CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICS IN ISRAEL

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Abstract

This paper explores the interplay between politics, religion, and identity within Israeli society, focusing uniquely on the ultra-Orthodox community and its exemption from military service. Exploring historical and contemporary dynamics unravels the complex tapestry of Israeli politics, shedding light on the tensions between secular and religious ideologies that shape the nation's socio-political landscape. This analysis underscores the profound implications of the evolving role of religion in Israeli politics for governance, citizenship, and social cohesion. By critically scrutinizing the influence of religious ideology on nationalistic sentiments, it reveals broader implications for Israeli identity and democracy. The study provides insights into the complexities of Israeli society and highlights the challenges posed by competing ideologies, demographic shifts, and geopolitical realities. It emphasizes the need for nuanced policy solutions to effectively reconcile religious diversity with national unity. The analysis of the political and social changes in Israel is based on the foundations of the "Clash of Civilizations" - a theory proposed by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington in his 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations?" published in the journal Foreign Affairs, and later expanded into a book titled "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" in 1996. Huntington's thesis posits that future global conflicts will be primarily cultural rather than ideological or economic.

Keyword: Huntington, Civilization, Politics, Religion, Israel

1.INTRODUCTION

Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations" posits that future conflicts will be primarily driven by cultural and religious differences rather than ideological or economic factors. Huntington identifies significant civilizations, such as Western, Islamic, and Sinic, predicting that conflicts will arise where these civilizations interact and clash. Religious representatives in Israel advocate for Jewish laws in a Jewish state. The absence of a formal constitution has led to addressing religious and secular claims through informal arrangements. These arrangements, known as the religious status quo, have developed as delicate compromises between religious and secular leaders. They dictate various aspects of Israeli life, including the recognition of the Sabbath, kosher food provisions, and the Orthodox monopoly over Jewish marriage and divorce.

In Israel, Huntington's clash can be manifested in the tensions between secular and religious Jewish communities. Secular Israelis embrace modern Western values, prioritizing democratic principles, individual rights, and a separation of religion and state, and often advocate for a more inclusive, pluralistic society. Religious Israelis, including Ultra-Orthodox/Haredi) place a strong emphasis on spiritual traditions, laws (Halacha), and a Jewish identity rooted in spiritual practice. The ultra-Orthodox community, in particular, resists secular influences, aiming to preserve a way of life centered around Torah study and religious observance. This paper contributes to scholarly discussions on religion, politics, and identity formation and understanding Israeli society's complexities by offering an overview of the religious-secular divide and proposing recommendations for addressing the tensions inherent in the intersection of religion and state. The research concludes that 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, providing a roadmap for their decision-making. It further argues 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. As a result, it can be concluded that 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 future generations.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

This paper explores the intricate interplay between politics, religion, and identity within Israeli society, with a particular focus on the ultra-Orthodox community and its exemption from military service. By examining historical and contemporary dynamics, it unravels the complex tapestry of Israeli politics, highlighting the tensions between secular and religious ideologies that shape the nation's socio-political landscape. This analysis underscores the profound implications of the evolving role of religion in Israeli politics for governance, citizenship, and social cohesion. By critically examining the influence of religious ideology on nationalistic sentiments, the paper reveals broader implications for Israeli identity and democracy. It provides insights into the complexities of Israeli society and highlights the challenges posed by competing ideologies, demographic shifts, and geopolitical realities. The study emphasizes the need for nuanced policy solutions to effectively reconcile religious diversity with national unity.

The analysis of political and social changes in Israel is grounded in Samuel P. Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" theory, which posits that future global conflicts will be primarily cultural rather than ideological or economic. Huntington's thesis, first introduced in his 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations?" and later expanded in his 1996 book "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," identifies significant civilizations, such as Western, Islamic, and Sinic, predicting that conflicts will arise where these civilizations interact and clash. In Israel, Huntington's clash is evident in the tensions between secular and

religious Jewish communities. Secular Israelis embrace modern Western values, prioritizing democratic principles, individual rights, and the separation of religion and state, advocating for a more inclusive, pluralistic society. In contrast, religious Israelis, particularly the Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi), emphasize spiritual traditions, laws (Halacha), and a Jewish identity rooted in religious practice, resisting secular influences to preserve a lifestyle centered around Torah study and observance.

