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ISRAEL

Political parties

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Religion is part of Israel’s political landscape, playing an important and disputed role in both private and public life. Israeli politics are exceptional for having so many religious parties all claiming to represent the same religion (Neuberger, 1997). Moreover, the religious parties’ influence on Israeli politics is disproportionate to their real power as a social group (Arian, 1985: 136), often beyond the size of their constituencies, enabling them not only to protect sectorial needs and demands but also to actively engage in public policy making on issues that pertain to the wider society and the state. The formal power of religious parties and institutions in Israel and the non-separation of church and state, de jure and de facto, is unique and different from most democracies. This can be explained by the fact that a large number of Israelis maintain their attachment to the Jewish religion in beliefs and practices, and many are becoming more religious in various ways. Moreover, the consensus among the Jewish majority that Israel is and must remain a ‘Jewish state’ guarantees the all but permanent importance of religion in public life. Religious parties in Israel, like elsewhere, differ in the way they relate to state and society. In this chapter, we describe three major religious political parties in Israel, their histories and transformations, and their impact on Israeli politics and society.

The religious parties share a common ideological stance, that religion and religious mores should have more authority and presence in public and private lives. But, their constituencies differ ethnically and by religiosity, they have different perceptions towards state and society, and, consequently, different political behaviour and strategies. The national-religious party (formerly NRP and now the ‘Jewish Home’) is a Zionist party which has taken an active part in the nation and state building project and later adopted a hawkish-nationalist stance, spearheading Israel’s settlement of the occupied territories. For the ultra-Orthodox of ‘Haredi’ parties, the relation to Zionism and the state was more ambivalent and at times fraught with tensions. For United Torah Judaism (formerly Agudat Yisrael), the veteran ultra-Orthodox party, participation in politics was strategic and limited, avoiding for many years, among other things, ministerial portfolios that might force religious compromises. Conversely, Shas, which emerged in the 1980s, is an ultra-Orthodox party representing Sephardic Jews, who are discriminated against in the ultra-Orthodox world. Due to its social and economic agenda, its supporters include also non-Orthodox Sephardic Jews who have found a home in the party.

We begin this survey with the conditions that led to the significant role that religion and religious parties play in Israeli politics and society, and the political agendas and debates that
concern them. Specifically, we explain why, despite the secular characteristics of Zionism, religion remains politically and socially important. Then, we go on to discuss the three Jewish religious parties participating in the current Knesset – ‘The Jewish Home’, ‘United Torah Judaism’ and ‘Shas’, focusing on their formation, the ideological shifts they have undergone and their current agendas on major religious and non-religious political issues. Finally, we conclude with an analysis of the contemporary role of religious parties in Israeli politics and their influence on Israeli public and private life.

Israel: religion and politics

Zionism, which appeared towards the end of the nineteenth century, was one form of modern Jewish identity related to growing national sentiment across Europe and to the anti-Semitism that threatened to undermine Jewish emancipation. The solution to the ‘Jewish problem’, argued Zionist leaders, was not emancipation in Europe and elsewhere but territorial sovereignty that would ‘normalise’ Jewish existence. As a secular ideology, Zionism challenged the religious-orthodox view that Jewish redemption would come about with the advent of the Messiah. National revival for Zionism implied a break with the past and the attempt to replace Judaism, a religion identified with the old world, with Jewishness, a modern identity of the Jewish people based on culture, ethnicity, a historical sense of belonging and a proactive approach towards the future. In his blueprint for the Jewish state, Theodor Herzl, the founding father of the political Zionist movement, stated:

Shall we end by having a theocracy? No, indeed … We shall, therefore, prevent any theocratic tendencies from coming to the fore on the part of our priesthood. We shall keep our priests within the confines of their temples in the same way as we shall keep our professional army within the confines of their barracks … [T]hey must not interfere in the administration of the state which confers distinction upon them, else they will conjure up difficulties without and within.

