

Analyzing Secular-Religious Divide in Israeli Society Through Conflict Theory

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This paper examines the complex relationship between secular and religious communities in Israel, highlighting the socio-political tensions that arise from competing cultural norms and governance frameworks. Secular Jews, who constitute a significant portion of the population, advocate for civil liberties, the separation of religion and state, and the integration of ultra-Orthodox communities into broader society. In contrast, religious groups exert substantial influence within coalition governments, often obstructing the implementation of secular policies and exacerbating political instability. The discussion emphasizes the challenges posed by Israel's unique legal framework, which intertwines Jewish identity with state governance, thereby complicating the principles of democracy and religious freedom. Key legislation, such as the Law of Return and the Law of the Rabbinical Courts, grants religious authorities substantial control over personal status issues, leading to ongoing disputes over rights and representation. The paper argues for the necessity of egalitarian pluralism as a framework for dialogue, aiming to bridge the divide between secular and religious communities. Fostering mutual respect and understanding is essential for achieving social cohesion and strengthening Israel's commitment to being both a Jewish and democratic state.

Keywords: secularism, religious influence, political tension, pluralism, identity

Introduction

Israel is a unique nation where the intertwining of religious and secular identities shapes its sociopolitical landscape. This intersectionality influences cultural norms and defines society's broader framework. The ongoing tensions between secular and religious communities have sparked significant debates regarding the role of religion in public life, governance, and individual freedoms. As a Jewish state, Israel struggles with the complexities of maintaining its religious identity while promoting democratic values and civil liberties for all its citizens. This delicate balance has led to a political environment characterized by conflicts over public space, cultural practices, and legal interpretations.

Secular Jews, who constitute a substantial segment of the population, advocate for a clear separation between religion and state, champion civil liberties, and push for a more inclusive society. Their efforts often collide with the interests of religious groups, leading to political friction and social instability. This structure explores the multifaceted nature of the secular-religious divide and its implications for governance, societal norms, and the quest for a cohesive national identity.

The research investigates the complex dynamics between secular and religious communities in Israel, focusing on how their interactions shape political, legal, and social structures. It examines the influence of

religious political parties, particularly ultra-Orthodox and national-religious groups, on coalition governments and their role in obstructing secular policies. Additionally, the research explores legal disputes, such as the Orthodox Rabbinate's control over personal status issues and social tensions concerning public space, cultural norms, and civil liberties. The study seeks to understand how these power struggles affect Israel's identity as both a Jewish and democratic state, highlighting the ongoing conflicts between secular values and religious authority.

Theoretical Approach

The theoretical framework of this research draws from political sociology and religious studies to analyze the complex relationship between secularism, religious influence, and political power within Israel's democratic system. Conflict theory, grounded in the work of Karl Marx and further developed by sociologists such as Ralf Dahrendorf and Lewis Coser, provides an ideal lens for examining these tensions, as it centers on the inherent struggles between competing groups seeking power, control, and influence over societal norms and policies. This theory explains the ongoing power dynamics between secular and religious factions in Israel, who vie for dominance in shaping Israel's national identity as both a Jewish and democratic state.

Rooted in Marx's concept of social life as a power struggle, conflict theory suggests that religious and secular groups within Israel compete for influence over legal and cultural frameworks in ways that reflect their differing values (Marx, 1848; Dahrendorf, 1959). In particular, these groups frequently clash over public policy areas, such as civil marriage, Sabbath observance, and public transportation, where religious factions aim to maintain traditional laws and customs, often at odds with secular Jews' liberal democratic ideals. Coser (1956) points out that such conflicts reinforce group boundaries and shape policies to align with each faction's interests, manifesting a continuous struggle for political and social dominance.

Religious parties leverage their power within coalition governments to preserve religious laws, which secular groups see as infringing on democratic freedoms. Coser's (1956) insights about conflict-driven boundary delineation illustrate how these groups use their influence to shape public life to reflect their values, escalating tensions and disrupting social cohesion. As Collins (1975) elaborates, these groups' political alliances maintain the stratification of power, intensifying friction as they vie for governance control, cultural hegemony, and resource allocation.

