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Factors Contributing to the Rightward Shift in Israeli Politics: An Analysis of Rocket Fire, Intergroup Tensions, and Polarization

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Factors Contributing to the Rightward Shift in Israeli Politics: An Analysis of Rocket Fire,
Intergroup Tensions, and Polarization

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Departmental Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Israeli society has experienced growth in the right bloc and adopted increasingly far-right policies. This thesis examines this development, exploring how various internal and external factors have contributed to the widespread adoption of right-wing policy and the growth of the far-right. The paper examines Hamas' role and its increasing rocket range while also looking at the effect of dissatisfaction rates in Israeli society. Further, these factors, in addition to the role of the Second Intifada on levels of tolerance and ethnocentrism, are also integral to explaining the adoption of far-right policies to foster a sense of security. Finally, this thesis touches on the effect of social identity theory on polarization between the Israeli Left and Right and Jews and Arabs within Israeli society.

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I. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, Israel's right bloc has dominated the country's political landscape. Israel's right-wing has slowly developed since the 1967 War. Previously, Israeli political life was controlled by the democratic-socialist Mapai Party, but following this war, Likud, the largest right-wing party in the Knesset, was founded in 1977. A left-right political split began to develop within Israeli society based on different approaches to handling the newly acquired territories, including the Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem from the 1967 War. The center-left bloc hoped to utilize these territories as "temporary assets" to promote a peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians, while the right bloc pushed to maintain control over the land. This split continues to have implications within Israeli politics through the twenty-first century.

Likud, the largest right-wing party, has formed a majority coalition in the Knesset since 2013 — except the 2019 unity government that disbanded less than a year later. The current government, representing an "unprecedented rise of the extreme right,"¹ contains high-level leadership known for their racist and anti-Arab rhetoric, has enacted policy to limit the autonomy of Israel's judicial branch,² and has incorporated the highest amount of settler housing in the West Bank since 2012.³

Data has shown that the Israeli right bloc has significantly increased in total size within the Israeli population over the past two decades, with 62 percent of Israeli Jews identifying as "right" in 2022 and significant decreases among the Israeli left and center blocs as a

¹Ravid, Barak. 2022. "The rise of Israel's extreme right." Axios. <https://www.axios.com/2022/11/02/israel-election-extreme-far-right-rise-netanyahu-victory>

²Cook, S. A. 2023. "Israel's judicial reforms: What to know." Council on Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/israels-judicial-reforms-what-know>

³Chacar, H. 2023. "Israel advances peak number of West Bank settlement plans in 2023, watchdog says." Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-advances-peak-number-west-bank-settlement-plans-2023-watchdog-2023-07-13/>

consequence. This growth has been advanced with the successful proliferation of the idea that Israel is a “nation under siege” and supported by the “failure of the peace process and the intensification of the conflict with Palestinians.”⁴ The most recent polling data shows a significant decrease in support for a two-state solution from both Israelis and Palestinians. In 2016, a slight majority of Palestinians (51 percent) and Israeli Jews (58.5 percent) supported a two-state solution. However, in 2023, these numbers decreased to 33 percent and 34 percent respectively.⁵ This polling data was provided by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, which interviewed and polled the same number of individuals in 2016 and 2023 from the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem, and Israel. In addition to a more significant portion of the electorate voting for right-wing parties, young Israelis tend to align farther to the right than previous generations.⁶

When examining the growth of the right, many academics point to the demographic change within Israeli society, particularly concerning immigrants from the former USSR and the high ultra-Orthodox birth rate.⁷ The ultra-Orthodox community in Israel has a growth rate of approximately 4 percent, and its population is very young, with over 60 percent being younger than 20 years of age. In addition, over 900,000 immigrants from the former USSR have contributed to the right’s growth — highlighted by the emergence of *Yisrael Beiteinu*, a far-right, nationalistic party.⁸ These factors have contributed to the increasing voter base in the right bloc, shifting the Israeli political sphere to the right.

⁴Perliger, Arie, and Ami Pedahzur. 2018. "The Radical Right in Israel." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, edited by Jens Rydgren. Oxford Handbooks. Online edn. Oxford Academic, February 5. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274559.013.33>. Accessed June 12, 2023.

⁵The Palestine/Israel pulse, *a joint poll summary report*. PCPSR. (2023). <https://pcpsr.org/en/node/928>

⁶Robbins, C. P. 2023. “How Israeli youth helped usher in the farthest right-wing government ever.” Vox. <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2023/2/23/23609584/israel-right-wing-young-voters-palestine>

⁷Hermann, T., Be’ery, G., Heller, E., Cohen, C., Lebel, Y., Mozes, H., & Neuman, K. (2014). *The National-Religious Sector in Israel 2014*. Israel Democracy Institute. https://en.idi.org.il/media/4663/madad-z-english_web.pdf

⁸Sherwood, Harriet. “Israel’s former Soviet immigrants transform adopted country.” *The Guardian*. August 17, 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/17/israel-soviet-immigrants-transform-country>

In addition, the population of Jewish settlers more than doubled from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present moment with this demographic voting for parties mainly within the right bloc of Israeli politics.⁹ This population also contributes to the development of the right within domestic politics, possibly resulting from the fact that they are more susceptible to and experience more violence within the West Bank.

The incorporation of the far-right in mainstream politics has ushered in the movement of the National-Religious camp from the margins of Israel's political system to the "socio-political center."¹⁰ For example, the Religious-Zionist party, defined as ultra-Orthodox and nationalistic, became the third-largest party in the 2022 Knesset election. As this party has gained support within Israel and becomes more prominent, its members continue to amplify divisive rhetoric and more aggressive policies within the West Bank.

Conflict within the region has also contributed to the growth of the right following the Second Intifada and rocket fire from the Gaza Strip to Israel. Previous studies that have examined the effect of terrorism on voting behavior have found that terrorism leads voters to be increasingly accommodating to terrorists' demands or that the practice spurs a rightward shift. One study examined the effect of rocket fire on Israeli localities, finding that even the threat of rocket fire increased the support for the right bloc.¹¹

Overall, this paper builds on the current research explaining the growth of Israeli right and the adoption of increasingly nationalistic policies that undermine pluralism within the state, examining the main factors contributing to this phenomenon that are pushing Israelis towards the right and leading to increasing polarization in Israeli society. For the purposes of this paper, the

⁹ JewishVirtualLibrary. "Total Population of Jewish Settlements By Year." January 1, 2024. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-settlements-population-1970-present>

¹⁰Hermann et al., 2023.

¹¹GETMANSKY, ANNA, and THOMAS ZEITZOFF. "Terrorism and Voting: The Effect of Rocket Threat on Voting in Israeli Elections." *The American Political Science Review* 108, no. 3 (2014): 588–604. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43654394>.

reactionary right within Israeli politics is defined as a coalition of parties that embolden and promote nationalistic policies that ultimately divide Israeli society, and in particular create discontent between social groups, especially among the Arab populations within Israel.

Primarily, the expanded military capabilities of Hamas — both in range of rocket fire and an increased number of rockets launched — have contributed to this rightwards shift. One study conducted in 2014 examined the role rockets had on those within range, particularly in southern Israel, between 2001 to 2009. Voters within this range were more likely to vote for right-wing parties, and this effect resulted in a two to six point percentage increase in the right-wing vote-share regardless of the number of Israeli casualties.¹² Since 2009, Hamas has launched an increasing number of rockets towards Israel in subsequent wars and has also developed a longer range.