(Herzl, 1946 [1896]: 43)

Notwithstanding Zionism’s challenge to orthodoxy, religion was, however, indispensable to the national movement as a marker of boundaries and a mobilising force, so that Herzl’s liberal vision of church–state separation could never in practice materialise. Both symbolic and practical political questions kept Jewish religion inside the political life of the nation and, later, of the state. First, the Zionist movement included religious groups that shared with secular Zionists the desire to establish sovereignty, and whose partnership was valued. Second, more importantly, the Zionist claim to speak on behalf of the Jewish people encouraged it to seek wide support and forced it to make compromises on practical religious questions. Third, religion has always remained in the background as a legitimating force for territorial claims. The state of Israel was established with no constitutional separation between church and state and therefore religion has always played a prominent role in the Israeli public sphere. Consequently, the Zionist movement and later the state had to find political compromises between religious and secular, providing an important role for the parties representing religious interests.

Compromises forged in pre-statehood, described as ‘consociational’ (Lijphart, 1969), enabled the political system to resolve religious conflicts and maintain stability and democracy (Don-Yehia, 2000). The visit of the United Nations (UN) Special Committee on Palestine in 1947 was the trigger to a series of such compromises between the Zionist movement, dominated by the Labor Party (MAPAI) and the religious parties, first the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael and
soon after with the Mizrachi (later the National Religious Party, NRP). The UN Committee’s task was to make recommendations for the future of Palestine following Britain’s request to end its mandate. In order to ensure that the Orthodox religious party would support the Zionist position a letter was sent by David Ben-Gurion, then Chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive and later Israel’s first prime minister, that became a cornerstone of religious–secular arrangements known as the ‘status quo’.

The commitments in the letter were somewhat vague, but the status quo laid down a basic agreement on the Jewish character of the state of Israel that enabled secular and religious political elites to formulate compromises and avoid conflicts (Don-Yehia, 2000). The letter stated that the future Jewish state would maintain rules of kashrut (Jewish dietary restrictions) in state kitchens, declare the Sabbath an official day of rest, maintain Jewish family values and acknowledge religious rights to separate education. After independence, the status quo was formalised and developed, stating duties, obligations and jurisdictions. Two of the components of the status quo dealt largely with duties and obligations. First, ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students were exempted from military service, meaning that the burden of defence in a country with universal conscription would not be equally shared. Second, the government granted autonomy to the ultra-Orthodox school system, a decision that raised debates over issues of curricula and funding. Three other components had a more direct effect on the lives of secular Jews: the designation of Saturday, the Sabbath, as the day of rest, with the mandatory closing of stores and public services; the required observance of Jewish dietary rules (kashrut) in public institutions; and the Orthodox monopoly over burial, marriage and divorce.

The status quo operated as a guideline for religious–secular negotiations during the first decades of statehood (Susser and Cohen, 2000). Beyond legislation and formal institutions regulating private lives, the status quo included informal institutions that helped overcome disagreements. These included refraining from formal and binding decisions over controversial matters, favouring of coalition partnerships over majority rule, allowing religious autonomy in specific areas, and attempting to shift disputes from national-political to judicial and local arenas. The formation of the status quo and its ability to remain effective for almost three decades is often attributed to many Jewish Israelis’ general desire to avoid conflict, under pressure of external threats and state-building challenges. These desires were matched by the pragmatism of the leading political parties, allowing cooperation between the dominant Labor Party and the major religious political parties, that upheld the functionality of the status quo for state and society.

Status quo: challenges

The status quo, in face of new changes and challenges, gradually waned and religious–secular conflicts became more difficult to contain. First, many non-religious and non-orthodox Israelis became frustrated with the restrictions of the status quo, which translated into different demands that challenged the orthodox monopoly over different aspects of public life, among other things, recognition of civil marriage and burial. Second, economic growth and globalisation underscored new lifestyles and a consumer culture resisting religious restrictions, whether on non-kosher food or shopping on Sabbath. And, third, the immigration of one million Jews from the Former Soviet Union in the 1990s, mostly secular and many non-Jewish according to Orthodox rules, created more demands for civil marriage and added to secular consumer demands.

