

Ankara University,
Faculty of Political Science
**The Turkish Yearbook of
International Relations,**
Volume 45 (2014), p. 41 - 64

Religion, Settlements and Israel's Relations with Palestinian Arabs

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Abstract

The emergence of Israel as an independent state shows the importance of religious identity in shaping political outcomes. Israel has been the fulfilment of the Zionist vision of Palestine as a homeland for Jews throughout the world from different backgrounds, and the founding leadership tried to create a state running with secular rather than religious principles. However, after the 1967 war added to Israel the territories that constituted the core of the biblically promised lands, namely the West Bank (described in Israeli parlance as Judea and Samaria) and East Jerusalem with the Temple Mount, which are the holiest places in Judaism, tens of thousands of religious Jews began to settle in those areas. They have high birth rates and their beliefs cause frictions between different levels of Israeli society. Moreover, they carry weight in Israeli politics far in excess of their numbers and occupy key positions in the military, the government, and various layers of the bureaucracy. They can affect the decision-making process in government circles and provide a support base for religious militants. Moreover, they strengthen the struggle against territorial withdrawals and may be seen as an obstacle for peace. This paper examines the role of religion in foreign policy in Israel with particular reference to religious Zionism. It explores the influence of religion in shaping the policy towards Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The argument is that for Israel, it is imperative to balance the effects of religious nationalism if it wants to reach a permanent peace and ensure its security.

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Introduction

The emergence of Israel as an independent state in 1948 highlighted the power of religious identity in shaping political outcomes. Israel came into being as the fulfilment of the Zionist vision of Palestine as a homeland for Jews throughout the world, and the post-independence leadership sought to create a state run by secular rather than religious political principles. Despite the central role of religious identity in bringing the Jewish state into being, religion was rarely mentioned in discussing the foreign policy.

However, religion can be a cause of conflict in and between states and an important variable in shaping the conflict behaviour of the parties involved. In this respect, religion has been quite influential in Israel's policy towards the territories occupied in 1967. When Israel was established, religious groups focused on implementing theological values, education, and laws to meet the conditions of the modern state, and tried to make them central to the daily life of Jews. They largely kept away from the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, after 1967, the religious groups gave a religious meaning to the conquest of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Instead of working to shape Jewish society according to religious rules, they began to deal with shaping conquered lands and argued that Jewish possession and settlement would accelerate arrival of the messianic age. They carried out a selective reading of the Jewish tradition, singled out the settling of the Land of Israel (Eretz Israel)² as the prime precept of Judaism, and challenged the prevailing secular establishment.

To this day, the role and compatibility of religion and politics has remained a strong focal point of countless debates, which became most visible after the 1990s. While the Labour Party based its commitment to the peace process on secular norms and values, the religious groups' opposition was motivated by a completely different normative mindset which centred around a messianic

2 Eretz Israel or Eretz Yisrael is a Hebrew term meaning "Land of Israel." It is used to refer to Palestine and is found in the Bible. It refers to the land of ancient Israel which covers all of Palestine, including West Bank and Jerusalem. See Bernard Reich and David H. Goldberg, *Historical Dictionary of Israel* (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), p.156.

theology. Apart from framing the territorial issue in religious terms, the religious groups were also influential as a political actor. They spearheaded the settlement of the occupied territories, were the first to set up communities in the West Bank, and protested fervently against any territorial concessions. Moreover, they utilised the mechanisms and power constellations of Israel's political system, which led to their regular involvement in the governing coalitions.

This paper begins by looking at the connection between religion, nationalism and the creation of the modern state of Israel in Palestine before discussing the role that religion played in shaping the foreign policy of the state. It tries to elaborate the growth of religious nationalism as a political force from the late 1960s on and its influence on government. The paper considers how far the foreign policy of Israel can be ascribed to the role of religion by emphasising the dangers and limitations of the Land of Israel ideology in forming foreign policy.

Religion and Politics from 1948 until the 1967 War

During the diaspora life, Jewish communities in different parts of the world considered the Jewish homeland, 'Zion', as a very important religious image but did not hope to actually return to and resettle the Land of Israel. However, "the longing for Zion did not disappear over the centuries but, like the appearance of the Messiah, was postponed until the dim and distant future."³ The Land of Israel constituted an important part of prayers and liturgy, but did not represent a basic element of Jewish life and identity. Until the end of the 19th century, when political Zionism entered the stage of history, the idea of living in the Land of Israel was a spiritual rather than a practical, realistic hope. The modern notion of Zionism was brought about in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but was mainly denounced by the religious

³ Kenneth D. Wald, "The Religious Dimension of Israeli Political Life," in Ted. G. Jelen and William C. Wilcox (eds.), *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: The One, The Few, and The Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.100.

community. Orthodox Jews⁴ believed that the Jewish people's return to the Land of Israel would occur only with the coming of Messiah:

“Their daily prayers contained passages that affirmed their faith in the promise G-d had made to the Jewish people at the time they were chosen to receive His law, a promise that He would send a Messiah as part of His plan for the Jews and for humanity and that the coming of the Messiah would be accompanied by the establishment for all time of a Jewish dominion in the land of Israel.”⁵

