

The ultra-Orthodox conundrum in Israeli society and politics



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There is hardly a more challenging and confusing community to understand in Israeli society, both for those who are part of that society and, even more so, for outsiders, than that of ultra-Orthodox Jews, known in Hebrew as “Haredi.”

For many, their traditions, their outlook on life and even the way they dress is shrouded in mystery and misunderstandings. But what makes the need to understand this community extremely important is that it is the fastest-growing in the Jewish state and, indeed, in the developed world.

One of the sources of confusion in understanding this community's relationship with wider Israeli society is the duality of its attitude to Zionism, which derives from the earliest days of the state¹. The Haredim oppose it in principle but whenever it has benefited them they have been happy to cooperate with the Zionist movement and, later, the Israeli state, although some oppose it in its entirety and do not recognize Israel.

Yet increasingly, through demographic growth, they have been gaining more influence over Israeli politics, utilizing

to their advantage the intricacies of the country's fragmented social and political state, and generally leaning to the right².

The most recent crisis facing Israel's ruling coalition revolves around a threat in the Knesset by the representatives of ultra-Orthodox communities to resign from the government and push for dissolution of the parliament, unless their youth continue to be exempt from military service.

This issue of military service has been one the most contentious divisions between the ultra-Orthodox and the rest of Israeli society. Beyond the aspects of this related to practicality and fairness, it illustrates the utterly differing views held by the Haredim and the wider population in Israel about society and the role of individuals and groups.

The Haredim (which translates as “those who tremble” in the presence of God) and their adherence to ultra-Orthodox Judaism emerged as a reaction to Zionism, and to the influence of the 18th and 19th-century enlightenment on the Ashkenazi who lived in Jewish communities in Europe.

The phenomenon of the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox — whose roots lie mainly in the Iberian Peninsula, as well as Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities —



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Police officers remove ultra-Orthodox Jewish men protesting military conscription outside the recruitment bureau in Jerusalem. REUTERS

and the related Shas political party — an acronym for Shisha Sidrei Mishnah, or the Six Books of the Mishnah — has emerged within Israel only since the 1980s³.

The term Hasidism is sometimes wrongly used interchangeably with Haredim; in fact, the Hasidim are just one subsection of a wider Haredim community that now numbers nearly 1.4 million, almost double the 750,000 of only 15 years ago.

Certainly, the Haredim is not a monolithic community; it encompasses diverse subgroups that differ in their interpretations of religious texts and have varying levels of engagement with the rest of Israeli society⁴.

The first ultra-Orthodox party, Agudat Israel, was founded in Kattowitz, Poland, in 1912, with the objective of preventing assimilation and the introduction of secular ideas into Jewish life, and to represent Orthodox Jewry in dealings with the authorities.

Until the Second World War, Agudat Israel was opposed to Zionism, but changes in the situation of the Jewish people, mainly as a result of the war and the Holocaust, caused it to modify this approach.

The origins of anti-Zionism among the ultra-Orthodox are, firstly, based on the perception of Zionism as being

mainly secular in nature. Secondly, from a theological perspective, they believed that a return to Eretz Israel (“Land of Israel”) must come to pass not as a result of human endeavor but by divine miracle, a sort of meta-historical revelation that would happen only if Jewish people perfected their devotion to their religion⁵.

The counterargument from the Zionist movement was that two millennia of waiting for this miracle had only visited a double disaster upon its people: antisemitism and the stagnation of life in the diaspora⁶.

Nevertheless, there are strands among the Haredi community, such as the Neturei Karta and Satmar Hasidim, who perceive Zionism and the State of Israel as an antimessianic movement, and contest the very legitimacy of Israel, especially as a Jewish state.

Three ultra-Orthodox parties are represented in the Knesset. One is Shas, a Sephardi/Mizrahi party that was formed in 1984. The others are Agudat Israel and Degel Hatorah (the latter split from the former in 1988), which represent Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox communities and run together on the same list as United Torah Judaism. At the most recent general election, in 2022, together they gained 18 seats (11

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for Shas, seven for UTJ) out of 120⁷.