The growing opposition to the status quo was also a response to the perceived empowerment of religious, especially ultra-Orthodox, parties from the 1980s. During that period, Israeli society and politics were divided over the future of the territories occupied in the war of 1967,
between those advocating territorial compromise and those opposing compromise. Ultra-Orthodox parties, relatively indifferent to the debate, were endowed with significant political leverage. The inability to form a governing coalition without these parties allowed them new gains, including funding for religious institutions and secure the exemption from military service. Yet, these gains fuelled negative reactions from non-religious Israelis that protested the fact that ultra-Orthodox men do not serve in the military nor take part in the labour market, preferring religious studies and enjoying state subsidies.

For their part, religious parties claimed they were fighting the growing secularisation and the breach of the status quo agreements. They also protested against increased commerce on the Sabbath, the sale of pork and the decline of traditional family values, attempting to use their political power to maintain the status quo, and at times to increase religious authority. Disagreements, previously de-politicised through compromises and agreements, became politicised as both secularisation and religious awakening demanded changes and the political parties representing the religious and secular were reluctant to compromise. The status quo and its gradual undermining were the political context for understanding the formation of religious political parties in Israel, their changing agendas and strategies. Next, we will describe these developments through the historical evolvement of the three main religious parties, their role in the status quo, the influence they had on its undermining and their contemporary ideologies and strategies.

National religious: ‘The Jewish Home’

As of today (2018), the largest religious party in the Israeli parliament is ‘The Jewish Home’ [HaBayit HaYehudi], representing religious-Zionism. Religious-Zionists formed a distinct ideology of a unique hybridity, seeking to live according to the Orthodox-Jewish Halakhic code while taking part in the Zionist movement and the establishment of a modern nation for the Jewish people (Schwartz, 2003). Against the Orthodox rabbis’ rejection of Zionism, the Mizrahi movement formed in 1902, under the leadership of Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Reines, adopted the slogan ‘The Land of Israel, for the People of Israel, according to the Torah of Israel’. The Mizrahi movement’s pragmatic approach enabled cooperation with the secular Labor Party (MAPAI). The so-called ‘historical alliance’ between the parties was formed in the 1930s and lasted until 1976. Another religious-Zionist sect, ‘HaPoel Hamizrachi’, identified with more socialist values, united with ‘Hamizrachi’ in 1957 in order to form the National-Religious Party [Mafdal]. Between 1955 and 1977 the joint list consistently won 10–12 Knesset seats (8.3–9.9 percent of the popular vote) and was the third or fourth largest party. The NRP’s efforts were turned to the preservation of the status quo arrangements and the party platform did not suggest their desire for any substantial changes in religion and state relations. Overall, the alliance between MAPAI and the NRP was based on a division of labour: MAPAI controlled security and foreign affairs and the NRP was in charge of religious ‘internal’ affairs.

In the 1960s, groups of young religious-Zionists began to express their dissatisfaction with this state of affairs and started seeking a more prominent role for religion (and for religious-Zionists) in Israeli leadership, no longer willing to accept religious Zionism’s marginal role. Gush Emunim (‘Bloc of the Faithful’), which appeared on the scene during the 1970s, constituted an attempt by the religious Zionists to make headway into a position of leadership while fusing religion, politics and territoriality (Schwartz, 1999: 83). While these feelings were prevalent among many religious-Zionists, the most vocal group expressing them was formed in ‘Merkaz HaRav’ yeshiva, under the leadership of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. Religious Zionists came to believe that it was time to assume leadership and settle the new territories occupied in
the war of 1967 to ensure they would become part of a larger Israel. The victory and the so-called ‘liberation’ of the occupied territories was attributed to divine intervention and the actualisation of the redemption of the People of Israel (Aran, 1987, 2013). The settlement of the territories – areas with historical and religious significance – was for religious Zionists both the fulfilment of religious commandments and national duty.