Theodor Herzl's political Zionism was an answer to the challenges of modernity which was shaped by enlightenment, secularisation, liberalism, and nationalism. It was one of the secular nationalist movements of the 19th century and was a response to the emerging anti-Semitism in Europe. It stood in the tradition of secular liberalism and used symbols and motifs of the Jewish religious tradition and history in order to foster a national movement.⁶ However, the religious Jewish community had difficulties in integrating this secular nationalistic movement into its religious worldview. As the political Zionists increasingly used language contrary to the outlook of most religious Jewish communities, many religious organizations began opposing Zionism. Their opposition was based on its secularism and on the grounds that only the Messiah could re-establish Jewish rule in Israel. “Most Orthodox Jews originally rejected Zionism because they believed the Jews must await the Messiah to restore them to nationhood.”⁷ Religious Jews held the traditional belief that the

4 The enlightenment and emancipation confronted the Jews with problems as to their religious identity. Social changes compelled many of them to alter their religious practices. The term “Orthodox” came into use to describe the Jews who continued Judaism's traditional tenets and practices. See Hilary L. Rubinstein, Dan Cohn-Sherbok, Abraham J. Edelheit and William D. Rubinstein, *The Jews in the Modern World: A History Since 1750* (London: Arnold Publishers, 2002), pp.45-47.

5 Mark Tessler, *Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), p.254.

6 Rubinstein *et al.*, pp.303-320.

7 Stephen M. Wylen, *Settings of Silver: An Introduction to Judaism* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000), p.356.

Land of Israel was given to the ancient Israelites by God, and the right of the Jews to that land was permanent and inalienable. Therefore the Messiah must have appeared before the land could return to Jewish control. For this reason, religious Jews adopted a rejectionist position towards Zionism, and held the idea that establishing a Jewish state would be a heresy.⁸ However, some modern and religious Jews have accepted an adaptive strategy, supporting Zionism and its modern lifestyle, and required that the Messiah should not be waited for the Jewish state to be established, and this state should run according to both secular and Jewish religious norms and principles. Thus, Orthodoxy in Judaism has been divided between religious non-Zionist and religious Zionist groups,⁹ non-Zionist groups opposing the creation of the state while religious Zionist (also known as religious nationalist) groups supporting it.

During the creation of the state, despite the distinct identity of the Jewish people being the *raison d'être* for the state of Israel, the nature of the state was to be an irresolvable problem. If it were to be a Jewish State, religious Jews expected the state to be governed by religious law. If it were to be a state for Jews, what mattered was Jewishness as an ethnic badge rather than a religious identity. When Israel was established, religious groups wanted the state to adopt religious norms in state laws. These demands were politically significant, because they were put forward to the public by religious parties, and during the independence period, it was important to secure the unity of the Jewish people coming from different religious and historical backgrounds. However, the Constituent Assembly elected to draft a constitution in 1949 was unable to agree on a draft, thus resolved instead that the parliament (Knesset) should pass a series of Basic Laws that would substitute the constitution. The result has been a compromise between secular and religious Jews, accepting the secular law as the baseline and making arrangements to give legal status to some religious norms and

⁸ Tessler, p.265.

⁹ Reuven Y. Hazan, "Religion and Politics in Israel The Rise and Fall of the Consociational Model," in Reuven Y. Hazan and Moshe Maor (eds.), *Parties, Elections and Cleavages Israel in Comparative and Theoretical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.113.

practices. Because there was not a constitution in Israel, these arrangements were ingrained in laws and regulations reflecting a practical compromise.

Even though religious identity had a central role of bringing Israel into being in 1948, religion was rarely mentioned in shaping the foreign policy of the state. Religious Zionism played only a minor role during the pre-state period and in the first two decades of the new state. Majority of European secular immigrants, mainly Ashkenazi origin, formed the social and political establishment in Israel. They were represented by the first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's Labour Party and controlled the country's development, and the secular leadership reached out to religious Zionists in order to secure the internal stability of the fragmented Israeli society.

The compromise or agreement between the secular Zionist leadership and the religious Jews was based on a June 1947 letter addressed by Ben-Gurion to the leadership of Agudat Israel, an umbrella organisation of the religious Jews. "The partnership was based on a coalition between the main socialist party and the main religious Zionist party, even when the latter was not needed."¹⁰ With this arrangement, while the religious Zionists were allowed to have a say in many domestic decisions; including recognition of the Jewish Sabbath, maintaining kashrut (Jewish dietary laws) in public institutions, state funding of religious public schools, and the acceptance of rabbinical authority over marriage and divorce,¹¹ they were kept from engaging in foreign policy. As a result, the new Jewish state began to use Jewish symbols (the Shield of David carried on the national flag and the menorah that is the national emblem), institutions (the establishment of the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Chief Rabbinate), language (Hebrew), and holidays (Jewish Holy Days).¹² Until the rise of religious nationalism in the 1970s, religious parties concentrated on their material interests (state patronage and funding for their own educational institutions and subsidised

¹⁰ Ibid., p.116.

¹¹ Alan Dowty, *The Jewish State A Century Later* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p.166.