This analysis also draws on De Juan's (2014) exploration of how religious conflicts can escalate intrastate tensions. The Orthodox Rabbinate's monopoly over marriage, divorce, and conversion laws illustrates how religious authorities maintain a firm hold over public and private life. The secular community's push for civil liberties, such as civil marriage and public transportation on the Sabbath, is resisted by religious groups seeking to preserve these traditions, framing this conflict as a battle for cultural dominance, as conflict theory suggests.

In understanding the role of religion in conflict, Fox (2000) emphasizes that while many ethnic conflicts are secular, religious elements intensify them by lending them a sacred quality, adding complexity. Religious parties' influence illustrates how religious authority controls personal aspects of citizens' lives and reinforces divisions with secular communities advocating for civil liberties. This entrenchment is supported by Nazir-Ali (2023), who notes that religion can escalate tensions by institutionalizing societal divisions, as one group's adherence to religious laws may directly impact the rights and freedoms of another group. This theoretical perspective aligns with the political landscape in Israel, where secular Jews view religious influence in government as a restriction on democratic freedoms. In contrast, religious groups consider secularization a threat to their cultural and religious identity.

Applying conflict theory to Israel's secular and religious divide offers valuable insights into how identity-based struggles perpetuate long-term societal rifts. Conflict theory has evolved to encompass the understanding of identity conflicts, which emphasize the role of ethnicity, religion, and nationalism in intensifying societal divisions. Moreover, contemporary scholarship underscores that each faction's ideological motivations make compromise challenging in identity-based conflicts. Esteban and Ray (2011) discuss how identity conflicts, particularly when associated with religion, gain added intensity due to perceived threats to cultural and existential values. This applies to Israel, where secular and religious groups view the nation's identity as intrinsically linked to their religious or secular worldviews, heightening the stakes of their political battles. Collins (1975) also noted that alliances within political structures often sustain identity-based struggles, which create avenues for marginalized groups to wield power disproportionately within coalition systems. This is evident in that ultra-Orthodox parties utilize their coalition positions to protect religious laws from secular reforms, leveraging their influence to resist secular policies on issues such as marriage laws, Sabbath observance, and education policies.

The Israeli case exemplifies conflict theory's assertion that economic disparities and social status are sources of tension between groups. The ultra-Orthodox community's exemption from mandatory military service and low workforce participation contribute to economic inequality, which secular groups argue further stratifies Israeli society (De Juan, 2014). Secular groups view these exemptions as unjust, arguing for their integration into the workforce and military. This division, consistent with conflict theory, reflects an ongoing competition for resources and social influence between secular and religious factions, each seeking to impose their values on public life and national identity.

The role of institutions as sites of power negotiation, central to conflict theory, is evident in Israel's Supreme Court, which acts as a mediator in secular-religious tensions. According to Bourdieu (1987), institutions can either perpetuate or mitigate societal conflicts by aligning with the interests of dominant groups. The Supreme Court's intervention in cases related to civil liberties, Sabbath observance, and education often reflects secular democratic principles, countering the religious establishment's dominance and thus embodying the theory's emphasis on institutional roles in mediating social conflicts.

The research's theoretical grounding in conflict theory offers a comprehensive framework for examining the complex dynamics in Israel's sociopolitical landscape, where secular and religious factions clash over national identity, cultural hegemony, and public policy. Through this lens, the study reveals how these ideological struggles permeate legal, political, and social arenas, shaping the tensions that define Israeli society.

Methodology

The application of conflict theory in this research is reflected through vital aspects that guide data analysis related to secular-religious tensions in Israel. It is designed to identify the conflicts between different social groups, their competing interests, and the power structures influencing political, social, and legal outcomes. In line with conflict theory, the research employs thematic analysis to identify patterns of inequality and dominance in the data. The methodology looks for recurring themes that indicate the political dominance of religious parties in coalition governments, social and legal conflicts over public space, including control over marriage laws and Sabbath observance, and economic disparities between secular and ultra-Orthodox communities, such as workforce participation and military exemptions.

The ongoing battle over the Orthodox Rabbinate's monopoly on personal status issues like marriage and divorce includes legal battles over Sabbath laws and public transportation. It conflicts over mandatory military

service exemptions for ultra-Orthodox Jews. This case study approach reflects conflict theory's emphasis on group struggles and institutional power. It allows for a detailed examination of how specific conflicts illustrate broader societal tensions.

