making, and societal norms. This involves studying the influence of religious parties, the relationship between religious and secular segments of society, and the implications for minority rights and freedoms. The research aims to assess the functioning of democracy in the counter-relations between religion and society, evaluating the extent to which democratic principles are upheld and the challenges faced in maintaining democratic governance amidst religious diversity and societal divisions. This objective is demonstrated by exploring the complexities of identity within Israeli society, including Jewish identity and the intersections between religious, cultural, and national identities. This involves examining how identity politics shapes political discourse, electoral behavior, and policy priorities. By analyzing the complexities of Israeli politics, the research seeks to identify key challenges facing the nation - tensions between religious and secular forces and uncover opportunities for fostering greater social cohesion, promoting democratic values, and addressing issues of religious pluralism. The main question investigated here is if we can trace an accelerated Israelization of Haredim due to local and global political changes and the fight for existence against terrorism that have changed the social and cultural nature of Israel in the last year?

KEYWORDS: Religion, Democracy, Identity, Politics, Israel

INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing issues in our modern world is the dynamic between established and disestablished religions and their interactions with the state. Many global conflicts, with their roots in disputes between ethnic or religious groups vying for state control, underscore the critical nature of this struggle. The state, acting as a conduit through which an ethno-religious majority may enforce its religious norms on the entire society, including minority groups, plays a pivotal role in this dynamic (Goldstein, 2022). In recent decades, government restrictions on religion, including laws, policies, and actions by state officials that restrict religious beliefs and practices, have increased markedly worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2019). When government authority is used to promote the interests and perspectives of a single group, it can lead to a more unstable and divided society (Deibert, 2023) since competition between social identities may result in one identity asserting dominance over others (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004). Contemporary debates about secularism center on the use of public spaces, and tensions emerge regarding the balance between secularism and religious symbolism. As Van der Tol & Gorski (2022) explain, this is particularly true for symbols originating from religious minorities, which can lead to significant disputes about their place and representation in public arenas. Religion and national identity often contribute to perceiving religious minorities as disloyal and unwilling to adopt the values of the national community, as explained by Fisher (2016), that fundamentalist movements, when part of secular political systems, can secure significant positions and push their extreme ideologies on the broader society.

The situation in Israel exemplifies many of the complexities discussed regarding the interplay between religion, state, and society. The unique context involves its identity as a Jewish state with a significant Arab minority, among other religious and ethnic groups. This foundational aspect of the state's identity naturally influences its domestic policies and international relations, leading to ongoing tensions and debates about the role of religion in public life and governance. The balance between secular governance and religious symbolism in Israel is contentious. The public display of religious symbols can be seen as privileging one religious' identity over others. This is a practical example of the debates Van der Tol and Gorski (2022) highlighted regarding the representation of religious symbols in public spaces. Specifically, in the context of Israeli Ultra-Orthodox (Haredim), Fisher notes that as these fundamentalists gain more political power, their efforts to promote their religious agenda become more pronounced.

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The research examines the complex relationship between religion and politics in Israel and the profound impact this has on governance, societal cohesion, and the nation's identity. It predicts that the deep-seated social, political, and religious conflicts characterizing Israel since its inception will persist, serving different parties' diverse social aspirations and political interests. This study asserts that this conflict highlights the distinctive nature of the political landscape, suggesting that while the country may be classified as a liberal democracy, it falls short of being a secular democracy due to the structural inclusion of religious and political parties and the absence of a clear separation between state and religion.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Religion and politics share a common objective: to acquire and utilize political power to achieve their respective goals, albeit through different methods. Religion appeals to people's spiritual sentiments to gain support and secure power. At the same time, politics often employs strategies such as intrigue and diplomacy, striving to sway public opinion either through democratic means in liberal systems or through force in less developed societies. Miller (2014) notes that when religion and politics are closely intertwined, this connection becomes a defining aspect of the state's political identity. As Mubarak (2009) explained, religion and politics often try to weaken each other's standing in the battle for influence. When religion gains political power, it aims to use this authority to fulfill what it perceives as a divine mission, asserting that its authority is derived from a higher power. While the objectives of religion are sacred and aimed at societal reform under spiritual guidance, politics typically lacks inherent spiritual values and focuses on the pragmatic needs and demands of society, adapting laws and governmental structures in response to changing circumstances and challenges. This fundamental distinction outlines two approaches: Religion bases its authority on immutable divine laws, whereas pragmatic politics advocates for societal progress and adaptation to new challenges over time.