This paper contributes to scholarly discussions on religion, politics, and identity formation in Israeli society by offering an overview of the religious-secular divide and proposing recommendations for addressing the inherent tensions between religion and state. The research concludes that Israeli policymakers must consider these insights as they navigate the intricate dynamics of religion, politics, and ideology, providing a roadmap for decision-making. It argues that by fostering dialogue, promoting tolerance, and embracing diversity, Israel can chart a path toward a more inclusive and resilient democracy that reflects its society's rich tapestry. 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 future generations.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper explores the intricate interplay between politics, religion, and identity within Israeli society, with a particular focus on the ultra-Orthodox community and its exemption from military service. By examining historical and contemporary dynamics, it unravels the complex tapestry of Israeli politics, highlighting the tensions between secular and religious ideologies that shape the nation's socio-political landscape. This analysis underscores the profound implications of the evolving role of religion in Israeli politics for governance, citizenship, and social cohesion. By critically examining the influence of religious ideology on nationalistic sentiments, the paper reveals broader implications for Israeli identity and democracy. It provides insights into the complexities of Israeli society and highlights the challenges posed by competing ideologies, demographic shifts, and geopolitical realities. The study emphasizes the need for nuanced policy solutions to

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4. POLITICAL DYNAMICS

Huntington's theory can help explain the political dynamics within Israel, where different cultural groups vie for influence and representation. Ultra-Orthodox parties represent the interests of the Haredi communities and often clash with secular parties over issues like military conscription, education, and public funding for religious institutions. These parties seek to preserve the autonomy of their religious education systems, which focus heavily on religious studies with limited secular subjects. This stance conflicts with state education policies and efforts to ensure a standard curriculum for all students. Balancing educational autonomy with national academic standards is an ongoing challenge since their communities have specific needs and preferences and require accommodations for large families and religious infrastructure. Political negotiations often center around securing suitable housing projects and community development plans that align with their lifestyle, and they are critical of judicial decisions that undermine religious values. They advocate for legal reforms to limit the judiciary's power and enhance the role of religious courts in matters of personal status and family law. Cohen (2023) explains that modern Orthodox communities face challenges navigating the complex relationship between modernization and maintaining religious integrity. They must address questions about freedom of expression, the role of media in society, and the balance between modernity and traditional values.

Thus, within the modern Orthodox spectrum, the subgroup represents a stricter approach, combining elements of both Haredi and modern Orthodox views. The community constructs stricter cultural boundaries to protect against perceived harmful influences from modern media and secular culture, similar to Haredi practices but with a slightly different emphasis on balancing modern and traditional values. Sharabi (2014) explains the Haredi community as engaged in a battle with the contemporary world, adopting a belligerent ideology. According to Etinger and Leon (2018), despite this struggle against modernity and secularism, the Haredi community has effectively maintained political influence.

The intersection of ideological principles and political party dynamics in Israel, particularly concerning ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) parties, has been the subject of significant academic and theoretical research that highlights the multifaceted nature of these interactions and offers various lenses to analyze the ongoing challenges and developments in Israeli society. The rapid growth of the Haredi community in Israel presents significant challenges to the nation's democratic and

liberal foundations, and by promoting integration, accommodating diverse perspectives, and fostering open dialogue, Israel can navigate this complex situation and create a more inclusive society that upholds its foundational values (Noeske et al., 2024).

Israel has a multi-party political system where Jewish religious parties, including religious Zionist and non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox parties, are considered natural coalition partners by significant parties (Yu, 2021). However, as Yu explains, these religious parties are not always the most reliable allies. The tension between their religious agendas and the semi-secular nature of the state leads to coalition instability and, at times, the collapse of the government. To gain the support of religious parties, the leading party must meet their demands, resulting in numerous privileges for the religious community in Israel, such as exemptions from military service.

In recent years, religious parties, in close political alliance with right-wing Jewish nationalists, have worked to strengthen the Jewish character of the State and deepen the influence of Jewish religious values in the education system and society at large. Itsik (2024) discusses the symbiotic relationship between Jewish religious and right-wing nationalist parties in Israel. It highlights how these alliances have shaped the political landscape, promoting the Jewish character of the state and influencing education and settlement policies. This partnership, driven by mutual interests, has led to significant privileges for religious communities, including exemptions from military service.

Huntington's theory provides valuable insights into the political dynamics within Israel, where diverse cultural groups vie for influence and representation. The ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) parties, representing the interests of Haredi communities, frequently clash with secular parties over issues such as military conscription, education, and public funding for religious institutions. These parties strive to maintain the autonomy of their religious education systems, prioritizing religious studies with minimal secular subjects. This often conflicts with state education policies that aim to standardize curricula for all students. Balancing educational autonomy with national standards is challenging, as the Haredi communities have specific needs related to large families and religious infrastructure. Political negotiations often focus on securing suitable housing projects and community

development plans that align with their lifestyle, while criticisms of judicial decisions that undermine religious values are expected. The ultra-Orthodox community advocates for legal reforms to limit the judiciary's power and enhance the role of religious courts in personal status and family law matters.