As the threat of rocket fire expands deeper into Israeli society, an increasing number of Israelis are directly affected by Hamas' actions, reflecting a greater sense of everyday anxiety among Israelis and allowing the right to establish their identity as the protectors of Israeli society. This increase in violence contributes to the shift, especially as the right has adopted the image of being the only viable party to protect Israeli security adequately, which in turn has resulted in an increasingly aggressive rhetoric against Gaza.

Rocket fire ultimately has led to a more stringent national security plan, a policy typically championed by the Israeli right. The language utilized by Israeli officials, often characterizing Israel as a nation that champions life while the opposing side values death, also aligns with the framework of social identity theory, which will be particularly useful to my analysis. Social identity theory provides insights on Israeli society and the ideological evolution of the Israeli political system. Previous research has applied aspects of social identity to the Israel-Palestinian

¹²Getmansky and Zeitsoff 2014.

conflict. This theory explains how groups interact, with members of an ingroup typically more strongly justifying their stance and demonizing those within the outgroup. In my paper, right-wing Jewish Israelis (the ingroup) utilize specific language to demonize and justify actions against Gaza as a whole (the outgroup).

In addition to rocket fire, exacerbation with the status quo has led voters in the center to shift to the right and pushed those on the right to adopt more extreme positions. A variety of factors highlight this dissatisfaction — including high rates of distrust for Israeli governmental institutions, declining support for a two-state solution, and a growing pessimism regarding the government's performance. Ultimately, voters are embracing alternative perspectives more commonly associated with the political far right. Further, public opinion data demonstrates a possible reevaluation of democratic principles — highlighted through the increasingly prevalent view to prioritize the rights of Jewish citizens over non-Jewish citizens. This shift seems to have permeated not only among the right but within those who align with the center of Israel's political stage.

The rise of the Religious Zionism party in recent Israeli elections signifies a notable shift in the country's political landscape. This party advocates for Jewish nationalism, settlement expansion, and a stronger integration of Jewish law into state affairs. Their merger with Otzma Yehudit, a party with similar radical views, further solidifies this shift towards more nationalistic and right-wing policies. The party's increasing support suggests a broader dissatisfaction with the status quo and existing political norms.

To examine the shift towards right-wing ideologies in Israeli society, it is also important to look at younger voters who have been significantly influenced by historical events, notably the Second Intifada (2000-2005). Polling data indicates that younger Jewish Israelis, aged 18-24,

increasingly identify with right-wing perspectives, contrasting with older age groups. The Second Intifada, marked by violent Palestinian uprisings within Israeli cities, resulted in significant Israeli casualties and fostered mistrust towards Palestinians. This period of conflict contributed to a rise in right-wing sentiments, as the violence was perceived as a personal threat rather than distant warfare.

Psychological studies suggest that prolonged exposure to violence can lead to increased intolerance, fear, and ethnocentrism.¹³ The trauma and fear resulting from the Second Intifada justified the adoption of stringent security measures by the Israeli government, such as checkpoints, security barriers, and settlement expansions. While these measures have effectively reduced violence and casualties, they have also deepened the divide between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians, limiting interactions and understanding between the two groups.

Legislation passed during and after the Second Intifada further reflects this rightward shift, often justified on grounds of national security. Laws such as the “Law of Political Parties” - Amendment No. 12 and the “Ban of Family Unification” - Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law restrict political dissent and family unification between Israeli citizens and Palestinians, respectively. These laws, alongside others like the “Nakba Law” and the Nation-State Law, have ultimately undermined the state’s democratic principles and pluralistic nature.

Finally, increased tensions and violence between Israeli Jews and Arabs and the left and right blocs can be seen as a symptom of this rightward shift. This paper explores the impact of this rightward shift on the interactions between the Israeli right, Israeli Arabs, and the Israeli Left, examining how group identities and political affiliations have become deeply intertwined.

Central to the right-wing identity in Israeli politics is the emphasis on maintaining the safety and Jewish identity of the state. The adoption of right-wing policies has intensified the

¹³ See citation 61.

association between political affiliation and identity, with a perception that Israel stands alone internationally heightening this sentiment. Consequently, both the Israeli Left and Israeli Arabs are often perceived as threats to the safety and Jewish identity of the state by the right-wing bloc.

The Israeli right adopts a skeptical posture towards Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, viewing them as potential threats to national security and Jewish identity as a whole. In contrast, the Israeli Left advocates for peace negotiation efforts with Palestinians and the inclusion of Israeli Arabs to foster societal success. Israeli Arabs, comprising over 20 percent of the population, are often seen as an unassimilable and enemy-affiliated minority, further fueling tensions.

Unlike previous moments of conflict, recent disputes between the two groups have occurred due to civilian-on-civilian violence, with outbreaks occurring in mixed-society cities.¹⁴ The situation has worsened as Arab citizens feel frustration over continued oppression, discrimination, and legislative reforms such as the Nation-State Law, which acknowledges Israel as a Jewish state and disregards the country's significant Arab population.¹⁵

The escalation of violence between Jews and Arabs has significant implications for Israeli society. Overall, the increased violence between these groups allows the right bloc to create a narrative that argues in favor of increasingly nationalistic policies, mobilizing voters based on anti-Arab sentiment. By emphasizing the heightened tensions and presenting a narrative that portrays Jews as under threat, political actors and their supporters can appeal to the collective identity of the Jewish population. This appeal is rooted in social identity theory, which suggests that individuals derive a sense of belonging and self-esteem from group memberships.

¹⁴Milshtein, M. (2021, June 16). *The crisis in relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel: Can the rift be healed?*. The Washington Institute. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/crisis-relations-between-jews-and-arabs-israel-can-rift-be-healed>

¹⁵ Waxman, Dov, and Ilan Peleg. "The Nation-State Law and the Weakening of Israeli Democracy." *Israel Studies* 25, no. 3 (2020): 185-200. doi:10.2979/israelstudies.25.3.16.

The violence and perceived threat to the Jewish community strengthened Jewish identity, reinforcing the notion of a distinct and separate group from Arabs. In this context, the right-wing bloc frames the conflict as an existential struggle, arguing that only by adopting more nationalistic policies can Israel ensure the safety and preservation of the Jewish people. By leveraging the emotions and fears associated with this conflict, right-wing politicians can tap into the social identity of Jewish citizens, fostering a stronger identification with their group and further distancing themselves from other groups. The emphasis on distinctions between groups can also be seen through the increasingly charged rhetoric used against Arabs and Palestinians by newly elected Knesset members.

Overall, the rise of Likud and the right-wing coalition's control in the Knesset, coupled with the incorporation of far-right ideologies into mainstream politics, signifies a notable transformation. Factors such as demographic changes, conflict with Hamas, increasing dissatisfaction and a lack of trust, and the psychological effects of the Second Intifada have fueled the growth of the Israeli right. The right's narrative, portraying Israel as a nation under siege, has resonated with an increasing portion of the electorate, especially among the youth. The adoption of nationalistic policies and the decline in support for a two-state solution are indicative of this rightward shift. As Israel grapples with internal and external challenges, understanding the multifaceted dynamics that contribute to the growth of the right becomes crucial for comprehending the evolving landscape of Israeli politics in the twenty-first century.