The growing influence of the younger generation led, in 1976, to the NRP’s decision to end the ‘historical alliance’ with the Labor Party. The trigger was the arrival of F-15 jets to Israel during the Sabbath, allegedly violating tacit agreements, that led to the resignation of the party’s ministers, forcing the government to dissolve and declare new elections. The increasing influence of ‘the youngsters’ was also evident in the party platform for the 1977 elections. The platform started with a declaration that Jerusalem is ‘The eternal capital of the People of Israel’ and that ‘The NRP will demand that the Israeli government will establish a national settlement program throughout all the land of Israel’, including the territories (referred to by their biblical names, Judaea and Samaria). The platform officially stated that ‘the historical alliance’ had ended and the NRP ‘[S]ees itself free to act in order to establish a government that will satisfy the needs and challenges of the state and the people, in light of its national religious vision’.

In the 1977 elections the Labor Party was ousted from power after almost 40 years. The NRP, which won 12 Knesset seats (9.2 percent of the popular vote), joined the coalition headed by the right-wing Likud Party, both committed to the settlement project. The new government accelerated the pace of settlement and during the first decade after 1977, 82 new settlements were established in the West Bank and 65,000 new settlers were added to the 5,000 settlers living there in 1977. Paradoxically, while the settlement movement’s power kept growing, the NRP’s political power decreased by more than 50 percent. From 1977 until the party’s transformation in 2008, the NRP regularly won only 4–6 Knesset seats (3.5–5 percent of the popular vote). However, its extra-parliamentary power was far more significant as Gush Emunim had immense influence on government policy.

In the early 2000s, the NRP’s political power declined due to the establishment of an extreme-right-wing party ‘The National Union’ [Ha’Ichud HaLeumi]. The National Union (NU) was comprised of prominent figures from within the settlement movement and presented a more hawkish character. The NU brought under its wing several small parties and individuals, united in their opposition to the Oslo peace process (that began in 1993) and the future territorial compromises it entailed. In 2005, both parties resigned from government in opposition to the disengagement plan from Gaza, but failed to prevent its implementation. The disengagement plan, which included the removal of settlements from the Gaza Strip and the north of the West Bank, encouraged the parties to unite before the next election. The results of the 2006 elections, however, were disappointing for religious-Zionists, winning only nine seats.

In 2008, the party rebranded itself as ‘The Jewish Home’, part of a wider attempt to reach new audiences. A committee of 40 public figures, led by former major-general Yaakov Amidror, was established in order to determine the party list of candidates. Daniel Herschkowitz, a mathematics professor, was elected party leader. But, shortly before the elections the NU withdrew from the party and won four parliament seats, while ‘The Jewish Home’ won only three seats. In the wake of its electoral failure, the party decided to hold open primaries among party members to elect representatives and the leader. The primaries were perceived as a struggle between the old party establishment, led by Zvulun Orlev (who himself was considered a leader among ‘the youngsters’ in the 1960s), and a new generation led by Naftali Bennet. Bennet, a successful entrepreneur who made his fortune in high-tech, joined the party along with his non-religious female political partner, Ayelet Shaked. Together, they presented an economic neoliberal agenda, along with populist statements against the old elites and the
Supreme Court, in order to appeal also to secular right-wing constituencies. Bennet’s sweeping victory, with 67 percent of the votes, signalled another change in national religious politics, with a new and more comprehensive agenda and the attempt to seek support beyond the traditional constituencies. The party platform for the 2012 elections presented the settlement project as part of a national goal to advance the social periphery, rather than a religious obligation. Moreover, regarding issues of religion and state, the platform states that “[T]he state’s [Jewish] character must be determined through dialogue among the entire public … We must avoid religious legislation and coercive secular legislation”.