6. NATIONALISM

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 establishing a Jewish homeland in the historic Land of Israel. It aimed to unite Jews worldwide under a shared national identity and promote Jewish self-determination. The establishment 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 (Hirsch, 2020). Perceptions of existential threats, perpetuated by ongoing conflicts with neighboring states, have reinforced the societal role of religion, fostering a collective sense of vulnerability (Noeske et al., 2024). 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 solid attachment to the land of Israel and a sense of belonging to the Jewish people. However, tensions and complexities are 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, and their strategic use of power extends to influencing legislation on issues related to religion, state affairs, and budgets (Shalev, 2019).

Nevertheless, while the ultra-Orthodox community remains primarily isolated from mainstream Israeli society, its significant political clout stems from its strong religious belonging. This prompts considering

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 (Rosenberg, 2021).

Modern Orthodox communities face their own set of challenges, navigating the tension between modernization and religious integrity. They grapple with issues related to freedom of expression, media influence, and the balance between modernity and traditional values. This subgroup combines elements of both Haredi and modern Orthodox perspectives, constructing stricter cultural boundaries to protect against perceived harmful influences from secular culture while balancing modern and traditional values. Despite their resistance to modernity, the Haredi community has managed to maintain significant political influence (Fox, Eisenstein & Breslawski, 2024). The intersection of ideological principles and political party dynamics reveals their complexities since the rapid growth of the Haredi community poses challenges to the nation's democratic and liberal foundations. Israel can navigate these complexities by promoting integration, accommodating diverse perspectives, fostering open dialogue, and working towards a more inclusive society (Desai, 2024).

Israel's multi-party political system includes Jewish religious parties, such as religious Zionist and non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox factions, which are often natural coalition partners for significant parties. However, these religious parties can be unreliable allies due to the tension between their religious agendas and the semi-secular nature of the state. This tension leads to coalition instability and government collapse. To gain the support of religious parties, large parties must often meet their demands, resulting in privileges for religious communities, such as military service exemptions. In recent decades, religious parties have allied with right-wing Jewish nationalists to strengthen the Jewish character of the state and deepen the influence of Jewish religious values in education and society. This alliance has significantly shaped the political landscape, influencing policies related to education and settlement (Cohen, 2022).

Nationalism, particularly Zionism, has been a defining aspect of Israeli society since its inception. Emerging in the late 19th century, Zionism aimed to establish a Jewish homeland in the historic Land of Israel and unite Jews worldwide under a shared national identity. The establishment of Israel in 1948 fulfilled the Zionist aspiration and solidified the nationalistic identity of Israeli society. The existential threats and ongoing conflicts with neighboring states have reinforced the societal role of religion, fostering a collective sense of vulnerability (Seyoum, 2024). This intersection of religion and nationalism in Israeli society creates tensions and complexities, particularly regarding the role of religion in public life, the status of non-Jewish minority groups, and the balance between Jewish religious law and democratic principles. The ultra-Orthodox community's significant political influence reflects its solid religious identity, prompting questions about whether this political dynamic can persist amidst ongoing social changes in Israel.

7. RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Huntington argues that people's cultural and religious identities will become the primary source of identification. His theory suggests that major conflicts will occur between cultural and religious identities. In Israel, there are significant cultural and religious divisions between various groups, notably between secular Jews and religious Jews, including ultra-Orthodox communities. This division often manifests in disagreements over laws related to marriage, the Sabbath, military conscription, and public transportation. These conflicts are political and deeply rooted in differing worldviews and lifestyles, aligning with Huntington's idea that cultural and religious identities are sources of conflict.

Jewish identity is central to national identity, but there are divergent views on what this identity should entail. Zionist ideology, mainly secular Zionism, views the state of Israel as a modern, democratic nation-state (Kisler, 2023). In contrast, ultra-Orthodox communities often prioritize religious laws and traditions over secular nationalistic ideals. This divergence can lead to clashes over what it means to be a Jewish state. The ultra-Orthodox population in Israel exhibits a higher natural growth rate than the general population, yet the employment rate among ultra-Orthodox men remains

significantly lower. This phenomenon can be explained by the religious club model (Chen & Yong, 2024), which suggests that strict requirements and club goods foster a solid commitment to the religious community.