The intertwining of politics and religion is a growing debate in the age of globalization. It is a common and complex issue that is debated globally and in each country, and although the state plays a pivotal role in international politics, it is evident that various other political entities are also gaining prominence, diversifying the political landscape and enhancing the influence of non-state actors. The growing importance of religion demonstrates that these groups increasingly assert themselves as significant political players, as their emergence and increasing influence reflect a significant shift in how political power and influence are distributed, even in a nation-focused religious context like Israel. This trend suggests that religious groups are becoming crucial in shaping policy and public opinion, both domestically and internationally, alongside traditional state-driven politics.

For Israel, a country deeply entangled in complex political, religious, and social issues, the rise of non-state actors can have profound implications. These groups can influence international perceptions and policies regarding Israel, advocate for or against government actions, and affect peace processes and economic agreements. Their ability to mobilize public opinion and sway government policy both within and outside of Israel underscores Israeli policymakers' need to engage with a broader array of influencers in today's interconnected political landscape. This interaction can help address domestic challenges and navigate the intricacies of international relations.

Ideology based on religion has consistently held a prominent position in the discourse surrounding Israel. As explained by Lehmann (2012), the state of Israel was established based on the Jewish religion, and the formal criterion of citizenship is being a Jew, thus belonging to the Jewish people. In the Israeli context, the term ideological politics refers to the internal divisions among social groups on the religious concept of the state, each claiming to represent the nation's best interests. Malach (2018) explains that the significant influence wielded by Orthodox communities has sparked public debates about the role of religion in Israel's social, cultural, and political landscape. Interest groups advocating for traditional cultural values rooted in religion have managed to shape and dictate the inseparable link between political power and religious control, impacting the social and cultural lives of all citizens, particularly the minority Orthodox community.

JEWISH AND DEMOCRATIC STATE

Religion's significant role in politics persists due to the profound influence of religious faith among the Orthodox. The Orthodox Jewish community constitutes a sizable portion of Israel's population, with various subgroups such as ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox adherents. Orthodox Jews are known for their commitment to religious observance, adherence to traditional Jewish law, and emphasis on the importance of Jewish heritage and continuity. As Miller (2014) explained, their demographic strength gives them significant political clout, as parties representing Orthodox interests often hold critical positions in coalition governments.

Israel was founded as an explicitly Jewish yet democratic state (Abigael, 2017). However, the deep connection of the Jewish identity of the state at the expense of minority rights further complicates the relationship between the state and religion. This underscores the challenges of balancing democracy and a defined religious identity. In contrast, the persistent conflict over religious and secular values challenges the state's democratic character. In the unique Israeli structure, religious freedom is protected, but there is no clear separation between religion and state. The Orthodox Jewish Rabbinate has official influence over many aspects of family law, reflecting this intertwined relationship. The study suggests that without significant policy reforms and efforts to bridge these ideological divides, the tension between preserving a Jewish state and ensuring democratic inclusivity will continue. This connection

between religion and politics profoundly affects governance, societal cohesion, and the nation's identity, presenting ongoing challenges to the future of Israeli democracy.