The research's focus on identifying and analyzing power struggles, social inequalities, and institutional dominance reflects the implementation of conflict theory. It reveals how secular and religious groups in Israel are locked in a continuous struggle for control over critical societal issues. Conflict theory shapes the entire research process, guiding data selection, analytical methods, and interpretive frameworks to understand the ongoing tensions within Israeli society.

The research question examined in this study, considering the application of conflict theory and the secular-religious tensions in Israel, is: "How do power struggles between secular and religious communities in Israel influence political, legal, and social structures, and what are the implications for balancing religious authority and democratic governance?"

This question effectively captures the core of the research, focusing on the conflict between these communities and its impact on governance, law, and societal norms while addressing the broader implications for Israel's dual identity as both a Jewish and democratic state.

The research addresses the question by analyzing the power struggles between secular and religious communities in Israel through a detailed examination of their political, legal, and social interactions.

The study explores how religious political parties, particularly ultra-Orthodox and national-religious factions, exert influence over coalition governments, hindering the implementation of secular policies. This political friction is analyzed in light of secular groups' advocacy for the separation of religion and state, revealing how power dynamics shape government decisions and legislative outcomes.

The research investigates Israel's legal framework, mainly how the Orthodox Rabbinate controls issues related to personal status (marriage, divorce) despite secular opposition. This control reflects religious dominance in legal affairs, contributing to ongoing tensions. It demonstrates how power is distributed and contested between secular and religious groups.

The study examines the social tensions between secular and religious groups, focusing on disputes over public space (such as transportation on the Sabbath) and differing cultural norms. By examining these tensions, the research reveals how power imbalances lead to conflicts shaping Israeli society, particularly concerning civil liberties and pluralism.

The study uses conflict theory to assess the broader implications of these struggles on Israel's democratic structure. It argues that religious influence, reinforced by political and legal mechanisms, challenges the democratic principle of equality, pushing for a more theocratic influence in governance. This creates a strain on Israel's attempt to balance its Jewish identity with democratic values.

Through these analyses, the research concludes that the secular-religious divide significantly impacts the balance of power in Israeli governance, legal systems, and societal norms, reflecting the broader challenges of maintaining a Jewish and democratic state.

Religious Influence on Israeli Politics

Israeli politics has long been defined by ideological disputes, particularly surrounding its identity as a Jewish state. Central to these conflicts is the tension between secular Jews and the ultra-Orthodox community, which, despite its minority status, wields considerable political influence. Over the past two decades, ultra-Orthodox

political parties have skillfully used religious issues as a platform to gain power, while secular politicians have capitalized on anti-religious sentiment to appeal to secular Israeli Jews. A significant point of contention in this conflict is the demand for military exemptions for ultra-Orthodox males, a policy that has shaped both the political discourse and the internal dynamics of the ultra-Orthodox community. This research investigates the social and political divisions arising from religion's role in shaping the Jewish state's identity, focusing on the implications of this ideological struggle for Israel's democracy.

The dominance of religious groups and the lack of a clear separation between religion and state complicates efforts to balance the interests of diverse religious and secular communities within Israel's democratic framework. Zandberg (2018) highlights how the fusion of religion and politics in Israel, especially in areas like family law and education, demonstrates the pervasive influence of Orthodox Jewish factions. These groups hold considerable power over cultural and social affairs, with Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law dictating policies on marriage, divorce, and education, among other areas (Sharabi, 2014). Orthodox Jewish control over marriage laws has led to restrictions on interfaith and same-sex marriages, further entrenching the religious influence on civil matters.

Orthodox political parties continue to play a pivotal role in Israeli politics by advocating for policies aligned with their religious priorities. These include funding religious institutions, enforcing Sabbath observance, and maintaining strict control over personal status laws. The presence of these parties in coalition governments enables them to shape policy decisions significantly. Ben-Porat (2013) describes how the political compromises that initially mediated secular and religious interests, encapsulated in the "status quo" agreement, have evolved into a more politicized religious compromise. This transformation underscores the depth of religious influence in public life, particularly pronounced due to the absence of a formal separation between religion and state. Orthodox parties, while representing a minority, can wield outsized political power by leveraging their role in coalition negotiations, sometimes threatening to destabilize governments if their demands are not met (Cohen, 2022).