This research paper was initiated prior to the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and as such, hopes to examine the growth of the Israeli right prior to this date. The analysis and findings presented are rooted in events and occurrences leading up to October 7. However, following the conclusion, I will use the information presented to provide insights that may serve to illuminate

and inform our understanding of events subsequent to this date. While the primary focus remains on the pre-October 7 landscape, the paper will include possible insights on October 7 and how this research might shed light on the events that occurred on that date and its aftermath.

II. The Influence of Hamas on Israel's Political Alignment

By amassing a more extensive arsenal with improved rocket technology, Hamas has contributed to the rightwards shift in Israeli politics. Specifically, the Israeli right has adopted an identity as the protectors of Israel against growing threats, including Hamas and other terrorist organizations within the Gaza Strip.

Hamas builds its arsenal domestically while also receiving warheads from countries like Iran and Syria. These contributors have provided better military technology for Hamas and allowed them to build up their military over time.

Since the first Gaza-Israel War in 2008, the number of rockets fired from Gaza to Israel has increased, reflecting a greater sense of everyday anxiety among Israelis and allowing the right to create the identity as the protector of Israeli society. In 2008, the number of rocket launches was approximately 600 within three weeks, and 2,048 were fired within that year. The next point of major conflict between Israel and Gaza was in 2014, when a total of 4,225 rockets were launched toward Israel. Finally, in the most recent war between the two entities, 3,600 to 4,500 missiles were fired from Gaza to Israel. Further, in later points of conflict compared to earlier ones, the daily firing rate of rockets by Hamas has increased as well. For example, in the 2021 war, Hamas launched 400 missiles a day, which was almost four times the daily average of rocket launches in the 2014 war, according to the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ben-David, L. 2021. "Hamas' advanced weaponry: Rockets, artillery, Drones, cyber." Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. <https://jcpa.org/article/hamas-advanced-weaponry-rockets-artillery-drones-cyber/>

Hundreds of rockets were fired toward Ashdod and Ashkelon within a “five-minute period.” This increase in firing has been employed to overwhelm Israel’s Iron Dome Defense system but also contributes to feelings of insecurity as these attacks become more intense and Hamas develops a more extensive arsenal. As the Israeli right adopts the image of being the only viable party to protect Israelis adequately, violence can be used as a tool to maintain power within Israeli society.

In addition to amassing a more significant number of weapons, experts have also found that Hamas has increased its technological capabilities since 2008, further contributing to the feelings of insecurity as Hamas becomes more powerful. According to the Wilson Center, Hamas has “significantly improved their tactics as well as their ability to launch large quantities of rockets.”¹⁷ The cultivation of increased rocket fire and improved tactics have allowed Hamas to develop a more extended rocket range, and as a result they were able to fire a significant amount of missiles during the 2021 conflict at Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in an unprecedented attack on two major cities in Israel. Their increased arsenal also allowed them to “overload” or “saturate” Israel’s Iron Dome defense system.¹⁸ In 2021, the long-range rockets launched at Tel-Aviv consisted of 17 percent of the missiles fired at the time compared to 8 percent in the 2014 conflict and less than one percent in 2012. The body also began firing heavier rockets, including the Badr 3, extensively used in May 2021. This particular weapon, weighing between 661 to 882 pounds, was explicitly designed by Iran to be made locally within Gaza, and repeatedly struck Israeli cities such as Ashkelon and Netivo during this conflict. In addition to creating rockets that fire at much larger ranges, the organization has also worked to develop drones, “unmanned

¹⁷Hinz, F. 2021. “Iran transfers rockets to Palestinian groups.” Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/irans-rockets-palestinian-groups>

¹⁸ Hinz 2021.

underwater vehicles,” and engage in cyber warfare. As a result, Israeli military officials are “far more concerned” about Hamas’ capabilities and ability to create rockets domestically.

These advances in Hamas’ arsenal have direct implications for the shift in Israeli politics toward the right. One previous study examined the effect of rocket fire on Israeli populations and voting behavior from 2001 to 2009, finding that voters who reside in rocket range and face its threat are more likely to vote for right-wing parties, resulting in an increase of about two to six percentage points in the Israeli right’s vote share. Incumbent parties like Likud also gained votes within missile range and had a “valence advantage over others when dealing with security challenges.”¹⁹ Finally, it is essential to note that rocket range primarily affected nationalistic parties compared to highly religious factions of the right.

These feelings are further corroborated by public opinion polling that focuses on questioning the perceived level of security Israelis feel. When asked “In your opinion, to what extent does the State of Israel ensure the security of its citizens?” over 60 percent of both Israeli Jews and Arabs responded by saying “very much” or “quite a lot” in 2019. While this percentage increased in 2020, these feelings of security have decreased since 2021 with only 56 percent of Israelis sharing this sentiment in 2021 and 38 percent in 2022. Responses between Jewish Israelis and Arab Israelis from 2018 to 2022 decreased by similar amounts. The loss of trust in the Israeli’s government to maintain security also aligns with the increased popularity of the right within Israeli politics, especially as political figures within this camp advocate for increased security measures and utilize more aggressive language to condemn attacks against Israel.

While the study analyzed the effect of rocket fire until 2009, this research holds important implications for Israeli politics over the past few years. As noted earlier in the paper, Hamas has expanded its capabilities, allowing it to reach farther targets within Israel, including major cities

¹⁹Getmansky and Zeitsoff 2014.

such as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. As a result, the perceived security threat may have intensified, further influencing voters to lean towards right-wing parties that advocate for stricter security practices. The observed shift to the right in Israeli politics aligns with the growth of nationalistic parties, such as the Religious Zionism party, reinforcing the notion that security concerns related to rocket attacks play a crucial role in shaping the political landscape. This political party is characterized as far-right and ultra-nationalist, with many party leaders living in Israeli settlements within the West Bank. The party merged with the Jewish Power Party and *Otzma Yehudit* in 2021.

This increase in support for Religious Zionism underscores the enduring impact of security challenges on electoral preferences, mirroring the trends highlighted in the study above. In the 2020 election, *Otzma Yehudit* received 19,402 votes and 225,641 votes in 2021 following the creation of the Religious Zionism party. In the most recent election, the faction won over 500,000, serving as the third-largest party within the Knesset. It is also important to note that this surge of support is not only resulting from settlements but has also been “surging” in cities. For example, in the 2022 election, support for left-leaning parties in Tel Aviv, such as Labor and Meretz, decreased by 5.5 percent and 3 percent, respectively, with votes shifting towards Yesh Atid, a centrist party. In addition, Religious Zionism increased their vote share by almost three percent.²⁰ Givat Shmuel, which voted predominantly for Yamina in 2021, had the highest percentage of votes for the Religious Zionism party. These shifts in voter trends reflect a change in Israeli politics, with the entire spectrum moving toward the right. Left-wing parties are increasingly losing votes with individuals moving to the center-right while some right-wing

²⁰ Times of Israel Staff. 2022. “Election results by locality show Yesh Atid cannibalizing allies, far-right surging.” Times of Israel. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/election-results-by-locality-show-yesh-atid-cannibalizing-allies-far-right-surging/>

voters are moving farther to the right, demonstrated through Religious Zionism's growing popularity.