The role of religion in public policy is critical. Religious parties' substantial influence extends into various sectors, including education, family law, and cultural affairs. These parties advocate for policies that align with Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law, affecting both religious and secular aspects of life. This situation challenges the separation between religion and state, complicating efforts to form a secular democracy. The entrenched positions of religious parties in coalition governments enable them to shape legislation and policy to reflect their doctrinal beliefs rather than broader public opinion. They emerged from ideological transformations in the ideological settlement movement during the 1980s and 1990s, combining aspects of the two major religious milieus in the country, national-religious Judaism and ultra-Orthodoxy (Mahala (2023). As explained by (Dödtmann, 2023), since its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel, which defines itself as a Jewish-nation state, has provided the community with vast autonomy in education. As Katzir & Perry-Hazan (2023) explain, most Haredi schools for boys in Israel focus almost exclusively on religious studies as ultra-Orthodox activism aimed at promoting secular education.

The interplay between secular and religious ideologies is a central theme that defines its political, social, and cultural landscape. Ram (2008) explained that Israeli political culture had moved from the type of solid to a strong connection between nation and religion. However, with the conflicts with secular perceptions and the state's evolution, the challenge lies in managing these deep-seated divisions and fostering a sense of national unity and cohesion. This requires political solutions and a broader societal effort to reconcile the diverse identities and beliefs that coexist within Israel. As demonstrated in this research, the ongoing debate over the role of religion in state affairs highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to governance that respects religious traditions and secular democratic principles.

Based on this research goal, focusing on the conflict between secularism and religious orthodoxy is paramount in analyzing Israeli politics since this conflict is deeply ingrained in the country's political landscape. The interplay between these ideologies influences policy and governance and has profound societal and cultural implications. The ultra-Orthodox community, despite being a minority, holds significant sway due to Israeli politics' coalition nature. Their strategic use of religious issues to gain political leverage is a testament to the depth of these ideological conflicts and their impact on political stability and policymaking. However, as argued by Tepe (2005), discussions of the role of religious parties in democracies can be highly misleading when they take the parties' ideologies at face value and assign them to the binary categories of moderate vs. radical since the political agendas of the religious parties have failed to exhibit a principled commitment to liberal values and provide inclusive and coherent alternatives to their secularist counterparts.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Israel has long been a complex and intriguing case for political scientists. On the one hand, it is a long-standing democracy with free elections and stable institutions, a developed capitalist economy, and strong cultural and political ties to other Western democracies. On the other, since its formation, it has found a profoundly fragmented society and has been involved in a protracted conflict with its Arab neighbors and the Palestinians. In addition, ideological debates over the relationship between religion and state shape policies such as religious freedom, state funding for religious institutions, and the role of Judaism in public life. Religious parties advocate for policies aligned with Orthodox Judaism, including state recognition of religious institutions, restrictions on activities on the Sabbath, and oversight of personal status matters such as marriage and divorce. Secular and liberal parties, on the other hand, push for greater separation of religion and state, advocating for civil marriage, public transportation on the Sabbath, and reducing the influence of religious authorities in public affairs. Examining the Israeli political system, Maoz and Henderson (2020) elucidate that political elites often manipulate religion to further their primary objective of political survival. They posit that the close alliance between religious and political institutions can create symbols that become contentious issues among different segments of society.

The social and cultural implications and the influence of religious ideologies on society are profound. Orthodox Jewish norms and values significantly impact the personal lives of citizens, influencing decisions around marriage, divorce, and education. This deep-seated influence can lead to social divisions, as seen in secular versus religious communities' differing lifestyles and values. The absence of civil marriage options and the authority of the Orthodox Rabbinate over personal status issues are points of contention that underscore the complex relationship between religion and state. These cultural and religious conflicts result in challenges in governance and stability. The political landscape is marked by a high degree of instability, mainly from unresolved debates over religious and secular values. These ideological conflicts impede consensus-building and effective governance, as political parties often prioritize ideological purity over pragmatic governance. The result is a cycle of political crises and coalition reshuffling that reflects the ongoing struggle to balance diverse and often conflicting interests within Israeli society. Since 2018, Israel's government has faced a crisis, highlighted by five consecutive elections that have repeatedly failed to stabilize the political landscape, and each election resulted in significant challenges in forming a stable coalition (Herzog, 2023).