The tension between recognizing diverse identities and maintaining social cohesion is a challenge faced by many modern democracies, including Israel. Seyoum (2024) argues that across the globe, individuals increasingly rally around grievances related to ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities, seeking acknowledgment from the broader society and protesting discrimination. This demand for recognition often creates friction in societies where cultural identities clash with the principles of national unity. This tension is exacerbated by the lack of a formal constitution, which has left the country without a clear framework for reconciling diverse interests.

Israel's absence of a formal constitution creates governance challenges, contributing to political instability and uncertainty. Shugart (2020) argues that a constitution serves as a unifying framework that could protect minority rights and promote social cohesion. However, opposition to establishing a constitution in Israel stems from fears that it would limit the influence of religious law and alter the existing power structures. While adopting a constitution could enhance stability and provide a more transparent structure for governance, reaching a consensus would require navigating the complex political dynamics involving religious and secular interests. Belder (2021) suggests that such a process would involve extensive dialogue and negotiation among diverse stakeholders to ensure the constitution's legitimacy and broad-based support.

The historical, legal, and ideological factors that have shaped Israel's political structure further complicate the issue of establishing a formal constitution. When Israel declared independence in 1948, the immediate security concerns and the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict took precedence over the drafting of a comprehensive constitution. Additionally, the country's diverse population, which includes a wide range of religious, ethnic, and

cultural communities, posed challenges to crafting a constitution that would be acceptable to all segments of society. Instead, Israel relied on basic laws enacted over time by the Knesset to serve as the legal foundation for its governance. While providing a framework for government, these Basic Laws do not constitute a unified constitution in the traditional sense. Debates over the role of religion have hindered efforts to draft a formal constitution, the rights of minority groups, and the legal status of non-Jewish citizens (Rosenthal, 2018).

Israel's political system continues to grapple with the profound influence of religion on its identity and governance. The ultra-Orthodox community's political power and the ongoing ideological conflict between secular and religious groups contribute to political instability and social division. Addressing these divisions and crafting a constitution that balances diverse interests could offer a pathway to more excellent stability, but doing so will require overcoming significant political and ideological challenges.

Ethnic Democracy and Jewish Identity

The politics of numerous countries have been reshaped by the rise of populism and civilizational ideologies, both of which many scholars deem substantial challenges to democracy. Yilmaz and Morison (2021) argue that civilization is often used as an ideology to support political agendas. However, they highlight the uniqueness of Jewish civilization within this context. While the intersection of religion and civilization is common in modern politics, it preceded the establishment of Israel and was instrumental in forming the Jewish state. This foundational debate over whether Judaism is primarily a religion or a nation has spurred a dedicated academic focus on Jewish political thought (Elazar, 1980; Stadler, 2009). The continuing tension between Jewish identity and democratic principles, nearly a century after Israel's founding, underscores the complex relationship between religion and governance in the state.

Laws such as the Law of Return and the authority of the Rabbinical Courts emphasize Israel's Jewish character, giving religious groups substantial influence over legislation. This system contrasts with secular democracies that separate religion and state, as the Orthodox Jewish Rabbinate controls aspects of family law (H. Lahav, 2017). Smooha (2002) contends that Israel functions as an "ethnic democracy", prioritizing Jewish citizens' interests despite its claims of liberal democracy. This dominance is manifest in the state's efforts to maintain a Jewish majority and shape the public sphere around Jewish identity. According to Yadgar (2020), Israel's blend of republicanism and ethnonationalism has created two classes of citizenship: "republican" for Jews and "liberal" for Arabs, with the latter group's participation in the public good being more restricted.

Arab citizens, while granted civil and political rights, face limitations on their engagement in Israeli public life, in contrast to Jews, who hold a more active role in governance. This system, based on Jewish hegemony, has parallels in other states where dominant ethnic groups balance democratic institutions with maintaining their cultural and political control (P. Lahav, 2017). Moreover, the Haredi Jewish community's reinterpretation of religious traditions to prioritize study overwork exemplifies how religious values continue to shape social and economic life (Perelman & Goldberg, 2024).