In 2012, the party formed a joined list with the NU and won 12 Knesset seats (9.1 percent of the popular vote), restoring the political power they had in 1977. After the elections, the party joined Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government, and Bennet served as the minister of economics and minister of religious services. During his first term in the Knesset Bennet did not try to implement any significant changes in religion affairs. This relatively moderate position, in line with the party’s strategy to expand its appeal, led to another split of the party led by Rabbi Zvi Tao (a disciple of Rabbi Zvi Yehudah), and the formation of ‘Yahad’, a more religious and radical-right party. Consequently, in the 2015 elections, the party’s seats shrank from 12 to 8 (6.7 percent of the popular vote). However, despite the setback, the party’s influence within the government grew. Bennet was appointed as minister of education and Ayelet Shaked as minister of justice.

The party’s attempt to expand its base of support was criticised from within by those who demanded it should remain loyal to its core. Conversely, the growing influence of the party through its control of significant ministries, led to opposition from the outside for what secular Israelis perceived as the growing influence of religion [Hadatul] in public life, as the party took a more activist position, meshing religious attachment with national identity. In the education system, for example, it was the religious language used in textbooks, and the channelling of money aimed for extracurricular activities almost entirely to Orthodox organisations. The party has also adopted a hawkish agenda, more than other parties in the coalition, that included legislation to legalise settlements and advocating a militant policy towards Palestinians.

Overall, the national religious party was transformed, first, from a moderate and somewhat marginal political force allied with a dominant Labor Party, to a right-wing and active party, heir to Labor’s Zionism. And, second, from 2012 it attempted to expand beyond its traditional constituency of religious Zionists and its agenda of religious affairs and settlements to position itself as a contender for national leadership.

**United Torah Judaism**

United Torah Judaism (UTJ) is currently the largest party representing ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews. Traditionally, ultra-Orthodox Jews rejected the Zionist movement from the outset, as it was perceived as violating ‘The three oaths’ prohibiting the immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel (Ravitzky, 1993). Moreover, the ultra-Orthodox opposition to Zionism persisted even after many of them immigrated to Palestine seeking refuge from anti-Semitism. In 1912 the ultra-Orthodox established a unified political umbrella organisation, Agudat Yisrael, its branch in Palestine established in 1919. The party did not take part in the Zionist project of nation and state building and explicitly rejected the authority of Zionist institutions. But, gradually the party has made different compromises and allowed some cooperation, as demonstrated in the status-quo arrangements. Opposed to these developments, some Haredi sects such as ‘Neturei Karta’ and ‘HaEda Hacharedit’ confronted the politics of Agudat Yisrael and demanded a total separation from the Zionist institutions. These groups maintained their distance from the state,
refusing to participate in politics or public life. While they did not directly influence Israeli politics, they have created public pressure that affected Haredi community’s positions.

Agudat Yisrael, despite its relatively small electoral clout, was able to negotiate and secure Haredi interests, and as a result became gradually involved in secular politics. The party was not officially part of the governing coalition but provided political support to the government. In return, Haredim received welfare support, autonomy for their educational system and exemption from enlistment to the army, mandatory for all Jewish men. These arrangements, sometimes perceived by the Israeli secular public as political extortion, supported the wide yeshivot (religious schools of higher learning) system that rapidly expanded. Thus, while the party representing Haredim opposed the secular state, its values, culture and symbols, it acknowledged the fact that Israel is the centre of the Jewish world. Consequently, Haredi politics also extended beyond sectorial interests and included demands for religious observance in the public sphere, over issues like marriage and divorce or the observance of Shabat (Sabbath).