The establishment of Israel as the Jewish state posed a real dilemma for the ultra-Orthodox. To them, a Jewish state should be one in which Jewish jurisprudence, based on their interpretation of what that is, is the law of the land. If instead the state is designed for the Jewish people, as the 1948 Declaration of Independence suggests it should, then this means a more pluralistic society that is both Jewish and democratic, which accommodates diverse views. Over the years, the growing political power of ultra-Orthodox parties has led to increasing political pressure to incorporate Jewish law — both *Mishpat Ivri*, concerning legal matters, and *Halakha*, covering religious law, ritual, and ethics — which clash with the concept of liberal democracy⁸.

There are structural aspects within the Haredi parties that distinguish them from other political parties in Israel. For example, those members of Haredi parties who are elected to the Knesset, and even those who represent them in the Cabinet, are not considered their highest political or ideological authorities. That honor is reserved for unelected bodies of senior rabbis — in the case of UTJ, the Council of Great Torah, and for Shas, the Council of Wise Torah Sages.

Within these councils there is no transparency or accountability, not even to their own communities let alone the wider Israeli population. These sages guide

Top: Ultra-Orthodox Jewish youths and children watch the burning of leavened items during the Srefat Chametz ritual on the eve of Passover. Previous: Members of the Haredi Jewish political party Agudat Yisrael protest the construction of a mixed swimming pool, deemed contrary to the law of Moses, in Jerusalem, 1958. AFP

their representatives in Knesset on how to vote and who to support. The public barely knows who they are or what their aims might be, yet is heavily affected by them⁹.

The natural growth rate of the Haredi population is the highest of any group in Israel (and come to that, any member state of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development): 4.2 percent a year, compared with 1.9 percent among the rest of Israeli society, and 1.4 percent among the wider Jewish population.

Given this, their political power will only increase over time. At this rate it is projected that in less than 40 years they will comprise more than 31 percent of the Israeli population — compared to the 13.9 percent of today — which will have an immense effect on the country's economy, society and its very nature as a liberal democracy.

Moreover, it is a very young population; about 60 percent are under the age of 20, nearly double the proportion in the rest of the population. And they marry at a relatively young age: an average of 23 years old for men and 22 for women.

Haredim are brought up within an education system that is separate from other schools in Israel, and the vast majority of pupils do not complete matriculation exams when they leave.

Religious studies are prioritized at the expense of core subjects such as foreign languages, math and sciences. In defiance of the state, these core subjects are not taught



even in elementary schools, despite the fact that this is required by law, not least because the schools are funded by the state.

Needless to say, failure to study core subjects compromises the education of graduates of these schools. It prevents them from studying at universities (progression to higher education is very uncommon, especially among ultra-Orthodox men), and from interacting fully with the labor market, especially well-paid jobs.

Only 53 percent of ultra-Orthodox men are in employment, compared with 87 percent among the rest of Israeli society. The situation is better among women but they are still mainly employed in low-paying jobs.

The combination of large families and low incomes contributes to a prevalence of poverty and generally low standards of living among ultra-Orthodox families: 34 percent live below the poverty line, compared with 21 percent among the rest of the Israeli population and 15 percent among other Jews.

Consequently, their contribution to national tax revenue stands at a mere 4 percent¹⁰, much lower than the proportion among the rest of the population. Yet at the same time, thanks to their political power, they enjoy a disproportionate range of benefits bestowed upon them

exclusively. These include reduced fares on public transport, housing assistance, municipal tax discounts, increased child benefit payments, and state support for full-time Torah students¹¹.

This is another source of friction between the ultra-Orthodox and wider Israeli society, especially among those who both serve in the military and pay high taxes, and rightly point out the unfairness of this situation¹².