¹² Ibid., p.187.

housing, exemption of Haredi males from compulsory military service) rather than broader issues, including foreign affairs. The handling of foreign and security policy was overseen only by secular Zionist leadership of Mapai/Labour.¹³

Even though the new state was governed by secular Zionists, Israel was marked by its creation on the basis of religious identity, and “there is no secular definition of Jewishness.”¹⁴ The first chief rabbi in the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community in mandatory Palestine), Avraham Yitzhak Kook, was the theological source for religious Zionism. Contrary to most religious Jews at the time who regarded secular Zionism as a heretical movement that defied the will of God by trying to end Jewish exile before the arrival of the Messiah, Kook supported the secular Zionists in the belief that the return of Jews to their homeland represented the beginning of the process of divine redemption. He argued that secular Zionists, the pioneers who had begun emigrating from Europe to Palestine, were carrying out God's will. Kook justified the participation of religious Jews in the Zionist national project, and rationalised the relationship between secular Zionism and religion:

“The spirit of Israel is so closely linked to the spirit of God that a Jewish nationalist, no matter how secularist his intention may be, is, despite himself, imbued with the divine spirit even against his own will.”¹⁵

Thus, Kook assigned an inherent holiness to Jewish people and the Land of Israel as a whole. He applied this argument to the reality of Zionist settlement in Palestine, and secular Zionist ideology was accepted by some religious Jews as a divine instrument in achieving the redemption of the Jewish people. This use of theological thought was an example of how religion affected the politics.

13 Zeev Maoz, *Defending the Holy Land A Critical Analysis of Israel's Security and Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2006), p.488.

14 Akiva Orr, *Israel Politics, Myths and Identity Crises* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), p.50.

15 Quoted in David J. Goldberg, *To the Promised Land A History of Zionist Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p.155.

Religious Communities and Political Life in Israel

Traditionally, there have been three main religious parties (the National Religious Party [NRP] of Datim¹⁶, the United Torah Judaism Party [UTJ] of Askhenazic¹⁷ Haredim, and the Shas Party of Mizrahi (Oriental)¹⁸ Haredim¹⁹) in Israel representing their religious communities.²⁰

After 1967, the NRP was the main religious nationalist party. It worked hard to balance the demands of rival groups of which one who put settlements first and the other who prioritised the use of religious practices in daily life. It was always a member of all coalitions from 1948 to 1992.²¹ After 1973, the party took a more nationalistic character, and its followers believed that settlements

16 Datim (modern Orthodox Jews) is the plural of the word Dati. Dati literally means “religious”. It refers to the group of Jews who follow religious practices and integrate them with modernity. See Barry Rubin, *Israel An Introduction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), p.331.

17 These are the Jews of eastern and central European extraction. They were the main components of the first waves of Zionist immigration to Palestine. See Reich and Goldberg, p.56.

18 These Jews are also called as Sephardim. This term was originally used to refer to the Jews from Spain expelled from the Iberian Peninsula during the Inquisition. This term is currently used when referring to all Jews of non-Western European descent which refers to all Jews whose origin is in the Arab world and Muslim lands. See Reich and Goldberg, p.366.

19 Haredim is the plural of the word Haredi. Haredi literally means “someone in fear of the power of the divine,” “God fearing”. It refers to describe the traditional Orthodox Jews (often translated in English as ultra-Orthodox). This group of Jews was generally non-Zionist in political orientation (“believing that the full national renewal of the Jewish people must await the arrival of the Messiah”), however most of them have realized Zionism and become integrated in Israeli political life with their own parties. “Demographically, the Haredim (along with the ‘modern Orthodox’) are among the fastest growing segments of the Jewish-Israeli population.” See Reich and Goldberg, p.207 and Rubin, p.332.

20 Rubin, pp.223-224.

21 Ibid., p.166.

in the West Bank and Jerusalem were closely associated with divine redemption. The competition from Shas and its rejection of the peace process all helped the NRP shrink in the Knesset, and it became an awkward coalition partner. As a result, it was not in the ruling coalition government in 1992.²² Internal disputes over the fate of Gaza and being a one-issue party destroyed the NRP, and it split ahead of the 2009 elections into National Union, a far-right, pro-settler group; and Jewish Home.

UTJ was formed in 1992 as an alliance between two ultra-Orthodox political parties, Agudat Israel and Degel HaTorah.²³ Agudat Israel was especially known in the late 1980s for its active support for the West Bank and Gaza settlers and its opposition to territorial concessions in peacemaking.²⁴ The party was controlled by a committee of senior Rabbis who chose the candidates for elections. It was not interested in gathering support outside its constituency. The party advocated for more inclusion of Jewish law within the frame of the state and believed that divine law superseded the state law, and it encouraged settlement building and discouraged territorial negotiations with the Palestinians, espousing the view that the entire Land of Israel is the divine right of the Jewish people. When Ehud Barak negotiated with Arafat in Camp David in 2000, UTJ quit the coalition government out of fear that Barak might give parts of Jerusalem to Palestinians.²⁵

The politics in Israel illustrates not only a deeper involvement of religious issues in domestic and foreign policy, but also deep struggles between parties, which is true also for the religious parties. This division has shown itself when the religious-political landscape was more and more fragmented by splits and mergers. The diversification caused by the rise of new competitors in the religious bloc is most impressively illustrated by the emergence of Shas in 1984. Shas was founded in 1984 as the answer to decades of discrimination by the Ashkenazi-dominated religious establishment. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef formed the party in protest

²² Ibid., p.224.

²³ Reich and Goldberg, p.522.

²⁴ Ibid., p.26.

²⁵ Rubin, p.225.

after Agudat Israel refused to place Mizrahi candidates on its election list.²⁶ Shas has been rarely out of the coalition since then. Officially Shas is a right-wing, ultra-Orthodox party.