Smooha (2002) contrasts Israel's ethnic democracy with Western nations transitioning towards multicultural civic democracies, arguing that Israel's model may offer insights for states balancing ethnic dominance with democratic structures. This dynamic is evident in Israel's citizenship policies, where Jewish cultural identity significantly influences the experience and rights of Israeli citizens (Karayanni, 2012). The balance between religion, democracy, and ethnicity in Israel continues to provoke debate, with ongoing struggles over religious pluralism and the role of Orthodox Judaism in public life. The challenges Israel faces in accommodating religious

diversity while preserving its Jewish identity provide a framework for understanding the broader global tensions between democracy and ethnic nationalism (Rosenberg, 2021).

The Jewish civilization reflects a complex interaction between religion, ethnicity, and democracy, shaping its citizens' legal structures and lived experiences. The deep ideological rift between secular and religious communities in Israel leads to frequent political crises and reshuffling, manifesting in unstable coalition governments where secular and religious parties struggle to find common ground. This instability results from a continuous tug-of-war between secular democratic principles and religious orthodoxy, which affects the government's ability to maintain cohesive and consistent policy directions (Shalev, 2019).

This power dynamic is deeply entrenched in Israel's legal framework, which lacks a formal constitution. Instead, Israel relies on Basic Laws and historical agreements to balance secular and religious interests (Yadgar, 2020). These agreements, rooted in the founding political understandings, allow religious institutions significant control over vital societal matters, often leading to tensions between secular and religious interpretations of the law. The legal and political power of religious parties frequently results in policy decisions that favor Orthodox Jewish values, such as Sabbath observance and kosher laws, to the frustration of secular Israelis, who push for civil reforms and a more precise separation between religion and state (Bromberg, 2018).

Populism and Civilization

Populism and the concept of civilization have transformed the politics of many countries, with scholars considering them some of the most significant challenges to democracy. Yilmaz and Morison (2022) identify civilization as an ideology that attaches itself to give political movements a strong narrative foundation. However, they argue that Jewish civilization is unique, though relationships between religions and civilizations are typical in the 21st century.

The relationship between Jewish identity and democratic values remains a subject of ongoing debate. Issues such as the rights of minority groups and the status of non-Jewish citizens intersect with foundational principles, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of Israeli identity and governance (Hirsch, 2020). Specific laws, such as the Law of Return and the Law of the Rabbinical Courts, reinforce Israel's Jewish identity while granting religious factions significant influence in shaping government policies. This approach, where religion and state are not separate, contrasts with most democracies, where the Orthodox Jewish Rabbinate maintains authority over family law despite individuals being free to practice their faith without interference from the state. H. Lahav (2017) found that about a quarter of Israeli Jews identify as secular believers, aligning themselves culturally with Judaism while maintaining secular lifestyles.

Despite Israel's self-image as a Western liberal democracy, it functions as an ethnic democracy, serving Jewish interests in its institutional design. For instance, efforts to maintain a Jewish majority through demographic policies, public symbols, language, and cultural expressions align with Jewish identity. Noseke et al. (2024) describe Israel as an ethnic democracy where Jewish citizens dominate. The citizenship status of Arab citizens plays a critical role in maintaining this system, where Arab citizens have civil and political rights but are restricted from full participation in shaping the public good (Miaari, Loewenthal, & Adnan, 2024).

The citizenship structure, where Jewish citizens enjoy fuller civic engagement and Arab citizens face restrictions, highlights the complexities of balancing ethnic identity with democratic values (Karayanni, 2012). The Haredi community, for example, reinterprets traditional Jewish teachings to justify prioritizing religious study over paid work. This transformation in religious and economic behavior has brought previously marginal

interpretations of religious texts to the center of Haredi religious discourse and practice. Haredi males emphasize religious study over productivity, redefining work and adopting new modes of thought regarding worldly affairs (Brown, 2017).

Religious membership can offer refuge for immigrants separated from their homeland by fostering a sense of belonging in the face of loss and adjustment challenges. As Smootha (2002) notes, while many Western countries are moving away from the nation-state model towards multicultural civic democracies, Israel has embraced an ethnic democracy where Jewish identity is central while still granting democratic rights to minority groups. This model emphasizes the importance of Jewish national security and identity, impacting citizenship, political engagement, and the public sphere, which are oriented toward Jewish traditions.