The rhetoric utilized by Israeli leadership regarding Hamas has also shifted since the 2008-2009 Gaza-Israel War, leading to increasingly charged language and a greater emphasis on retribution as a means of achieving safety for Israelis. The language used surrounding this first period of escalation focused on Hamas' methods of operating among civilian populations and holding Palestinians "hostage." The language used by both members of the Knesset and Israeli representatives for the UN emphasized Hamas' role in acting as an obstacle for a Palestinian state. To a foreign press, President Shimon Perez calls Hamas a "murderous terrorist organization" and its members a "brutal people of the lowest order." However, much of the rhetoric used by Israeli officials distinguishes Palestinians within Gaza and Hamas. For example, in Sderot, President Peres said, "To the Palestinians, I say - we do not want to see you suffering on account of Hamas's guilt," distinguishing between the two entities.²¹

However, in later conflicts, the rhetoric towards Hamas and Gaza experienced a shift—language utilized by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the 2014 Gaza-Israel War. For the first time, Prime Minister Netanyahu draws connections between Hamas, ISIL, and Nazism. He further aligns Israel's war with Hamas to the global common goal of "defeating Islamic extremism," arguing that Israel must destroy this "cancer."²² He also advocated for the importance of protecting Israeli civilians, emphasizing this goal by enumerating vulnerable cities within Israel, including Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Ashkelon.

During the 2021 Gaza-Israel Conflict, which resulted in over 300 deaths in Gaza due to airstrikes, Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke in a televised address and said that Israeli air raids

²¹ Associated Press. 2014. "Netanyahu says Hamas is ISIL." *POLITICO*.
<https://www.politico.com/story/2014/09/benjamin-netanyahu-hamas-isis-111452>

²² Associated Press 2014.

would continue at full force to “levy a heavy price” on Hamas’ leadership.²³ Similarly, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, in his initial public addresses, said that Israeli patience has run out and “Our enemies will get to know the rules: We will not tolerate violence and a slow drip [of rockets],” arguing in favor for a more aggressive policy towards Hamas.²⁴

The increasingly aggressive and extreme rhetoric adopted by the Israeli right, particularly evident in the shift in language from the 2008-2009 Gaza-Israel War to the 2021 Gaza-Israel Conflict, serves as a strategic tool to rally and necessitate support for a more assertive policy within Gaza. By drawing comparisons between Hamas, ISIL, and Nazism, leaders like Prime Minister Netanyahu create a narrative that frames Israel's actions as part of a global struggle against terrorism and extremism. This rhetoric not only positions the Israeli right as staunch protectors of the Israeli people but also justifies a more aggressive approach by invoking the perceived existential threat posed by these entities. By emphasizing the need to ensure the safety of Israeli citizens and enumerating cities under potential threat, leaders like Netanyahu and Prime Minister Bennett build a narrative that portrays the Israeli right as unwavering defenders, regardless of the demonization of Hamas and Gaza and the increasing loss of life for Palestinians. This approach seeks to cultivate a sense of urgency and fear, garnering support for a proactive and forceful response to perceived threats.

III. Exhaustion with the Status Quo

This shift of Israelis towards the right can also be explained by a widespread exhaustion with the political status quo, pushing more moderate voters to the right and right-wing voters to

²³Akram, Fares and Krauss, Joseph. 2021. “Israel kills 42 in Gaza as Netanyahu warns war will go on.” PBS. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/israel-kills-42-in-gaza-as-netanyahu-warns-war-will-go-on>

²⁴ Times of Israel Staff. 2021. “Bennett warns Hamas: ‘our patience has run out.’” *Times of Israel*. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/bennett-warns-hamas-our-patience-has-run-out/>

adopt more extreme values. Several factors indicate this shift, and to examine these effects, the section of the paper will utilize data collected and compiled from the Israeli Democracy Institute, which has conducted yearly polling through the Israeli Democracy Index since 2003. The survey is carried out in Hebrew via the Dialogue Institute and Arabic via the Afkar Institute. In both 2021 and 2022, samples included over 1,000 Jewish Israelis over 18 years of age and approximately 200 Arab citizens of Israel as well.

Primarily, polling, across a wide range of age groups and religious affiliations, indicates a lack of trust of Israeli political institutions and an increasingly pessimistic view on the Israeli government's performance.²⁵ Consistently, in 2021 and 2022, the Israeli Knesset, the government, and political parties were ranked the lowest in terms of the amount of trust earned when compared to other branches of society including the IDF, the police, and the office of the President. The public grew even more distrustful of these branches in 2022; for example, only nine percent of Israelis said they trust political parties in 2022. Further, in 2022, a minority of respondents — approximately 20 percent — agreed with the statement “on the whole, most Knesset members work hard and are doing a good job.” Both these figures represent the highest level of dissatisfaction in Israel for at least the past decade.

Overall, the combined average level of trust of all Israeli institutions as a whole has decreased as well from 61 percent in 2003 to 34.5 percent in 2022. In conjunction with these results, many Jewish Israelis have expressed increased levels of dissatisfaction with the direction of Israeli society. Similarly, according to the same polling conducted by the IDI, both Jewish and Arab Israelis have reported increasing negative feelings about Israel's overall situation with 73 percent of Jewish Israelis characterizing Israel's overall situation as “bad” in 2022. This polling

²⁵ Hermann, Tamar, et al. 2022. “The Israeli Democracy Index 2022.” *Israel Democracy Institute*. en.idi.org.il/media/19697/the-israeli-democracy-index-2022.pdf.

indicates a growing and strong lack of trust between the public and the Israeli government, indicating a dissatisfaction that has been accumulating over the past decade.

In particular, the polling also included multi-year averages in institutions as a whole, including the IDF, President of Israel, supreme court, police, government, media, political parties, and Knesset.²⁶ Among political orientations, those who identify with the right had the highest level of distrust for these organizations at approximately 30 percent in 2022 compared to approximately 50 percent of those who identified with the Left in the same year. This right bloc experienced a downwards trend in trust for these institutions starting in 2011. Another group that experienced higher levels of distrust were the Hardeim and national religious groups compared to those who identified as traditional or secular. While in previous years the Hardeim have typically ranked lower than other groups in terms of trust levels, national religious previously identified with a similar level of trust as those who are part of traditional and secular groups. For example, these three groups reported similar findings but the national religious grew more distrustful approximately around 2017, demonstrated by growing differences with secular and traditional citizens.

This data offers compelling evidence to support the idea that the shift of Israelis towards the right is driven by a widespread exhaustion with the political status quo. The growing distrust of Israeli political institutions and increasing pessimism about the government's performance indicate a deep-seated dissatisfaction among the public that has been accumulating over the past decade — especially among those who identify with the right but also with groups that are increasingly identifying with more radical parts of the right bloc in Israeli politics. These findings suggest that as trust in the political establishment erodes, Israelis are seeking alternatives that encapsulate increasingly adopting values more associated with the far-right. This

²⁶Hermann, Tamar, et al., 2022.

trend represents a broader disillusionment with the status quo. Parties aligning with the far right have seized this opportunity, promising a new "vision for Israel's future" that resonates with those seeking significant change.²⁷

This shift in values can also be seen through the evolving way that Israelis characterize the state of Israel. Overall, the public's commitment to democratic principles has declined over time. In 2009, approximately 36 percent of Israelis agreed that Jewish citizens should have more rights than non-Jewish citizens of Israel, and while this number has fluctuated over the years, this percentage has notably increased since 2018 with almost a majority of Israelis holding this view, according to the most recent polling in 2022.²⁸ Further, the IDI found that this belief among the Israeli center is 8 points higher than the multi-year average and 14 points higher among the right with this upward trend indicating a "growing endorsement of nondemocratic attitudes" and a growing detachment to the democratic principle of equal rights for all citizens.²⁹ Interestingly, differences also emerged among age groups with younger generations (18 to 25 year olds) being the most supportive of Jewish citizens enjoying more rights compared to non-Jewish citizens of Israel. This percentage inversely declines among older populations.