The consequence of the interaction between politics and ideology is a dynamic process that influences efforts to maintain stability or bring about change within the political system. The political landscape is characterized by deep ideological divisions that reflect

competing visions for the country's identity, borders, security, and socio-economic policies. Political parties in Israel often represent distinct ideological positions, ranging from nationalist and religious parties advocating for more significant territorial expansion and Jewish settlement in the West Bank to leftist parties advocating for a two-state solution and social justice reforms (Belder, 2021). These ideological divisions shape the political discourse, electoral competition, and coalition-building strategies, influencing efforts to maintain stability or enact change within the political system. Lehmann (2012) points out that political conflicts within Israel tend to result in the state endorsing ultra-Orthodox practices and membership criteria despite this group being a minority. But the lack of a political definition of Jewishness in a state that fundamentally views Jewishness as a political identity stems from Zionist thinkers' inability to establish a viable alternative to the religious frameworks they aimed to supplant. Consequently, the state has assigned the role of "national gatekeepers" to the rabbis, perpetuating outdated religious notions in the secular understanding of Jewish identity. Smocha (2021) critiques Israel's model of ethnic democracy, arguing that although it portrays itself and is internationally recognized as a Western liberal democracy, it operates more as an ethnic democracy. In this system, Jews predominantly control the state, focusing on national security and cultural preservation while granting varying degrees of rights to Arab citizens, who are often viewed as a security risk.

MAINTAINING A DELICATE BALANCE

Religious parties have been influential since Israel's inception. They advocate for legislation that reflects Orthodox Jewish values and often hold the balance of power in the proportional representation system (Ketchell, 2019). The multi-party system, a key feature of its political landscape, is based on proportional representation. This system significantly amplifies the influence of ideological attachments, shaping voter behavior, coalition building, and policy formation. While ideological divisions can foster solidarity and cooperation, they can exacerbate societal tensions and impede governance. The absence of a formal constitution intensifies debates surrounding minority rights and the status of non-Jewish citizens. Smooha (2021) explains that the unique governance structure continues to influence the conflicting identities of secular and religious communities, while Leon (2014) argues that despite the conflicting identities of the secular and religious communities, the political structure safeguards religious freedom while rejecting the complete separation of religion and state.

The influential role of religious identity is amplified by the country's electoral system, which is grounded in proportional representation. During elections, votes from across the nation are tallied, and parties are allocated seats in the Knesset proportionate to their percentage of votes. This system fosters the presence of numerous small parties, making it challenging for any single party to amass the 61 seats needed to pass legislation and govern independently. The necessity to form coalitions, often comprising several parties, grants disproportionate power to smaller parties capable of influencing the viability of a coalition. Religious parties, including the ultra-Orthodox, have been integral coalition partners due to their primary focus on preserving the state's spiritual and religious character rather than central concerns in foreign or economic policy. This alignment makes them convenient partners in coalition-building, reinforcing their sway in the political landscape.

The political system fragmentation and coalition-building necessitate alliances with religious parties to form governing majorities. In the multi-party system, coalition governments are the norm, necessitating pragmatic compromises and negotiations among ideological rivals to form governing majorities. Political parties often prioritize the pursuit of power and influence, leading to alliances across ideological lines based on shared interests or policy objectives. While ideology may inform party platforms and policy preferences, pragmatic considerations such as electoral arithmetic, coalition dynamics, and governance imperatives often drive decision-making processes. As a result, maintaining stability and governing effectively requires navigating the tensions between ideological commitments and practical political realities. However, initiating ideological differences, fostering consensus, and responding to societal demands are ongoing challenges that policymakers and stakeholders navigate in pursuit of effective governance and national objectives.