Although Israel guarantees religious freedom for all its citizens, tensions persist between religious and secular groups as debates over the role of religion in public life and state funding for religious institutions continue (Horowitz, 2019). Efforts to promote religious pluralism, such as recognizing non-Orthodox Jewish denominations, have faced resistance from Orthodox authorities, highlighting ongoing debates about the extent to which religious diversity should be supported within Israel's democratic framework.

Basic Laws and Historical Agreements

Religious identity is not just a cultural issue but also a political one, with religious parties holding a crucial role in coalition governments. This results in religious interests significantly shaping national policies, often at odds with secular democratic ideals. The tensions between these groups continue to fuel political instability, frequent elections, and ongoing debates about balancing religious traditions with democratic governance (Desai, 2024).

The deep ideological rift between secular and religious communities leads to frequent political crises and reshuffling, manifesting in unstable coalition governments where secular and religious parties struggle to find common ground. This instability results from a continuous tug-of-war between secular democratic principles and religious orthodoxy, which affects the government's ability to maintain cohesive and consistent policy directions (Shalev, 2019). Orthodox parties use religious ideology to maintain political power, shaping the political landscape through demands for substantial funding for religious education, control over marriage and conversion laws, and exemptions from military service (Herzog, 2023).

This power dynamic is deeply entrenched in the legal framework, which lacks a formal constitution. Instead, Israel relies on Basic Laws and historical agreements to balance secular and religious interests (Galnoor, 2023). These agreements, rooted in Israel's founding political understandings, allow religious institutions significant control over vital societal matters, often leading to tensions between secular and religious interpretations of the law. The legal and political power of religious parties frequently results in policy decisions that favor Orthodox Jewish values, such as Sabbath observance and kosher laws, to the frustration of secular Israelis, who push for civil reforms and a more precise separation between religion and state (Fox, Eisenstein, & Breslawski, 2024).

The ultra-Orthodox community, driven by the desire to preserve its distinct religious way of life, exerts considerable influence over policy-making in education and social welfare (Ettinger & Nissim, 2018). Their political power allows them to secure funding for independent religious schools, which focus heavily on religious studies at the expense of secular subjects, and to resist efforts to integrate their communities into the workforce and the military (Zandberg, 2018). This dynamic has led to criticisms of the Haredi community for its reliance on state welfare and its resistance to integrating into broader Israeli society.

Israel's political landscape is unique due to its lack of a formal constitution; instead, it relies on a blend of fundamental laws and historical agreements to navigate the complex interplay between secular and religious interests. This framework allows religious institutions significant sway over societal matters, creating tensions between secular and religious interpretations of the law. For instance, the Israeli Declaration of Independence guarantees religious freedom, yet the legal framework accommodates religious practices, often resulting in policies that favor Orthodox Jewish values. As noted by Yadgar (2020), the historical agreements governing this relationship represent a delicate balance that reflects a political understanding between secular and religious factions, committing both sides not to alter communal arrangements regarding religious matters in a predominantly secular society.

Ultra-Orthodox politics, characterized by strict adherence to traditional Jewish laws and customs, has a profound impact on Israeli governance. The ultra-Orthodox community strives to preserve its religious lifestyle within the Israeli state. It seeks to shape laws and policies that reflect its values, such as Sabbath observance and kosher laws. Haredi parties play a crucial role in coalition governments, often holding the balance of power and using their leverage to secure funding for independent religious schools focused on religious studies, thereby ensuring the continuity of traditional Haredi education and values (Ettinger & Nissim, 2018; Zandberg, 2018). Their political agenda also emphasizes maintaining the Orthodox Rabbinate's control over personal status issues, which presents significant barriers to religious pluralism in Israel. Non-Orthodox Jews and interfaith couples frequently face challenges in having their marriages recognized domestically, often resorting to marrying abroad (Almond, Appleby, & Sivan, 2003; Ketchell, 2019).

Dual Identity

The dominance of Orthodox Judaism in public and legal spheres, coupled with socio-political dynamics, limits the full realization of religious pluralism. Secular Israelis criticize the Haredi community for its high poverty rates, low workforce participation, reliance on state welfare, and resistance to military service, creating further social divides. The exclusive control of the Orthodox Rabbinate over marriage, divorce, and conversion issues has led to significant tensions, as many secular citizens advocate for civil marriage and a more inclusive approach to religious practices (Lavi, 2013). However, the necessity for coalition governments often enables ultra-Orthodox parties to exert considerable influence, leading to political instability and ongoing debates about balancing religious traditions with democratic principles (Rynhold, 2015; Cohen, 2014).