While the survey indicates that younger age groups contain a higher percentage of individuals who identify with religious groups such as the Haredim, national religious, and traditional religious, this shift in values among younger generations was found both for those who identified with the right and the center.³⁰ The increase in support for the idea that Jewish citizens should have more rights than non-Jewish citizens, even among those identifying with the center, suggests a growing acceptance of these views beyond ideological boundaries and the rise

²⁷ Szendro, Brendan. 2022. "Israel's Religious Zionism gained ground in November election." The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/12/16/israel-rzp-religious-zionist-knesset/>

²⁸ Hermann, Tamar, et al., 2022.

²⁹ Hermann, Tamar, et al. 2021. "The Israeli Democracy Index 2021." *Israel Democracy Institute*. <https://en.idi.org.il/media/18096/the-israeli-democracy-index-2021.pdf>

³⁰ Hermann, Tamar, et al., 2022.

among the center implies a shift in the overall political landscape of Israel.

Moreover, the loss of widespread support for democratic values and the rise in endorsement that Jewish citizens should have more rights compared to others suggests a concerning trend towards a weakening of democratic values within Israeli society. This shift reflects a prioritization of the rights and interests of Israelis over those of the Arab minority, potentially stemming from dissatisfaction with the existing political and social landscape. The erosion of democratic principles not only threatens the equality and rights of minority groups within Israel but also fosters greater divides within Israeli society. By prioritizing ethnic or religious identity over democratic values, Israelis risk exacerbating tensions between ethnic groups, ultimately undermining the long-term stability and cohesion of the nation.

All these factors — the lack of trust for the Israeli Knesset, increasingly lower rating of Israel's status, and decline in support for the two-state solution — encapsulates a broader societal shift in Israel, reflecting a growing trend of challenging the long-standing policies. In recent years, there has been a notable adoption of policies traditionally associated with the Israeli right, which increasingly does not support a two-state solution. This departure from the previous consensus underscores a significant ideological realignment within Israeli society. Israelis, increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo, are embracing alternative perspectives more commonly associated with the political right. The dynamics of this shift suggest a reevaluation of priorities, security concerns, and a desire for a different approach to the complex issues facing the region.

Another way this desire for change has manifested is through the rise of the Religious Zionism party during the most recent elections. While this movement currently holds the third-largest party in the Knesset, the party was unable to surpass the electoral threshold in April

2019, September 2019, and March 2020. In 2021, the party obtained 6 seats, and in the country's most recent election, garnered 14 seats.³¹ Not only has the party increased their popularity and influence over the past few years, but the party has continued to gain influence despite the controversy surrounding prominent Religious Zionism leadership. The party's most well-known leaders include the Ministry of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich — both known for their extreme right positions. Ben-Gvir has previously championed anti-Arab rhetoric and openly admires Meir Kahane, who advocated for segregated spaces in Israel and the removal of Arab citizens from Israel.³² Smotrich has taken a leadership role in attempting to limit the power of the Israeli Supreme Court and has advocated for permanent Israeli control over the West Bank.³³ Their rising prominence from the “fringes” of Israeli society reflects the more widespread adoption of far-right, nationalistic policies throughout Israeli society, possibly resulting from dissatisfaction with the more moderate policies stemming from center-right coalitions.³⁴ Examining the adoption and expansion of Religious Zionism sheds insight on the possible explanations of the growth of the Israeli right.

Religious Zionism's political ideology centers around Jewish nationalism with the aspiration of creating a unified Israel through settlement expansion, greater integration of Jewish law with state law, and reforming the legal system.³⁵ Throughout its platform found on their website, the party also singles out two contributors who are detrimental to Israeli society: the

³¹ Lieber, Dov, Raice, Sayndi, and Boxerman, Aaron. 2022. “Behind Benjamin Netanyahu's Win in Israel: The Rise of Religious Zionism.” *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/behind-benjamin-netanyahus-win-in-israel-the-rise-of-religious-zionism-11667743595#:~:text=The%20Religious%20Zionism%20ticket%20co,third%2Dlargest%20party%20in%20Israel>.

³² Kingsley, Patrick. 2023. “Who Is Itamar Ben-Gvir?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times. www.nytimes.com/2023/03/27/world/middleeast/israel-netanyahu-ben-gvir.html.

³³ Kingsley, Patrick. 2023. “As Israel's Crises Pile up, a Far-Right Minister Is a Common Thread.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times. www.nytimes.com/2023/03/31/world/middleeast/israel-smotrich-protests.html.

³⁴ Lieber et al., 2022.

³⁵ “Religious Zionism Party (Formerly Tkuma).” *MyJewishLearning*, 2022, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/tkuma-political-party.

Israeli Left and non-Jewish Arabs. For example, the party's opposing argument against the judiciary branch rests on the idea that "left has systematically... injected them" with progressive ideals that ultimately shape its decision-making abilities.³⁶ Further, the Party takes a strong stance against terrorism, calling for a "decisive military response" against "Arab murderers" in the West Bank.³⁷ These policies both provide a strong sense of the party's ideals and the rhetoric they utilize to advance this particular ideology. Further, in order to form a coalition, this party also merged with *Otzmah Yehudit* (the Jewish Power Party) in the 2022 election. *Otzmah Yehudit*, led by Ben Gvir, has been known to champion Kahanist views, anti-Arab racism, and incitement. In 1988, the Kach party was banned from running in the Knesset due their extreme views, and two Kahanist movements were also deemed terrorist organizations in 1994 — demonstrating a prior contempt for these views. However, with the Jewish Power party gaining more power in the Knesset today, this shift highlights a larger-scale change in Israeli politics and the acceptance of more radical views over time.

As previously stated, the expanded role of the Religious Zionist party also contributes to the idea that an increasing number of Israelis are dissatisfied with the status quo, pushing the Israeli spectrum to the right and leading to the adoption of more nationalistic policy. Some of this support is derived from the ultra-Orthodox community, which makes up 13 percent of the Israeli population. In previous years, this sect of Israeli society typically voted for Shas, mainly representing the Mizrahi-Orthodox communities and United Torah Judaism (UTJ). However, a growing number of those who identify with the Haredi populations are beginning to vote for the Religious Zionist party, especially among younger voters within these demographics and

³⁶ "Judicial Reform." *The Religious Zionist Party*, 2022, zionutdatit.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Judicial-Reform.pdf.