The 1990s was marked by the electoral rise of the religious parties, peaking at 31 of the 120 Knesset seats in 1999. Five seats were claimed by the NRP and most of the rest by ultra-Orthodox groups including, most notably, Shas, which won 17 seats. Yosef believed that the Mizrahi Jews had a historically underprivileged position in Israeli society which stemmed from a loss of pride in their cultural heritage and therefore advocated “a spiritual-religious transformation of an ethnically conscious sector of society.”²⁷ Shas has enjoyed striking political success, took part in most of the Israeli governments formed since it entered the Knesset in 1984, and it was the third biggest partner in the governing coalition formed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert after the 2006 elections.

According to the results of the last elections for the Knesset which was held on 22 January 2013, Shas got 11 seats, and the other ultra-Orthodox party, UTJ, got 7 seats. Both parties managed to slightly improve their number of seats. While Mizrahi Shas won the same number of seats with the previous elections, the Ashkenazi UTJ raised its number from 5 to 7. At the same time, Naftali Bennett’s the Jewish Home (a religious nationalist party) got 12 seats together with the National Union Party.²⁸ This result meant a 9-seat increase for Bennett, who rejects the two-state solution with Palestinian Arabs, and this result also showed that Bennett has been one of the winners of the election. After the elections, he found himself in a powerful position for the coalition negotiations and announced that he would like to be the Minister of Housing and Construction to use that position to exert significant influence on the settlement policy.²⁹ However, he became Minister of Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs and Minister

26 Ibid.

27 Lilly Weissbrod, “Shas: An Ethnic Religious Party,” *Israel Affairs*, Vol.9, No.4 (2003), p.102.

28 Ralf Hexel, *Israel After The Elections: Is The Country Facing Political Change? International Policy Analysis* (Herzliya: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2013), p.11.

29 Ibid., p.6.

of Economy, but the post of the Minister of Housing and Construction was assumed by one of the members of the Jewish Home, Uri Yehuda Ariel, while both Shas and UTJ stayed out of the government.³⁰

Religious parties in Israel have usually got their electoral support almost from religious groups,³¹ and beginning from the 1970s, religious parties became more interested in foreign and security policies of the state. They did not confine themselves only to domestic issues; instead, gradually adopted a hawkish position on the territorial question. Given the fragmented political system, religious parties exerted considerable power and attained a powerful position within the government disproportionate to their electoral gains. In pressing their demands, they made or broke ruling coalitions or hastened early elections. As the electoral system forced parties to form coalition governments, the competition for power between Labour and Likud Parties (the major two parties in Israeli political system until 2000s) benefited the small religious parties. Both parties tried to induce religious parties to form a government, and their inclusion in the governing coalitions became a necessity. "Hawkishness, religiosity, Sephardi origin, relatively depressed economic status, and lower educational attainments constitute one broad electoral-ideological constituency, and dovishness, secularity, Ashkenazi origin, relatively comfortable economic status, and higher educational attainments form the other."³²

Because they are in an advantageous position during coalition formation, the small religious parties have the opportunity to blackmail the big parties. For instance, in many governments, the NRP controlled the Ministry of Housing and Construction, and increased the funding for new settlements in the occupied territories, and contributed to the ongoing conflict with

30 "Nineteenth Knesset: Government 33," *The Knesset*, 18 March 2013, http://www.knesset.gov.il/govt/eng/GovtByNumber_eng.asp (Accessed on 15 September 2014).

31 Hazan, p.114.

32 Asher Cohen and Bernard Susser, *Israel and The Politics of Jewish Identity The Secular-Religious Impasse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p.62.

Palestinians. However, the inclusion of religious parties in coalition governments was also closely linked to the foreign policy choices of the big parties in the government. In this respect, Yitzhak Rabin was the first prime minister who abstained from inviting religious parties into the government “in order to diminish the role of religion in foreign policy.”³³ In contrast, his successor Benjamin Netanyahu put together a religious nationalist coalition that supported his hawkish policies towards the Palestinian Arabs. In fact, Netanyahu’s victory in the 1996 elections was largely brought about by the broad support of the religious public, and by the late 1990s, the peace process was buried under renewed hostility and mistrust.

The Capture of Biblical Landscapes and the Question of Settlements

The year 1967 had profound impacts for Israeli society and Israeli politics. Israeli army captured the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem during the Six-Day War of 1967. This was a “momentous turning point in the history of the Jewish state.”³⁴ The 1967 war added to Israel those territories that constituted the core of the biblically promised land: Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), and East Jerusalem with the Temple Mount, the holiest place in Judaism. This gave rise to religious Zionism as an important factor which has been taken into account in Israeli politics since then. Many religious Jews saw the conquest of East Jerusalem and the West Bank of the Jordan river as the providentially redemptive hand of the God and those people thought that they were living in messianic times.³⁵ They interpreted the military campaign as a divine act which would restore the Jewish people to the promised land, and because the biblical lands were under the control of the Jewish

33 Hillel Frisch and Shmuel Sandler, “Religion, State, and the International System in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *International Political Science Review*, Vol.25, No.1 (2004), p.84.

34 Shmuel Sandler, *The State of Israel, The Land of Israel The Statist and Ethnonational Dimensions of Foreign Policy* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1993), p.141.

35 Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall Israel and the Arab World* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), p.549.

state, religious Zionists began to deal with the future of these territories. From then on, political discourse in Israel has had a religious factor which was absent in political spectrum while discussing foreign policy and security.