Between 1951 and 1981 the party regularly won 3–4 Knesset seats (2–3.7 percent of the popular vote) with a platform that advocated the establishment of a theocracy in Israel, implementing religious rules and mores as the foundation for all legislation. Specifically, Agudat Yisrael advocated the abdiction of women’s enlistment to the army, strict observance of the Sabbath in the public sphere, prohibition on the sale of pork and on autopsies, as well as other religious issues. In addition, the party supported welfare policies important for Haredim with their mainly low-income households, large families and low participation in the labour force. Accordingly, Agudat Yisrael demanded universal public health care and financial aid for large families.

The ultra-Orthodox parties in Israel are exceptional in the fact that all party institutions (including the politicians themselves) are not autonomous to make decisions but subordinated to a religious authority. ‘The Council of Great Torah Sages’ [Mo’etzet Gedolei HaTorah] is the Ashkenazi authority, and ‘The Council of Wise Torah Sages’ [Mo’etzet Chakhmei HaTorah] is the Sephardic authority controlling the Shas party. Both councils select the parties’ list of candidates, are involved with policy making and determine the parties’ agenda regarding political issues. Haredi parties are mostly concerned with religious affairs and consider issues of security, foreign affairs and economics as secondary. Consequently, while Agudat Yisrael advocated moderate positions on issues of security and foreign policy, it consistently supported in recent years right-wing governments more receptive to its demands over religious issues.

The councils’ rulings do not allow women to be elected as Knesset members and in the Ashkenazi case, the council also forbade its members of parliament to serve as ministers, and therefore Agudat Yisrael (and later UTJ) did not take an active part in government and refused ministerial portfolios. The party did take part in the coalition and its members served as the heads of parliamentary committees (traditionally the finance committee). Lately, however, due to the party’s strong support for Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, the party agreed to appoint Yaakov Lizman as a deputy-minister of health (though he de facto serves as minister). These changes may be indicative of wider trends where the ultra-Orthodox become more involved in state and societal affairs, gaining ‘secular’ education and taking part in the labour market.

The diversity and schisms of the ultra-Orthodox world eventually affected Agudat Yisrael. First, as elaborated below, Sephardic Jews marginalised in the party formed their own: Shas. The party was supported by Rabbi Elazar Shach, an Ashkenazi supreme rabbinical authority, who split from the party and ordered his followers to vote for Shas. The split within the Haredi community weakened Agudat Yisrael and in 1984 they won only two Knesset seats (1.7 percent). In 1988 Rabbi Shach completely removed himself from Agudat Yisrael and founded his own party, Degel HaTorah (‘The Flag of the Torah’) that in the elections of 1988 won two Knesset seats (1.5 percent) while Agudat Yisrael won five (4.5 percent). After the parliament’s
decision to raise the election threshold to 1.5 percent the two parties decided to reunite and the UTJ ('Yahadut HaTorah HaMeuchedet') was formed in 1992. Since the unification, the party’s power grew gradually and in 2013 it reached a peak of seven Knesset seats (5.2 percent).

**Shas**

Unlike Ashkenazi haredi parties, Shas entered Israeli politics not only to defend the interests of a specific public and advance the cause of Jewish halakhic legislation, but also to implement a far-reaching change in the social agenda and the Israeli collective identity (Ben-Rafael and Leon, 2006: 309). The ethnic division in Israel is usually referred to as that between Ashkenazin (Jews of European descent) and Mizrahim or Sefaradim (Jews of Middle Eastern or North African descent). This division began before statehood but became more salient after statehood with the mass immigration of Jews from Muslim countries. The state and its institutions embarked on a project of assimilation that sought to culturally transform the newcomers, disregarding their traditional or religious preferences. At the same time, many of these immigrants were marginalised, relegated to the periphery and became blue-collar laborers in the developing economy. As a result, an ‘ethnic gap’ was formed, reflected in residency patterns, educational attainment and income distribution. Combining ethnicity and religiosity, Shas advocated a return to tradition against the secularisation forced on Mizrahi immigrants, and protested their marginalisation. Becoming a significant political force, the party was successful in channelling Mizrahi resentment not against the Ashkenazi element, being loyal to Jewish unity and the state, but rather against the secular element (Peled, 1998).