³⁷ "The War Against Terror." *The Religious Zionist Party*, 2022, <https://zionutdatit.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/The-War-Against-Terror-1.pdf>

following Yamina's electoral loss.³⁸ In the 2021 elections, significant differences arose between the national-Haredi demographic compared to the rest of the national-religious population.³⁹ Members of the national-Haredim voted for Religious Zionism (42 percent) and Haredi parties (27 percent) at a greater extent compared to the rest of the national-religious public with a large portion of this group supporting Yamina.

The shifting dynamics within Israeli politics, particularly the increasing support for the Religious Zionist party, underscore a multifaceted transformation that extends beyond mere demographic considerations. While it is evident that the party has garnered backing from a growing segment within the ultra-Orthodox community, transcending traditional allegiances to parties like Shas and United Torah Judaism, the reasons behind this shift are deeply rooted in ideological and nationalistic dimensions. The Religious Zionist party's ascendancy is propelled not solely by religious affiliations but also by its unwavering commitment to a strong nationalistic stance concerning the state of Israel regardless of the implications of Israel's democracy. In the aftermath of Yamina's electoral setback, there is a discernible resonance of dissatisfaction with the prevailing status quo, compelling an increasing number of Israelis to align with a party that advocates for a robust national identity.⁴⁰ This sentiment, particularly pronounced among the younger demographics within the Haredi populations, has found a voice in the Religious Zionist party, which champions a vision of Israel rooted in a distinctive national ethos. The party's appeal extends beyond religious parameters, making it a conduit for those dissatisfied with existing political norms, thereby contributing to a broader shift toward

³⁸Shpigel, Noa. "Politically Homeless: A Quarter of Religious Zionists Still Not Sure Who They'll Vote For." *Haaretz*. October 11, 2022.

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/2022-10-11/ty-article/.premium/politically-homeless-a-quarter-of-religious-zionists-still-not-sure-who-theyll-vote-for/00000183-c748-dd41-a7eb-df4a022f0000>

³⁹Finkelstein, Dr. Ariel. "Voting Patterns of Jewish Israelis in the March 2021 Elections by Religious Affiliation." *The Israel Democracy Institute*, 4 Aug. 2022, en.idi.org.il/articles/39417.

⁴⁰Ben Zion, Ilan. 2022 "Israel's Haredi Voters Drift Hard Right in Leadership Vacuum." *AP News*. <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-religion-jerusalem-israel-29fa429e432e87bdb2f62f7a5a1d95d7>

right-wing and nationalistic policies within the Israeli political spectrum. This view aligns with previous researchers who have argued that Ben Gvir has given “disenfranchised ultra-Orthodox youth an outlet for...their nationalistic sentiment.”⁴¹

Various factors illustrate that this phenomenon is partially due to a lack of contentment with the status quo within these communities and not simply explainable by the faster population growth as cited in previous works. If these factors were influenced by demographic factors and religious concerns, the vote share for Shas and UTG would likely have increased but have remained stagnant in the most recent elections.

Finally, in addition to public opinion data, the previously listed statistics reflecting waning support for the two-state solution also reflect a trend within Israeli society that highlights a movement away from the status quo. Previously, a two-state solution was supported by a majority of the Israeli population with over 70 percent of Israel’s population supporting Oslo II in 1995.⁴² Yet, currently only 32 percent of Jewish Israelis and 41 percent of Arab Israelis support this policy.⁴³ Moreover, polling indicates that approximately 80 percent of those in the West Bank and Gaza do “not trust Israeli Jews” with similar sentiments mirrored by Israeli Jews.⁴⁴ This shift in support not only highlights a lack of trust in the status quo agreement but also reflects a larger change in distinctions between the right and left within Israel’s political sphere. Previously, this distinction was mainly based on divides on the Israeli-Palestinian

⁴¹ Ben-Dor, Calev. “Understanding the Rise of Itamar Ben Gvir.” Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council. October 26, 2022. <https://aijac.org.au/australia-israel-review/understanding-the-rise-of-itamar-ben-gvir/>

⁴² Cleveland, Catherine. “New Polling and the Legacy of the Oslo Accords.” The Washington Institute. September 14, 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-polling-and-legacy-oslo-accords>

⁴³ Shikaki, Khalil, Rosler, Nimrod, Yakter, Alon, and Scheindlin, Dahlia. “The Palestine/Israel Pulse, a Joint Poll Summary Report.” Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, January 24, 2023. <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/928>.

⁴⁴ Cleveland, 2023.

conflict⁴⁵; while the left typically supported a two-state solution, the Israeli right was known to value security. However, as a result of lessening support and the loss of political power of the Israeli left, Israel's political spectrum is undergoing changes that reflect dissatisfaction with the peace process and possibly even greater support for armed struggle against opposing groups.⁴⁶

IV. Influence of Younger Voters and the Second Intifada

When analyzing this shift to the right, it is also imperative to examine the impact younger voters have on this trend. Specifically, according to polling conducted by the Israeli Democracy Institute, 73 percent of Jewish Israelis within the 18-24 age range defined themselves as identifying with the right-wing, compared to 46 percent of Israelis over the age of 65.⁴⁷ This demographic plays an imperative role analyzing this shift within Israeli society and various factors contribute to this shift. As stated previously in this paper, changing demographics—especially among the ultra-religious—has played a role in the greater adoption of right-wing policies in Israeli society. However, when looking at younger demographics specifically, polling data shows that the ultra-religious in Israel cannot fully account for this widespread acceptance of right-wing policies.⁴⁸

One influencing factor cited by experts is the role of the Second Intifada, which continued from 2000 to 2005. This period in Israeli society was characterized as a mass uprising by Palestinians against Israeli occupation, characterized by a period of intense violence on city buses, restaurants, and in the streets. Some experts have speculated the 2000 Camp David Peace

⁴⁵ Yakter, A., & Tessler, M. (2023). The long-term electoral implications of conflict escalation: Doubtful doves and the breakdown of Israel's left-right dichotomy. *Journal of Peace Research*, 60(3), 504-520. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00223433221088038>

⁴⁶ Cleveland, 2023.

⁴⁷Robbins, Claire Porter. "How Israeli Youth Helped Usher in the Farthest Right-Wing Government Ever." Vox, February 23, 2023. <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2023/2/23/23609584/israel-right-wing-young-voters-palestine>.

⁴⁸ Robbins 2023.

Summit played a role in this violence while others have pointed to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount as the instigator of this conflict. After five years, an estimated 1,200 Israelis were killed with another 1,000 injured. The deadliest year of the conflict for Israel was 2002, ending in 269 civilian deaths with 47 children.⁴⁹ The civilians' deaths likely fueled increasing right-wing views, especially considering the generation that grew up during this period of conflict are beginning to vote in Israeli elections. By analyzing this perspective from a psychological viewpoint, scholars interested in the evolution of Israeli politics can likely develop a greater understanding of the factors that have shaped the political leanings within Israel's domestic sphere.

The Second Intifada stands out as a period unlike previous points of conflict in Israeli history. Unlike other points of conflict, this period of violence occurred primarily within Israeli society (as opposed to a combat zone), disrupting the daily lives of Israelis within cities across Israel. In addition, prior to the attacks of October 7, 2023, this period of violence marked one of the largest number of civilian casualties in Israel's history. This context is important in explaining the eroding trust from the Israeli perspective towards Palestinians, and in turn, the support for right wing policies.⁵⁰ Instead of experiencing loss as a result of war, which also has shown to push people further to the right, this feeling of loss expanded to a much more personal level.