These conflicts reflect Huntington's idea that cultural and religious groups will seek to protect and advance their interests in the political arena. Significant tensions within Jewish society, particularly between secular Jews and various religious groups, can lead to societal friction and political instability, reflecting Huntington's idea of fault lines within civilizations. Perelman et al. (2019) assert that the ideal man is viewed as a religious scholar wholly devoted to Torah study within the ultra-Orthodox community.

Consequently, ultra-Orthodox men are expected to allocate significant time to religious studies, affirming their dedication to this ideal and signaling their membership within the religious community. Beyond dedicating time to religious studies, other behaviors also signal an ultra-Orthodox man's commitment to the religious community. These behaviors include consciously distancing themselves from secular influences, such as avoiding reading secular newspapers and refraining from using the internet for non-livelihood purposes. Thus, membership in the religious community is not a one-off formality determined by a single criterion. Instead, it is an implicit amalgamation of factors, including time dedicated to Torah study, abstention from secular activities, and adherence to religious norms. Although these membership criteria might seem ambiguous, they allow for varying degrees of commitment within the religious community.

Religion's significant role in Israeli politics persists due to the profound influence of religious faith among the ultra-Orthodox. Over time, the initially contained religious politics, shaped by common goals and secular ambivalence, evolved into a politicized religious compromise. This compromise, known as the status quo, allowed the government to mediate between secular and religious groups (Ben-Porat, 2013). In this compromised structure, religion obtained an excessive role in both the public and private spheres of Israeli society. The Basic Law of Return, symbolized by religious sources, highlights the pivotal role of the Jewish religion in determining citizenship. Religious courts, monopolizing personal status determinations, and imposed religious restrictions contribute to conflicts with secular segments. The ultra-Orthodoxy's separate network of schools, reliance on taxpayer-funded support, and enforcement of a public status quo further fuel tensions with the secular majority (Ketchell, 2019).

The transformation from focusing on modernization and political stability to the clash of civilizations represents a shift in Huntington's theoretical framework. It reflects his evolving perspective on the sources of conflict and the challenges facing the modern world. Cohen (2023) explains that the contrasting approaches of ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox communities reflect their differing theological perspectives and strategies for engaging with modernity. The Haredi community has historically sought to maintain a strict separation from secular society. This separation is driven by a belief that secular culture is morally and spiritually harmful to their values, which are based on traditional Jewish Torah teachings.

To protect their members from what they perceive as the negative influences of secular media, Haredi communities have created self-contained cultural environments where secular media, such as newspapers, television, and the Internet, are generally banned. Haredi rabbis and leaders have established media outlets to reflect their values and serve their community's needs. This media serves both to provide necessary information and to reinforce the community's religious and cultural norms. Media within the Haredi community is often subject to strict rabbinical oversight to ensure that content aligns with their religious standards. Education in Haredi communities typically emphasizes the avoidance of secular media, with a focus on religious studies and community values.

8. CULTURAL IDENTITY

Huntington argues that cultural and religious identities will become the primary sources of personal identification and that significant conflicts will arise from these identities. In Israel, this theory is evident in the substantial cultural and religious divisions between groups such as secular Jews and religious Jews, including the ultra-Orthodox communities. These divisions often manifest in disputes over laws related to marriage, the Sabbath, military conscription, and public transportation. Such conflicts are profoundly political and rooted in differing worldviews and lifestyles, aligning with Huntington's notion that cultural and religious identities can be sources of conflict.

Jewish identity is central to Israeli national identity, but there are varying opinions on what this identity should encompass. Secular Zionism views Israel as a modern, democratic nation-state, while ultra-Orthodox communities prioritize religious laws and traditions, leading to clashes over the definition of a Jewish state. The ultra-Orthodox population in Israel is growing at a faster rate compared to the general population, yet their employment rates, especially among men, remain notably lower. This phenomenon aligns with strict religious requirements that build a solid commitment to the religious community (Zandberg & Itamar, 2022).

These tensions reflect Huntington's theory that cultural and religious groups will seek to protect and advance their interests in the political sphere. The friction within Jewish society, particularly between secular Jews and various religious groups, can lead to societal discord and political instability, mirroring Huntington's concept of fault lines within civilizations. Perelman et al. (2019) note that the ideal ultra-Orthodox man is seen as a religious scholar devoted to Torah study. To embody this ideal, ultra-Orthodox men are expected to dedicate considerable time to religious study and to avoid secular influences, such as secular newspapers and non-essential internet use. Membership in the religious community involves a combination of factors, including time spent in Torah study, abstention from secular activities, and adherence to religious norms.