After the war, the young guard of the religious nationalists had the opportunity of combining nationalism and religion with the idea of Eretz Israel. These young generations took over the leadership of the NRP and became more closely associated with the hawkish position on territorial concessions. For the spiritual leader of the NRP, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, there were no occupied territories, only redeemed land. After the war he demanded their complete annexation and Jewish settlement.³⁶ His followers responded by establishing Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) in 1974 and began settlement activity in 1975.³⁷ Land began to be seen as an important factor in the worldview of these religious and political Jews:

“For many, territory has become the very core element of their ideology, having replaced other religious precepts as the foundation stone around which their religious and national affiliation is based. Their inherent ‘right’ to settle the West Bank is seen as part of a Divine process, of which pre-1967 Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 were stages through which abstract and metaphysical notions of space have been transformed into concrete notions of statehood following two thousand years of exile and territorial dislocation, and through which the ‘homeland’ territory has returned to its ‘rightful owner’, and been ‘liberated’ from foreign control.”³⁸

While the adherence to territory as a religious and nationalistic tool within the political spectrum was associated with the NRP, it was Gush Emunim which spearheaded the settlement drive with government approval. As one-time member of Gush Emunim, Rabbi Yehuda Amital stated:

36 Nur Masalha, *Imperial Israel and the Palestinians* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p.113; Dowty, p.228.

37 Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), pp.55-56.

38 David Newman, “From National to Post-National Territorial Identities in Israel-Palestine,” *GeoJournal*, Vol.53, No.3 (2001), p.241.

“This (religious-nationalist) Zionism has not come to solve the Jewish problem by the establishment of a Jewish State but is used, instead, by the High Providence as a tool in order to move and advance Israel towards its redemption. Its intrinsic direction is not the normalisation of the people of Israel in order to become a nation like all nations, but to become a holy people, a people of living God, whose basis is in Jerusalem and a king’s temple is its centre.”³⁹

Gush Emunim won widespread public acceptance soon after it was launched. Its main aim was to secure Israeli ownership of the West Bank by settling Jews throughout the occupied territories.⁴⁰ The State of Israel was seen as a means in achieving the sanctity of the Eretz Israel. The creation of the state was hastening the messianic era, rather than ending it. Sovereignty of God as enshrined in sacred Judaic texts was placed above that of the State. Thus, Gush Emunim rejected the secularity of the state that had determined the scope of political discourse in Israel until 1967. It regarded the land as central to the redemption of the Jewish people, and opposed any attempt to trade land for peace, which would otherwise be contrary to the will of God.

Changes in the ideological landscape of the political spectrum coincided with the transformation of the Israeli governing party system. The Likud Party won the elections in 1977, ending 30 years of political dominance of Labour. The Menachem Begin government of the Likud Party proceeded to implement ideological elements of the Revisionist Zionism.⁴¹ The Revisionist Movement has been an extreme rightist stream within Zionism under the

³⁹ Quoted in Ehud Sprinzak, *The Ascendance of Israel’s Radical Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.116.

⁴⁰ Dowty, p.228.

⁴¹ Revisionist Zionism was born as a reaction to mainstream zionism of David Ben-Gurion and Chaim Weizmann especially during mandate era. As an historic force, Vladimir Jabotinsky is considered to be the founding father of the Zionist Right (Herut and Likud line in Israeli politics). “Revisionist Zionists demanded that the entire mandated territory of Palestine, on both sides of the Jordan River, be turned into a Jewish state with a Jewish majority.” See Reich and Goldberg, p.418; Ilan Peleg, “The Zionist Right and Constructivist Realism, Ideological Persistence and Tactical Readjustments,” *Israel Studies*, Vol.10, No.3 (Fall 2005), pp.127-153.

leadership of Vladimir Jabotinsky. Begin was one of Jabotinsky's students and admirers, and during his tenure, the transformation of large chunks of the occupied territories into Eretz Israel proceeded apace.⁴² Begin's successor, Yitzhak Shamir, even compared the settlers to Israel's founding fathers, "creating the historical facts for which future generations of Israelis will bless them."⁴³ Begin's and his successors' paradigm included the vision of Eretz Yisrael as the expanded Land of Israel dedicated to the Jewish people by God. As a result, with the Likud in power, the Eretz Israel ideology was transformed into an nationalist agenda and became the core of right-wing foreign politics. Religious groups welcomed this result and "power sharing between a nationalist ruling party and the religious parties proved both more natural and politically potent."⁴⁴

There was a consensus of different parties for the retention of territories captured in the June 1967 war on strategic grounds. Not only all Israeli governments justified the retention of territories in terms of ensuring strategic security against the Arab world, but also they recognised the importance of the occupation in providing an economic market, and cheap pool of labour.⁴⁵ However, a convergence of interest emerged between Revisionist Zionists who believed the Eretz Israel ideal on historical grounds, and religious nationalist Zionists who saw the capture and settlement of Jerusalem and the West Bank in theological terms.⁴⁶ While Labour governments had limited goals of settling Jews in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the Begin government and the following Likud leaders tried to change the demographic balance in the territories in order to enable Israel to eventually annex them. The political goal of this project has been to prevent any solution to the conflict about territories, and to

42 Masalha, pp.119-121.

43 Yitzhak Shamir, *Summing Up An Autobiography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994), p.151.

44 Frisch and Sandler, p.83.

45 Ruth Margolies Beitler, "The Intifada Palestinian Adaptation to Israeli Counterinsurgency Tactics," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol.7, No.2 (Summer 1995), pp.55-56.