Past research has examined the role of conflict in tolerance, finding that regular exposure to attacks has the ability to "raise intolerance toward political minorities," which can be further

⁴⁹"Database on Fatalities and House Demolitions." B'Tselem, October 5, 2023.

<https://statistics.btselem.org/en/all-fatalities/by-date-of-incident?section=overall&tab=charts>.

⁵⁰ Palti, Zohar. "The Implications of the Second Intifada on Israeli Views of Oslo." The Washington Institute, September 8, 2023.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/implications-second-intifada-israeli-views-oslo>.

heightened by political figures who “stoke public fears even longer.”⁵¹ In this particular case, the violence associated with the Second Intifada followed by periodic violence from rocket fire throughout the 2000s possibly contributes to feelings of mistrust of not only the peace process but also towards ethnic minorities in Israel, leading some to feel represented by and support far-right parties that advocate on behalf of Jewish safety.⁵²

Various studies and experts have highlighted the effect of the Second Intifada on the Jewish Israeli population. One consequence of this period is a feeling of helplessness, especially after the progress made following the Oslo Accords.⁵³ One expert, after engaging in conversations with Israelis following the Second Intifada, noted an “erosion of trust” among Israelis and Palestinians as well as feelings of helplessness and the need to pinpoint the blame on another entity — the Palestinian Authority (PA). This increased period of violence can be used to justify stronger security measures rooted from the sense of general anxiety Israelis feel stemming from this period.⁵⁴ Coupling the feeling of a loss of power with the blame placed on the PA ultimately ushered in a period that justified increased security measures against Palestinians, a key platform of the Israeli right-wing. With the effectiveness of these policies cited by members of the Knesset and the IDF, a highly trusted organization amongst Israelis, the Left bloc not only lost support but the right, led by Prime Minister Netanyahu, became known as the protector of Israeli society.

⁵¹ Peffley, Marc, Marc L. Hutchison, and Michal Shamir. “The Impact of Persistent Terrorism on Political Tolerance: Israel, 1980 to 2011.” *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 4 (2015): 817–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000441>.

⁵² Izydorczyk, Monika. 2006. “Security vs. Justice—Israel and Palestine: Diverging Perceptions of the Middle East Conflict since the Beginning of the Second Intifada and their Influence on the Peace Process.” Marshall Center. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/security-vs-justice-israel-and-palestine-diverging-perceptions-middle-east-conflict-beginning-second#toc-conclusion>

⁵³Palti 2023.

⁵⁴Harel, Amos. “No Terror Attacks, No Accords: 20 Years On, the Effects of the Second Intifada are Clear.” Haaretz, September 28, 2023. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2020-09-28/ty-article/.premium/no-terror-no-accords-20-years-on-the-effects-of-the-second-intifada-are-clear/0000017f-db6d-d3a5-af7f-fbef914c0000>

Another study that examined effects of political violence on children found that exposure to ethnic violence leads to “normative beliefs” on violence and aggression.⁵⁵ This effect of desensitization regarding violence leads them to become “emotionally callous to violence,” and the researchers found that exposure to political violence in early adolescents predicted support for engaging in political and political violent demonstrations.”⁵⁶

The phenomena outlined above align not only with the growing prevalence of the right-wing ideology but also possibly contribute to the adoption of increasingly radical right policies. As more children who were growing up during the Second Intifada become eligible to vote, this influential event could have an imperative effect on this generation’s political leaning, causing a larger percentage of this age group to identify with the right, aligning with the Left bloc’s well documented loss of a strong following in Israel. For example, in 1992, the left bloc, composed of Meretz and Labor, won 44 percent of the vote, and during Prime Minister Netanyahu’s first year in office, this percentage dropped to 34 percent in 1996. This number further decreased following the Second Intifada with 19 percent of Israelis supporting the left bloc, and most recently, winning 7 percent of voters in the 2022 election.⁵⁷

In addition, the success of these procedures in reducing the amount of Israeli casualties provides additional political support for these policies while at the same time reducing these feelings of helplessness, incentivizing members of the Israeli public to support right-wing policies. These initiatives include increased settlement in the West Bank and the installation of checkpoints between the West Bank and Israel. Further, beginning in 2002, Israel began the creation of a security barrier between Israel and the West Bank, allowing the country to distribute

⁵⁵Huesmann, Rowell and Dubow, Eric. “The psychological consequences of political violence..” University of Michigan. November 21, 2023. <https://news.umich.edu/the-psychological-consequences-of-political-violence/>

⁵⁶Huesmann and Dubow 2023.

⁵⁷Gur, Haviv Rettig. “The Israeli left has lost more than an election.” The Times of Israel, November, 7, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-israeli-left-has-lost-more-than-an-election/#:~:text=In%20the%20five%2Delection%20run,a%20tailspin%20for%20three%20decades.>

visas and install checkpoints. These measures were found to be successful as the IDF was able to stop every attempt at a suicide bombing in 2004 from the northern West Bank.⁵⁸ In the years beyond the Second Intifada, as a result of these policies, the IDF has cited significant decreases in suicide attacks, shootings, and civilian casualties.⁵⁹ According to the IDF, the checkpoints and security barrier have decreased suicide bombings and shootings to almost 0 along with civilian death. While these numbers possibly could have resulted from a variety of other factors (such as the ending of the Second Intifada with Israel leaving Gaza), these statistics demonstrate that the Israeli government utilize them to advocate in favor of these counterterrorism measures, and their supposed effectiveness creates a positive feedback loop for right-wing policy.

In addition to providing additional support to Israel's right bloc, specific policies, including the security wall and limiting the number of visas for Palestinians, also has contributed to a lessening of interactions between Jewish Israelis who live inside Israel proper and Palestinians in the West Bank.⁶⁰ Primarily, the security wall and checkpoints limiting movement from the West Bank into Israel have contributed to not only to increased safety for Israelis but also resulted in the cutting off of the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Israel proper. Israel controls all entry and exit points not only into the West Bank but also those leading to East Jerusalem, maintaining the authority to those who cross these checkpoints. A report compiled by the UN Organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) found that over 500 movement obstacles in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, including approximately 180

⁵⁸ Palti, Zohar. "Israel's Security Fence: Effective in Reducing Suicide Attacks from the Northern West Bank." The Washington Institute. 2004.
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-security-fence-effective-reducing-suicide-attacks-northern-west-bank>

⁵⁹IDF Editorial Team. "Setting the Facts Straight on the Security Fence." IDF, May 5, 2015.
<https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/palestinian-terrorism/setting-the-facts-straight-on-the-security-fence/>

⁶⁰ Bronner, Ethan. "A Damaging Distance." The New York Times. July 11, 2014.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/13/sunday-review/for-israelis-and-palestinians-separation-is-dehumanizing.html>

checkpoints, and 304 roadblocks, earth-mounds, and roadgates.⁶¹ These checkpoints include metal detectors and surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition technology. The number of checkpoints and various security measures has increased by 8 percent between 2020 and 2023, according to the UNOCH.