Religion's significant role in Israeli politics persists due to the strong influence of religious faith among the ultra-Orthodox. Initially, religious politics were contained by shared goals and secular ambivalence, but they have since evolved into a politicized religious compromise known as the status quo. This compromise has allowed the government to mediate between secular and religious groups (Ben-Porat, 2013). The shift from focusing on modernization and political stability to a clash of civilizations represents an evolution in Huntington's theoretical framework. It reflects his changing perspective on the sources of conflict and the challenges facing the modern world. Cohen (2023) discusses how the contrasting approaches of ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox communities reflect their differing theological perspectives and strategies for engaging with modernity. The Haredi community has traditionally sought to maintain a strict separation from secular society, believing that secular culture is detrimental to their values based on traditional Jewish Torah teachings. To shield their members from secular influences, Haredi communities have established self-contained cultural environments that generally ban secular media. Haredi rabbis and leaders have created media outlets to serve their community's needs and reinforce their religious and cultural norms. Their media is carefully monitored to ensure that it aligns with religious standards and that education within the Haredi community emphasizes religious studies and community values, avoiding secular influences (Zandberg, 2018).

The most contentious issue in Israeli society is the exemption of ultra-Orthodox men from mandatory military service, a fundamental aspect of national identity. Ultra-Orthodox parties vigorously defend this exemption on religious grounds, while many secular and non-Orthodox parties argue for equal national service obligations. This debate underscores the challenge of reconciling religious ideology with broader societal values. Cohen (2023) notes that the Haredi approach emphasizes isolation from secular media to protect religious integrity and preserve a distinct cultural identity. In contrast, modern Orthodox groups seek a balance with modernity, engaging with secular media while striving to maintain religious values.

The Haredi minority has traditionally been isolated from the mainstream. However, the Hamas-led attack on Israel in October has created moments of increased solidarity between the ultra-Orthodox and secular communities, as the shared threat has accelerated the integration of some of Israel's most insular citizens. As the conflict with Gaza continues and reservists face extended tours of duty, debates about military exemptions for the ultra-Orthodox are once again central to national discussions (Harel, 2024).

Nevertheless, ultra-Orthodox men often prioritize religious study over formal employment, resulting in higher poverty rates and limited economic integration. This reliance on state welfare creates tension with secular Israelis, who view it as a financial burden. Large families within the ultra-Orthodox community exacerbate economic challenges and increase dependence on social welfare programs. Ultra-Orthodox women, who serve as primary breadwinners while managing family responsibilities, highlight gender dynamics within these communities (Herzog, 2023).

9. CONCLUSION

Samuel Huntington's theory, first articulated in his 1993 Foreign Affairs article and later expanded in his 1996 book "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," posits that future conflicts will be driven primarily by cultural and religious identities rather than ideological or economic differences. His central thesis is that the primary source of conflict will be cultural, involving countries from different civilizations rallying support from their civilizational allies, thus leading to broader and more entrenched conflicts. Huntington's theory asserts that cultural and religious identities will be the main drivers of conflict, shaping the future of global politics and international relations.

Huntington's theory is particularly relevant to Israeli society, where secular-religious tensions and the role of ultra-Orthodox parties illustrate his concepts. In Israel, deeply rooted religious convictions, particularly among the ultra-Orthodox community, influence politics significantly. The religious involvement in politics has evolved into a politicized compromise known as the status quo, allowing the government to navigate between secular and religious interests. This framework has led to religion exerting pervasive influence across both public and private spheres of Israeli society.

Examples include the Basic Law of Return, religious courts' monopoly over personal status matters, and the ultra-Orthodox community's reliance on state funding for their distinct school network, which further exacerbates divisions with the secular majority. 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, influencing Israeli society, culture, and governance. Jewish religious traditions, laws, and beliefs hold significant sway with various denominations within Judaism, including Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism, each with their practices and interpretations of Jewish law.

The intersection of religious and nationalistic identities in Israeli society creates tensions and complexities, reflecting Huntington's idea that cultural and religious groups will seek to protect and advance their interests. This results in societal friction and political instability. Despite the Haredi community's isolation from mainstream society, its significant political influence stems from solid religious belonging. This prompts considering whether the political impasse can develop strategies to manage conflicts and maintain global stability.

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