Efforts to integrate Haredi communities into broader Israeli society, including workforce participation and military service, remain contentious. The Haredi response to modernity is primarily characterized by increased isolation, perceived as a strategy to protect Jewish identity from global influences (Zandberg, 2018). This isolationist stance and the community's political strategies highlight their focus on securing communal advantages through political power (Ettinger & Nissim, 2018). The resulting tension between secular and religious factions underscores the challenges inherent in Israel's political landscape, where competing ideologies shape policy debates and societal dynamics.

The divide between secular and religious communities in Israel manifests as social tensions, protests, and conflicts over public space and cultural norms. Despite these challenges, ultra-Orthodox parties influence coalition governments, hindering the implementation of secular policies and contributing to political friction and instability. Fox et al. (2024) explain that secular Jews represent a substantial segment of the Israeli population, significantly shaping the country's culture, politics, and society. They advocate for a clear separation between

religion and state, champion civil liberties, and strive for a more inclusive and pluralistic society. However, this advocacy often places them at odds with religious groups, particularly ultra-Orthodox and national-religious communities, over various social, legal, and political issues. Secular Jews advocate for civil marriage and divorce, public transportation on the Sabbath, and a secular education system focused on science, technology, and liberal arts. They oppose the Orthodox Rabbinate's monopoly over personal status issues. Hoffman (2014) calls for mandatory military service for all citizens, including ultra-Orthodox Jews, promoting their integration into the workforce and society to address economic and social disparities.

Religion deeply shapes Israeli politics, sparking debate over the meaning of democracy in a state defined as both Jewish and democratic (Desai, 2024). Unlike secular democracies, Israel must pursue "egalitarian pluralism" (Stopler, 2013), which respects both religious and secular voices in law and governance. The growing ultra-Orthodox population challenges Israel's liberal-democratic values (Noeske, Paulsen, & Gressing, 2024). While dialogue is essential, existing laws such as the Law of Return (1950) and the Law of the Rabbinical Courts (1953) give religious authorities disproportionate influence, despite many Israelis being non-Orthodox. Miller (2014) emphasizes that only Orthodox Judaism holds legal power, reinforcing state-religion ties and complicating efforts to separate religion from state. Although Israel guarantees freedom of religion in its Declaration of Independence, its system blends religious identity with national governance, creating ongoing tension.

Secular-Religious Divide

The divide between secular and religious communities in Israel manifests as social tensions, protests, and conflicts over public space and cultural norms. Despite these challenges, ultra-Orthodox and national-religious parties often influence coalition governments, hindering the implementation of secular policies and contributing to political friction and instability (Sharkansky, 2014; Rosenberg, 2021). Secular Jews represent a substantial segment of the Israeli population, significantly shaping the country's culture, politics, and society. They advocate for a clear separation between religion and state, champion civil liberties, and strive for a more inclusive and pluralistic society. However, this advocacy often places them at odds with religious groups, particularly ultra-Orthodox and national-religious communities, over various social, legal, and political issues (Bromberg, 2018).

Secular Jews strongly support the establishment of civil marriage and divorce, opposing the Orthodox Rabbinate's monopoly over personal status issues (H. Lahav, 2017). They also advocate for public transportation on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays, challenging existing religious restrictions. Furthermore, there is significant support for a secular education system that emphasizes science, technology, and liberal arts, as opposed to religious studies (Glickman, 2021). Many secular Israelis argue for mandatory military service for all citizens, including ultra-Orthodox Jews, challenging the current exemptions granted to yeshiva students (Hoffman, 2014). This advocacy extends to promoting the integration of the ultra-Orthodox community into the workforce and society at large, aiming to address economic disparities and foster social cohesion (Cohen & Tsur, 2020).