Sephardic Jews, who became part of the ultra-Orthodox world in response to the secularising attempts of the state (Friedman, 1991: 176–177), also found themselves marginalised within Haredi society. Not represented in ‘The Council of Great Torah Sages’, where discussions were held in Yiddish, not represented in Agudat Yisrael institutions, and with limited access to prestigious educational institutions, Sephardic Jews became frustrated. At first, a Shas list participated in the 1983 municipal elections in Jerusalem, in response to the discrimination of Sephardic girls in orthodox schools, where it received surprising strong support. Encouraged by that success, a national party was formed and a separate Sephardic religious authority: ‘The Council of Wise Torah Sages’, led by the Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Shas received support initially mainly from ultra-Orthodox groups: The Haredi Mizrahi community and The Haredi Ashkenazi followers of Rabbi Shach. In the 1984 elections, Shas won four Knesset seats (3.1 percent) and immediately became the biggest Haredi party.

Like UTJ, Shas demands that the laws of the state be guided by religious rules. But, unlike Ashkenazi Haredi parties, Shas constituency extended well beyond the Haredi world and included also traditional non-Orthodox (Masorti) Mizrahim in peripheral towns and neighbourhoods. Consequently, the party’s attitude towards the state and its institutions was also very different. First, many of its supporters and political candidates served in the army and participate in the labour market. And, second, the party delegates willingly took upon themselves ministerial positions, with the support of the council. Through its political power Shas was able to create an extensive network of educational and welfare institutions, constituting a substitute for the receding welfare state and thereby reinforcing the party’s standing with both the state, which used it as an intermediary, and with its voters, who became more dependent on the party’s social and economic network (Levi and Amreich, 2001).

If at the outset Shas aimed at rectifying the discrimination against Mizraim, from the 1990s onward the party championed a religious revolution and a spiritual revival aimed at changing the balance of power between the secular majority and the religious minority (Tessler, 2003:
Shas’s slogan: ‘Lehahazir Atara LeYoshna’ (‘Bringing back the crown (of the Torah) to the (good) old days’) refers not only to its demand for dominance in rulings over religious matters, but also to the marginalisation forced on it by the Zionist Ashkenazi hegemony. On security issues, its spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia, stated his support for peace with the Palestinians but the party gradually adopted a hawkish position and took part in ruling right-wing coalitions. Aside from its spiritual leader and founder Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, the figure most associated with the party is Rabbi Aryeh Deri. Deri was first appointed as executive director in the ministry of interior, held by Shas. After the minister resigned, Deri at the age of 29 became the youngest minister in Israel’s history. In the late 1980s, when a corruption investigation against Deri began, he was successfully able to depict it as an elitist attempt to curb the party’s power. Shortly before he was convicted in 1999 the party enjoyed its biggest success in the ballots: 17 Knesset seats (13 percent). Besides Aryeh Deri, over the years six additional MKs from Shas were convicted in felonies, though none of them received the same public support.

After Deri’s conviction, he was replaced by Eli Yishai, who later became his political rival. Under Yishai, the party started emphasising its hawkish views and Yishai led the party to resign from the government due to the Camp David negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians in 2000. Without Deri’s charismatic leadership the party’s power declined and it won only 11 Knesset seats (8.2 percent). Moreover, Shinui, a new secular party, won 15 seats, with a powerful anti-religious campaign and left Shas outside the coalition for the first time in its history. In 2009 Shas re-entered the government and Yishai was appointed as minister of interior, a position he used in order to present a hard line against African asylum-seekers. Yishai opposed the outcries to acknowledge them as refugees and promoted policies in order to deport and imprison the asylum-seekers he referred to as ‘infiltrators’.