Another evident trait originated in the diaspora, where Jews in general, and the ultra-Orthodox in particular, were accustomed to living in communities separate from the rest of society. The difference in Israel is that the ultra-Orthodox distinguish themselves from other Jews, not only from gentiles.

Top: A rabbi helps a pupil read during class at the Maoz Hatora boys' school, where most ultra-Orthodox boys receive little or no secular education after age 14. **Bottom:** Ultra-Orthodox women gather at the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai at Mount Meron on Lag BaOmer. **Next:** Ultra-Orthodox Jews protest outside the US consulate in Tel Aviv against what organizers call "deliberate starvation of Gaza by Israel."
REUTERS/AFP/REUTERS



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This seclusion derives from fear of assimilation and their disappearance as a distinct religion and culture. The establishment of the Jewish state presented them with a different but no less challenging conundrum: how to preserve their unique way of life, not from assimilation by non-Jews but by other Jews with whom they have profound disagreements about what it means to be Jewish, and what is Judaism when the state is governed by Jews.

At the same time, they opted to become Israeli citizens and enjoy the same rights bestowed on other citizens. And so the dream of a return to Eretz Israel was facilitated for them, though not in the manner in which they believe it should have happened.

In the years after Israel was founded, there emerged a dualism in relations between Haredi communities and their political representatives, on the one hand, and the state and the rest of Israeli society, on the other.

This duality manifests in their separate networks of schools, synagogues and social organizations, including rabbinical courts. Even their dress code separates them from the rest of the population.

The Haredim are concentrated in urban areas and neighborhoods that remain predominantly ultra-Orthodox and have never embraced the Zionist model of engagement in farming and industry. Their representatives in the Knesset and municipalities represent their very specific interests, operating more as lobby or special-interest groups, rather than the catch-all political parties one might expect in a democratic system.

The more the ultra-Orthodox become involved in political life, which is already divisive by its very nature, especially in Israel, and increasingly hold key government posts, the more they find friction with the rest of society; not only with secular society, but also with other “orthodox” groups and those who maintain Jewish traditions but do not perceive themselves as being particularly religious.

But if there is a single issue that most infuriates non-Haredi Jews in Israel, and best represents the schism between them and the ultra-Orthodox, it is the exemption of the latter from the country’s otherwise compulsory draft for military service.

Upon reaching the age of 18, all other young Israelis are obliged by law to serve in the army. In a country where military service is regarded as a duty, as an indication of loyalty and patriotism, the refusal of most Haredi to do so, even to the extent of breaking the law and



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holding violent protests, represents a hugely symbolic wall between them and the rest of Jewish society.

This refusal to serve is particularly infuriating to those who serve in the military, and are prepared to sacrifice their lives in doing so, when the ultra-Orthodox insist that their devotion to religion contributes more to the security of the country and the safe return of soldiers.

This is an open wound in Israeli society, never more so than now when, after nearly two years of war, the loss of so many lives and the huge burdens placed on those who serve in the reserves, the military desperately needs an additional 10,000 soldiers¹³.

Furthermore, the ultra-Orthodox position on the Palestine issue and relations with other countries in the region has moved steadily to the right over the years, to embrace a much more uncompromisingly hawkish approach — as long as they do not have to do the actual dirty work by serving in the military, of course¹⁴.

Until this divisive issue of military service is resolved, the Haredi community will never be perceived as an integral part of Israeli society.

And if they continue to refuse to accept changes to their education system, and integrate into what is otherwise a highly modern and technological economy, with their growing numbers they will pose a severe economic threat to Israel.

In a country and society riven by deep social and political frictions and unresolved conflicts, as long as the ultra-Orthodox hold the immense political power to decide who leads a coalition government, and to impose their way of life on certain aspects of society, they will continue to create an explosive situation within Israeli society that, for the foreseeable future, seems impossible to resolve.

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