The growth of the ultra-Orthodox community poses significant challenges to Israel's democratic and liberal foundations (Noeske et al., 2024). They acknowledge the necessity for dialogue while recognizing the limitations of this perspective. The Basic Laws of Israel define it as a Jewish and democratic state, with the Declaration of Independence (1948) affirming its identity as a Jewish state. The Law of Return (1950) reinforces this identity by allowing Jews worldwide to immigrate, while the Law of the Rabbinical Courts (1953) mandates that all

Jewish Israelis marry and divorce according to Orthodox Chief Rabbinate rules, despite many Israeli Jews not practicing Orthodox Judaism (Bromberg, 2018).

This legal framework grants religious factions significant leverage in shaping government policies and legislation, creating tensions between secular and religious interpretations of the law. Miller (2014) highlights the integral relationship between the state and religious authority in Israel, where various branches of Judaism hold no legal authority unless they conform to the Orthodox standards set by the Chief Rabbinate. This connection reinforces the state's political identity, complicating the balance between religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Israel's unique approach to religious freedom allows for the practice of faith without state interference yet does not adhere to strict separation principles found in other democracies (H. Lahav, 2017). The Declaration of Independence guarantees freedom of religion and conscience for all citizens, irrespective of their beliefs, encompassing Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Druze (Sharkansky, 2014).

This dual identity underscores Israel's historical significance as a homeland for the Jewish people while also upholding principles of equality, pluralism, and the rule of law for all citizens. The intersection of these foundational principles with contemporary societal issues highlights the ongoing tensions and challenges within Israeli politics, necessitating continued dialogue and negotiation between secular and religious communities.

Conclusion

Conflict theory provides a framework to study societal divisions rooted in disparities of power and resources. Emerging from Karl Marx's foundational ideas, conflict theory posits that society is fundamentally structured by competing interests between groups with differential access to economic, political, and cultural power (Marx, 1848). Scholars such as Ralf Dahrendorf and Lewis Coser built upon this model to analyze how societal conflict shapes social order and continuity. Dahrendorf (1959) expanded the theory to argue that social conflict is inevitable and necessary for societal change, as tensions between authority and subordinate groups push for social reformation and redistribution of power. Coser (1956) further explored the role of conflict in solidifying group identities, positing that, while destructive, conflicts may also enhance cohesion within groups, particularly when they rally against a perceived adversary.

In applying conflict theory to Israel's religious-secular divide, the theoretical approach captures the power dynamics and ideological battles at play. It contextualizes the impact of these conflicts on social cohesion, political stability, and the continuous shaping of Israel's identity. By examining religious influence, state control, and political power through conflict theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding Israel's socio-political landscape and the structural conflicts that arise from the intersection of religious and secular interests.

Conflict theory is applied to economic disparities and social policies, particularly regarding the ultra-Orthodox community's workforce integration and military service exemptions. Secular groups advocate for equality and economic integration. At the same time, ultra-Orthodox communities resist these changes to protect their religious practices, exemplifying conflict theory's view of inequality as a source of social tension. The Supreme Court's role in balancing secular and religious values highlights this conflict within Israel's political institutions, as it frequently mediates disputes between state secularism and religious influence. This function aligns with conflict theory's focus on institutions as battlegrounds for negotiating power and influence, underscoring the depth and complexity of secular-religious struggles within the Israeli state.

The secular-religious divide in Israel represents a profound challenge to the nation's aspirations of being both a Jewish and democratic state. As secular Jews advocate for civil liberties, the separation of religion and state, and the integration of all communities into a pluralistic society, they encounter significant opposition from ultra-Orthodox and national-religious groups. This ongoing tension manifests in social conflicts, legal disputes, and political instability, complicating the governance landscape and the implementation of secular policies.

Israel's unique framework, defined by foundational laws and historical context, continues to shape the relationship between religion and state, presenting both opportunities and obstacles. At the same time, the commitment to religious freedom is a cornerstone of Israel's identity; the lack of a strict separation allows religious authorities to exert considerable influence over personal status issues, further entrenching divisions within society.

Fostering dialogue between secular and religious communities is essential to navigating these complexities. As scholars have highlighted, a commitment to egalitarian pluralism can help reconcile diverse interests and promote social cohesion. As Israel confronts these challenges, it must strive to uphold the principles of equality, justice, and respect for all its citizens, ensuring that its democratic ideals resonate throughout its multifaceted society. The path toward a more inclusive and harmonious Israel hinges on recognizing the legitimacy of various identities and beliefs, ultimately enriching the nation's democratic fabric.

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