46 Clive Jones, "Ideo-Theology: Dissonance and Discourse in the State of Israel," *Israel Affairs*, Vol.3, No.3&4 (Spring/Summer 1997), pp.28-46.

ensure Israeli annexation in the future.⁴⁷ Thus, Gush Emunim and Likud Party enjoyed a relationship on supporting settlements. Unlike the Labour Party, which signalled a willingness to exchange land for peace, Likud took the position that Israel had the right to maintain these territories for reasons mentioned above, and this issue continues to define the main axis of political conflict in Israel.

While the political system in Israel moved rightward and Israeli society became more ideologically radicalized, the religious nationalist position of the NRP towards the settlements became more acceptable for the new political mainstream. And, the support of the new cabinet for the establishment of new settlements in the West Bank, announced by Begin and the new Minister of Agriculture Ariel Sharon immediately after the elections, was highly appreciated by the settlers of Gush Emunim.⁴⁸ What brought together Likud with the Jewish settlers and the NRP was the emphasis on the Eretz Israel over the State of Israel.⁴⁹ Begin endorsed settlement plans of Gush Emunim, and generous government grants, attractive loans for housing, and support for infrastructure (roads, electricity, water). Likud Party considered the settlement project as the implementation of the Eretz Israel ideology with its emphasis on the use of power, territoriality, and the refusal to work toward a negotiated compromise with Palestinian Arabs. Likud and its followers viewed the Arab-Jewish dispute as a struggle over territory, and after 1977 large-scale portions of land was expropriated. As Begin wrote in 1951, “this wandering people had returned to its Homeland. The secular tour was ended.”⁵⁰ Forty years later, his successor, Yitzhak Shamir, addressing the Middle East Peace Conference in Madrid, declared: “No nation has expressed its bond with its land with as much intensity and consistency as we

47 Peleg (2005), p.140.

48 Ilan Peleg, *Begin's Foreign Policy 1977-1983 Israel's Move to the Right* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp.45-47.

49 Uri Ram, “From Nation-State to Nation-State: Nation, History and Identity Struggles in Jewish Israel,” in Ephraim Nimni (eds.), *The Challenge of Post-Zionism Alternatives to Israeli Fundamentalist Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2003), p.28.

50 Menachem Begin, *The Revolt* (London: W.H. Allen, 1951), p.372.

have...Only Eretz Israel, the Land of Israel, is our true homeland.”⁵¹ As a result, Gush Emunim established more than 40 settlements during Begin's first term (1977-1981), most of them in the West Bank.⁵² When Begin left office in 1983, “Israel controlled 42 percent of the West Bank and 31 percent of the Gaza Strip, and this large-scale land seizure radicalized the Palestinian population, contributing to the outbreak of the first Intifada in 1987.”⁵³

Although it had been Labour who had first initiated the construction of settlements in the territories, the number of these settlements had been limited to security considerations. Likud started an immense project of building settlements which were especially concentrated on the West Bank and were put forward to the Israeli public as part of both a national and a security agenda. However, as Begin told the participants of a party conference in 1967 after the Six-Day War that “the right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, in its historical integrity, is an eternal and inalienable right,”⁵⁴ the settlement activity was hardly related to strategic considerations. Rather, it was designed to make the occupation irreversible and to enable Israel to eventually annex the territories by fragmenting the Palestinian land, creating irreversible facts on the ground and paving the way for the Judeazation of the West Bank by changing its political and demographic structure.⁵⁵

Religious parties' attachment to Eretz Israel ideology has framed their attitude to Israel as a state. Following the Six-Day War, this paradigm, together with the fact that their followers tended to be more hawkish, inclined them towards pursuing a harder line in foreign policy.⁵⁶ However, the attitudes of the different religious parties towards the occupied territories has not been

51 Shamir, p.238.

52 Peleg (2005), pp.140-141.

53 Ibid, p.141.

54 Arye Naor, “Hawks' Beaks, Doves' Feathers: Likud Prime Ministers Between Ideology and Reality,” *Israel Studies*, Vol.10, No.3 (2005), p.160.

55 Mark Tessler, *A History of The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp.505-506.

56 Dowty, p.181.

uniform.⁵⁷ Shas in particular has seemed to be inclined to pursue a pragmatic line over territorial compromise. It traded its votes in the Ehud Barak government of 1999-2000 on agreements with the Palestine National Authority and the dismantling of unofficial settlements for funding concessions.⁵⁸ Together with its electoral strength, this helped Shas replace the NRP as the central religious player in government.

After the end of the Cold War and during the 1990s, Israel engaged in a peace process that seemed to pave the road to a negotiated solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Because there were no longer two competing blocks for the global rivalry in the Middle East, and Iraq was weakened after the Gulf War, it seemed that there was an opportunity for direct negotiations between Israel and Palestinians. These advantageous international conditions were crucial in putting the secular norms and preferences back on the map, dwarfing the religious and nationalist ideology. The land for peace approach summarized the political vision of the governing Labour Party under Yitzhak Rabin. "Rabin, in short, consistently framed the settlements as holding hostage Israel's future peace and prosperity and as depriving Israel of its Zionist and liberal identity."⁵⁹ The prospect of peace infused hope and even enthusiasm in many parts of the Israeli society; however, for the religious Zionists, who had placed the territory at the centre of their religious ideology and identity, the plan to give land for peace was perceived as an existential threat. "The settlers and the religious community were up in arms, frantic and angered by his (Rabin's) assault on their positions and core values."⁶⁰ This embittered opposition found its most tragic expression in the

57 Stewart Reiser, "The Religious Parties As A Support System for The Settler Movement," in Bernard Reich and Gershon R. Kieval (eds.), *Israeli Politics in The 1990s Key Domestic and Foreign Policy Factors* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), pp.79-83.