Based on proportional representation, the multi-party system amplifies ideological attachments, shaping voter behavior and policy formation. Coalition-building is essential for governance, often resulting in alliances with religious parties and granting them substantial influence over policies, particularly on contentious issues like military conscription exemptions and funding for religious education (Cohen, 2022). As a result, society in Israel is deeply divided along secular and religious lines, leading to conflicts over issues such as state funding for religious institutions and the role of religious authorities in public life. Orthodox Judaism holds considerable sway, especially in matters of personal status, despite the limited rights of non-Orthodox denominations (Rahat & Hazan, 2015).

This grants religious factions significant influence in shaping government policies, particularly on issues such as military conscription exemptions for ultra-Orthodox Jews and funding for religious education. The absence of a formal constitution has resulted in a historic agreement governing the interaction between religious and political spheres, preserving a delicate balance between secular and spiritual demands (Cohen, 2022). As explained by Ettinger and Leon (2018), society is deeply divided along secular and religious lines, leading to tensions over issues such as state funding for religious institutions, the role of religious authorities in public life, and the enforcement of religious laws.

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CONCLUSION

Israel's political landscape is a multifaceted environment with intricate threads of religion, ideology, and identity. At its core lies a delicate balance between democracy and religious influence, shaping policies and societal norms. The unique position as a long-standing democracy with a profoundly religious and fragmented society has engendered a complex political environment characterized by ideological divisions and pragmatic compromises. Religion permeates politics, with Orthodox Judaism exerting considerable influence over various aspects of society and governance. Orthodox parties advocate for policies aligned with their religious beliefs, often holding critical positions in coalition governments. The absence of a formal constitution further complicates governance, leading to tensions over minority rights and the role of religious institutions in public life. As a result, the political system operates within a multi-party framework, where coalition governments are the norm. This necessitates alliances across ideological lines, often resulting in pragmatic compromises to maintain stability. However, these compromises can also perpetuate the dominance of religious parties and hinder efforts to enact significant reforms.

The influence of religion extends beyond politics, shaping cultural norms and societal practices. Orthodox communities maintain traditional values and customs, often resisting secular influences while navigating the challenges of modernity. The community's rapid growth challenges Israel's democratic and liberal foundations, highlighting the need for a dynamic approach to address evolving societal trends and ideological shifts. External factors, such as regional conflicts and diplomatic challenges, also impact Israeli politics, shaping government priorities and policy responses. The ongoing conflict with Palestinians and tensions with neighboring countries influence political decision-making, adding another layer of complexity to the political landscape. However, despite these challenges, Israel continues to navigate the intricate interplay between religion, ideology, and identity. The dynamic nature of Israeli politics reflects ongoing debates and tensions over the role of religion in the state as different factions vie for influence and seek to advance their agendas. Under these circumstances, the political landscape is characterized by a delicate balance between democracy and religious influence, shaped by ideological divisions, pragmatic compromises, and external pressures. The research concludes that as Israel evolves, it must grapple with these complexities while striving to uphold its democratic principles and promote societal cohesion amidst diverse religious and cultural identities. The ability of Israel to integrate its diverse populations, including the growing Haredi community and the secular majority, will play a crucial role in defining its future as a democratic and inclusive state. This involves balancing religious values with democratic principles, ensuring that the state remains a homeland for all Jews while also upholding the rights and freedoms characteristic of a liberal democracy. The core challenge is managing these dynamics to sustain Israel's foundational values while adapting to changing demographic realities.

Many Israelis, including Haredim, are wondering whether the events of October 7, 2023, and the War in Gaza can alter the model of insularity and separatism on which the Haredi community operates. Against the background of the war, can we detect indications that pockets of change and integration in the ultra-Orthodox community are widening and young people of the community are joining the army service despite the opposition of community leaders. The question raised by this research is, therefore - will it be possible to advance an accelerated Israelization of Haredim?

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