In 2012 Aryeh Deri officially returned to politics and was re-appointed as the head of the party. Eli Yishai, in return, resigned from the party and formed a more right-wing party named Beyahad (Together). In the 2015 elections Beyahad won almost 3 percent of the popular vote but did not pass the electoral threshold, which was raised to 3.25 percent. The split of Shas, and more importantly the death of its spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, caused another decline of the party’s power, down to seven parliamentary seats.

Conclusions

Religious and secular politics in Israel shifted from a politics of accommodation, underscored by the status quo, to a ‘politics of crisis’ of deeper schisms and contention (Susser and Coen, 2000). First, economic and demographic changes rendered previous arrangements all but obsolete, leading, on the one hand, to secularisation and the undermining of religious authority, but, on the other hand, to a religious resurgence (Ben-Porat, 2013). Second, religious schisms overlapped with ethnic, economic and political divides, adding to religious-secular tensions. And, third, the political system was no longer able to enforce the status quo but also incapable of creating new, updated and accepted rules that could answer the rising challenges and contain the growing differences. The political standstill was not unique to questions of religion but was indicative of a deeper and wider political crisis and an unstable political system.

Religious parties, as described above, while moving away from the status quo, followed different trajectories. For religious Zionism, the status quo implied a marginal role in politics and society. After the war of 1967, a younger generation challenged its marginal position, claiming their time had come to assume leadership. The settlement of the territories – areas with historical and religious significance – was for religious Zionists the fulfilment of religious commandments and national duty. Consequently, the NRP (and its successor the Jewish Home)
became a right-wing party advocating both religious revival and a hawkish foreign/security policy, distancing itself from previous accommodation and compromises.

For the ultra-Orthodox Agudat Yisrael the political divide between the secular parties provided an opportunity for substantial gains, funding for religious institutions, exemptions from military service and attempted religious legislation. These gains, however, deepened the schism between religious and secular, perceived by secular Israelis as ‘extortions’. Ultra-Orthodox religious parties struggle to defend the autonomy of their religious institutions and their exemptions from military service, both perceived as essential to protect the community from secularisation. Shas, more aligned with state and society, and supported by a wider constituency that took part in its education and social network, adopted a wider social and political agenda and different political strategies. Overall, religious parties, on the one hand, broke away from compromises in favour of a firmer religious agenda. But, on the other hand, became more nationalistic and more involved in secular politics and society.

Notes
1 This social group is also referred to as ‘National-religious’, e.g. in Herman (2014).
2 Gadi Taub (2007) interestingly notes the exclusion of the state of Israel from this trinity.
3 The son of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, an idiosyncratic ultra-Orthodox figure who served as the chief rabbi of Israel during the mandate period. While Rabbi Zvi Yehuda presents himself as following his father’s teachings, researchers have noted some substantial differences between their theologies (Ravitzky, 1993; Aran, 1987).
4 All quotes are taken from the NRP platform for 1977 elections, as appears on the Israeli Democracy Institute website. www.idi.org.il/media/6982/hamifлага-hadatit-leumit-9.doc (Hebrew).
5 One exception to this is the 1996 elections (in which the NRP won 7.9 percent), though this idiosyncrasy can be attributed to the revision in the electoral system, which led to a general increase in the power of sectorial parties.
6 https://www.idi.org.il/media/6469/ה%-D7%25-
7 Bennet explained these results by claiming that large numbers among the national-religious community decided to vote for Benjamin Netanyahu, in order to prevent a victory of the left, though some argue the data shows otherwise. See https://mida.org.il/2015/03/22/ע-ש-%D7%25.
9 The council changed this decision in August 2015, after the supreme court ruled that Yaakov Litzman cannot serve as a deputy-minister with no minister. In 2018 the Knesset law was changed so that Litzman can return to his position as deputy-minister after he resigned from the government due to railway construction taking place on the Sabbath.

References