58 Weissbrod, p.86.

59 Michael Barnett, "The Israeli Identity and The Peace Process Re/creating the Un/thinkable," in Michael Barnett and Shibley Telhami (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), p.74.

60 Ibid, p.79.

assassination of Rabin in 1995. The assassin, Yigal Amir, was a law student at the religious-conservative Bar Ilan-University and came from the religious Zionist background.

Even though there have been substantial developments in domestic politics about a settlement between Israel and Palestinians, the rift between religious nationalists and the secular groups deepened during the 1990s.⁶¹ And, some even began to see religion as having replaced secular right and left-wing expressions of Zionism as “the source of political legitimation for the state.”⁶² In 1996 Benjamin Netanyahu from Likud Party has been elected as the Prime Minister after five years of Labour rule.

Most damaging to the peace process was the Netanyahu government's decision to lift the freeze on the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. As a result, under the Netanyahu government, the number of settlers living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip rose by 12.4 percent in just 18 months from January 1997 to July 1998. At the same time, the number of settlers increased by 8.8 percent in 1997 and by another 3.3 percent in the first half of 1998.⁶³ Although the peace process was largely paralyzed during Netanyahu's tenure, what Netanyahu offered during the negotiations was significant in terms of Israel's domestic debate over the future of the occupied territories. According to the Hebron Accord of January 1997, Israel agreed to transfer control of the West Bank town of Hebron to the Palestinians, while keeping 20 percent of the town under Israeli control. Netanyahu's agreement to partially withdraw from Hebron was condemned by many of his rightwing supporters, especially by the Jewish settlers for whom it was seen as an act of betrayal. Because, Hebron is a town whose biblical and modern

61 Hazan, pp.127-133.

62 Avishai Ehrlich, “Zionism, Anti-Zionism, Post-Zionism,” in Ephraim Nimni (eds.), *The Challenge of Post-Zionism Alternatives to Israeli Fundamentalist Politics* (London: Zed Books, 2003), p.93.

63 “Report on Israeli Settlement in the Occupied Territories,” *The Foundation for Middle East Peace*, Vol.8, No.5 (September-October 1998), <http://www.fmep.org/reports/archive/vol.-8/no.-5/news> (Accessed on 7 September 2014).

history gives it a particular significance to nationalist and religious Jews. For the first time, a leader of the Likud was officially offering to hand Jewish land to the Palestinians. This was an act of historic importance.⁶⁴ However, Netanyahu's approach to the settlements has been fundamentally a continuation of the approach adopted by previous leaders of the Likud. Like his predecessors, he has offered a territorial approach by recommending the eventual annexation by Israel of all of the territories occupied⁶⁵: According to Netanyahu, Israel would be sovereign in the West Bank and Gaza. At the same time, Israel should not have any limitation in settling Jews in the occupied territories of which the West Bank would be annexed by Israel and four specified urban areas would receive local autonomy.⁶⁶

After Ariel Sharon replaced Netanyahu in Likud and became Prime Minister in 2003, he introduced his plan for the settlements and for the peace with Palestinian Arabs. He offered to pull the 7,500 settlers out of the Gaza and wanted to retain the six major Jewish settlement blocks, holding 92,000 people, on the West Bank.⁶⁷ Ahead of the Gaza withdrawal, religious nationalist parliamentarians tried to bring down the government in the Knesset. At the same time, mass rallies and countless acts of civil disobedience were staged. However, it would be wrong to assume that the Gaza withdrawal necessarily would repeat itself in the West Bank. Gaza's settler population was less than 3 percent of the West Bank's and its religious heritage far less significant. Although Sharon withdrew Israeli forces and settlements from Gaza, it is highly likely that he would not have been able to make more concessions, and he would not compromise on Jerusalem.⁶⁸

64 Dov Waxman, *The Pursuit of Peace and The Crisis of Israeli Identity: Defending/Defining the Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp.130.

65 Peleg (2005), p.145.

66 Ibid, p.147.

67 Avi Shlaim, "Ariel Sharon's War against the Palestinians," *Logos Journal*, Vol.3, No.3 (2004), <http://www.logosjournal.com/shlaim.pdf> (Accessed on 5 July 2014).

68 Yael S. Aronoff, "From Warfare to Withdrawal: The Legacy of Ariel Sharon," *Israel Studies*, Vol.15, No.2 (2010), p.165.

After the last elections for the Knesset which was held on 22 January 2013, Netanyahu formed his coalition government together with the Yesh Atid and HaTnuah Parties, together with Naftali Bennett's The Jewish Home Party.⁶⁹ Yesh Atid is a liberal centrist party and HaTnuah is a liberal party. However, as mentioned before, Bennett's The Jewish Home Party is a religious nationalist party formed as the successor to the NRP.⁷⁰ It primarily represents the modern Orthodox Jews, whose members adhere to the belief that Jews are divinely commanded to retain control over the Land of Israel, and Bennett's pro-settlement messages helped the party increase popularity.⁷¹ The Yesh Atid and the Jewish Home became the two largest coalition parties and forced Netanyahu not to include the ultra-Orthodox Shas and Yahadut HaTorah parties in the government.⁷²

Prior to going into politics, Bennett was serving as the appointed director general of the Yesha Council, the political representation of Jewish settlers in the West Bank. His rapid rise in politics owes much to his views on the settlements, which are far more to the right compared to Netanyahu's position.⁷³ In his article, Israel Stability Initiative, he has suggested that Israel annex 60 percent of the West Bank, thereby turning the land into an integral part of Israel. These are the so-called Areas C, which has most of the Jewish settlements and was supposed to come entirely under Israeli control as a result of the Oslo Treaty. According to the Bennett's plan, on the remaining 40 percent of the West Bank

69 Joel Greenberg, "Netanyahu Reaches Agreement to Form Government," *The Washington Post*, 15 March 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/netanyahu-reaches-agreement-to-form-government/2013/03/14/18beace8-8c99-11e2-9838-d62f083ba93f_story.html (Accessed on 17 September 2014).

70 Hexel, pp.11.

71 "A Look At The Makeup of The New Israeli Government," *The Associated Press*, 14 March 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/look-makeup-new-israeli-government> (Accessed on 17 September 2014).

72 Aron Heller, "Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Suddenly Are Outsiders," *The Associated Press*, 12 March 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/israels-ultra-orthodox-suddenly-are-outsiders> (Accessed on 17 September 2014).

73 Hexel, pp.3-4.

territory (Areas A and B) Palestinians would be granted autonomy, and Jerusalem would remain undivided Israeli territory.⁷⁴ The plan does not mention a Palestinian state, and Bennett promised to do everything to combat the founding of a Palestinian State in his election campaign. As far as the peace process is concerned, a coalition with Bennett, who rejects the two-state solution, is a disastrous message. Participation of Bennett in the coalition government is a clear indicator of the direction Israeli government would follow in the peace process.⁷⁵

Conclusion

When Israel is the subject matter, assessing the influence that religion has on foreign policy is not easy. The overlapping agendas of secular and religious Zionists, especially in relation to the issues of the Jewish settlements in Jerusalem and the West Bank, complicates analysis. The convergence of national security concerns and religious interests of both groups can be clearly seen in the handling of the Jewish settlements in Jerusalem and the West Bank. Religion has been an important factor in Israel's foreign policy towards Palestinians in Jerusalem and the West Bank. The sanctity of the land lies at the core of the religious perspective on foreign policy in Israel. It is both a cause of the conflict and the choice of conflict behaviour. In particular, the religious Zionists promoted the settlement process and deepened hostility towards the Palestinians.

The religious nationalists in Israel stand at the centre of two of the most important questions: what to do with the occupied territories and how to structure the relationship between religion and the state? On the territorial question, religious nationalists tend to sit on one end of the Israeli political spectrum. They constitute the bulk of the religiously and ideologically driven settlers in the West Bank. They and their supporters inside Israel are among the most vocal opponents to Israeli territorial concessions and the most likely to violently resist any attempt to

74 Naftali Bennett, "The Israel Stability Initiative," *The One State Solution Israel*, www.onestateisrael.com/solutions/israeli-proposals/the-israeli-stability-initiative-naftali-bennett/ (Accessed on 21 September 2014).

75 Hexel, p.8.

evacuate settlements. There is a significant challenge from the religious Zionists and from settlers who view the attempts for relinquishment of the territories as a blasphemy. And, as a result, the settlements are an important obstacle to achieving a durable peace between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs. The argument is that for Israel, it is imperative to balance the effects of religious nationalism if it wants to reach a permanent peace and ensure its security.

In addition to the religious nationalists, Likud's policies of creating new settlements in the occupied territories, as well as its discourses about land and the roots of the conflict had many lasting consequences on the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Successive Likud governments have built more and more settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem, and expanded them year after year. As long as the Likud and the other pro-settlement parties are in power, there is no room for a lasting solution. As the Likud' Party Platform emphasizing the right of settlements which was declared in 1999 states that:

"The Jewish communities in Judea, Smaria and Gaza are the realization of Zionist values. Settlement of the land is a clear expression of the unassailable right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and constitutes an important asset in the defense of the vital interests of the State of Israel. The Likud will continue to strengthen and develop these communities and will prevent their uprooting."⁷⁶

A close look at the positions of the Israeli side shows that there is hardly any reason for optimism. Netanyahu's positions are well known. He refuses to evacuate settlements on the West Bank, and rejects any settlement of the conflict on the basis of the 1967 borders, including land exchanges. During his previous tenures in the office of the Premiership, there were no substantial developments in the peace process, but more settlements. Recently, after the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teens, he announced the construction of new settlements which would

⁷⁶ "Likud Charter Does Not Recognize Palestine," *Palestine Chronicle*, http://www.palestinechronicle.com/old/view_article_details.php?id=14772 (Accessed on 11 September 2014).

become the biggest in 30 years.⁷⁷ Moreover, Netanyahu's coalition government put The Jewish Home's officials in key positions where they can promote the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem.⁷⁸ The large increase of votes cast for Naftali Bennett, who made the avoidance of a two-state solution his political goal, indicates that his radical positions on the Palestinian question are shared by a growing number of Israeli citizens. In short, settlements and the governments that back them imperil the chances for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Israeli authorities hardly feel any pressure to pursue a different policy.

⁷⁷ "Israel Announces Construction of Biggest Settlement in 30 Years," *The Telegraph*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/11067466/Israel-announces-construction-of-biggest-settlement-in-30-years.html> (Accessed on 21 September 2014).

⁷⁸ Greenberg, (web).