In addition, the permit system, which requires Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza to apply for work permits, had contributed further to this separation. The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories has stated that Palestinians undergo an “arbitrary, entirely non-transparent” system with applications denied without explanation.⁶² These restrictions contribute additional hardships on Palestinians but also limit their interactions with Israelis both in the settlements of the West Bank and within Israel. This lessening of interactions between the two groups likely could contribute to effects found in previous studies that examined the attitudes of Israelis towards Palestinians. Moreover, these tactics — regardless of their effectiveness — have reinforced the divide between “us” versus “them” by combining cultural perspectives of separation with tactics of safety and national security.⁶³ This separation barrier represents the broader policy of maintaining a distinct separation between Israelis and Palestinians.

One systematic review of the psychological effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict included on how individuals’ attitudes shifted as a result of the violence associated with the conflict. Greater exposure to violence was associated with increasing levels of ethnocentrism,

⁶¹ OCHA. 2023 “Fact Sheet: Movement and Access in the West Bank, August 2023.”

<https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/fact-sheet-movement-and-access-west-bank-august-2023>

⁶² B’TSelem. “Restrictions on Movement.” November 11, 2017. https://www.btselem.org/freedom_of_movement

⁶³ Ben-Eliezer, Uri, and Yuval Feinstein. “‘The Battle over Our Homes’: Reconstructing/Deconstructing Sovereign Practices around Israel’s Separation Barrier on the West Bank.” *Israel Studies* 12, no. 1 (2007): 171–92.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30245812>.

support for political violence, and authoritarianism.⁶⁴ Further, violence also contributed to increasing levels of fear, hatred, and negative stereotypes towards the outgroup (in this case with the outgroup being Palestinians and the ingroup being Israelis). While these effects were attributed to the Second Intifada, the resulting policies possibly could have also contributed to these end results, specifically the weakening of democratic values within Israeli society.

Examining the effect of the Second Intifada on settler communities additionally sheds light on the increasing prevalence of far-right policies. For example, the Religious Zionism party receives much of their support from Israelis who live within Israeli settlements in the West Bank. One study assessed the impact of this period of violence on children from Jerusalem, Gilo, and Jewish settlements.⁶⁵ The study's findings highlight a concerning trend: approximately two-thirds of adolescents in settlements rejected peace talks entirely, compared to only around half of youths in Jerusalem and Gilo who supported the continuation of peace talks. This stark contrast suggests that the prolonged exposure to violence during the Second Intifada has deeply influenced the mindset of Israeli settlers, pushing them further to support far-right ideologies. Moreover, the correlation between exposure to violence and both PTSD symptoms and anti-peace attitudes underscores the psychological impact of conflict on individuals within these communities where the impact of this period of violence challenges core aspects of their belief system, including the idea that Israel is the “historical and biblical heartland of the Jewish people.”⁶⁶ As settlers grapple with trauma and fear, they may increasingly turn to far-right political leaders and policies perceived as offering security and protection. Therefore, it becomes

⁶⁴Ayer, Lynsay, Brinda Venkatesh, Robert Stewart, Daniel Mandel, Bradley Stein, and Michael Schoenbaum. “Psychological Aspects of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict: A Systematic Review.” *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 18, no. 3 (2017): 322–38. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26638184>.

⁶⁵Solomon, Z., and T. Lavi. 2005. "Israeli Youth in the Second Intifada: PTSD and Future Orientation." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 44, no. 11: 1167–1175. <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.chi.0000161650.97643.e1>.

⁶⁶Goldenberg, Tia. “Israeli settler population in West Bank surpasses half a million.” PBS, February 2, 2023. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/israeli-settler-population-in-west-bank-surpasses-half-a-million>

evident that the rise in support for far-right ideologies in Israeli politics can be partly attributed to the psychological aftermath of the Second Intifada, perpetuating a cycle of violence and polarization.

Beyond examining the increased level of security measures taken by the Israeli government, this decrease in communication adds a growing divide between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians, allowing less room for connections to develop, a decrease in understanding on both sides of the other, and creating a divide that makes Palestinians “invisible as individuals to Israeli Jews.”⁶⁷ This shift is also reflected through the lessening of support for the two-state solution among both Israelis and Palestinians cited earlier in this paper. This divide can also be seen through the lack of efforts towards a peace agreement in recent years. While this trend can be attributed to various factors, including security concerns and political dynamics, it is important to note that recent agreements between Israelis and Palestinians have primarily focused on economic incentives rather than addressing fundamental humanitarian and political issues. This shift in approach, in addition to a lack of sustained leadership commitment from both Israeli and Palestinian governments, has hindered progress towards a comprehensive peace agreement. The absence of meaningful dialogue and the failure to address core grievances have contributed to a sense of disillusionment and frustration among both populations, further widening the gap between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. As a result, the prospects for meaningful reconciliation and the realization of a viable two-state solution have become increasingly remote in recent years.

Following the Second Intifada, specific policies aligned with this shift in attitudes, both exacerbating tensions and weakening Israel’s democracy. As the lives of Jewish Israelis were

⁶⁷Cohen, Roger. “Between Israelis and Palestinians, a Lethal Psychological Chasm Grows.” *New York Times*, November 20, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/20/world/middleeast/israelis-palestinians-conflict.html>

threatened during the Second Intifada, these policies became more easily justifiable in the name of national security. Further, the increased violence between these groups allows the right bloc to create a narrative that argues in favor of increasingly nationalistic and protectionist policies, pushing Israeli society farther to the right than ever before. By emphasizing the heightened tensions and presenting a narrative that portrays Jews as under threat, right-wing politicians and their supporters can appeal to the collective identity of the Jewish population.

Specifically, this paper examines laws passed during and since the Second Intifada and landmark cases in years after this period, including the Nakba Law and the Nation-State Law. According to Adalah, The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel, more than 65 laws discriminate against Palestinians both in Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories with more than half (36) adopted since 2000. These laws both reflect the permissibility to enact possibly discriminatory changes when citing national security, which continues to have implications in Israeli society today. Moreover, some of these laws demonstrate the weakening of Israel's democracy within the twenty-first century. This contention of Israel's crisis of democracy has been noted by previous researchers who found "new legislation that was put forward by the government or by Knesset members, but was problematic in terms of liberal democracy as practiced in Western democracies."⁶⁸

Two laws passed during the Second Intifada and still upheld today are the Law of Political Parties - Amendment No. 12 and the "Ban of Family Unification" - Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law. These policies were passed in 2002 and 2003, respectfully. The former regulates the creation and establishment of political parties in Israel, restricting ideological limitations on parties that can be registered in the Knesset including those that "deny the

⁶⁸ Nueberger, Benyamin. 2022. "The Rise and Gradual Decline of Israeli Democracy, 1920–2020." Project Muse. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/article/842365/pdf>

existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state” or have goals that directly or indirectly support the “armed struggle of an enemy state or terror organization.”⁶⁹ The latter policy, which initially began as a temporary order but was reauthorized in 2022, limits family unification between one spouse who is an Israeli citizen and the other spouse who resides in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).⁷⁰

The passage and continued enforcement of these laws reflect a broader trend of governments leveraging national security concerns to justify differential treatment of communities in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. For example, the Law of Political Parties imposes ideological limitations on political parties in Israel and, while the aim may be to prevent subversive activities, the vague language of the law and its potential to stifle dissent or minority viewpoints raise concerns about its potential discriminatory impact, especially on Arab-Israeli political parties. Further, according to IDI, Israel’s supreme court “has not demonstrated consistency or decisiveness” towards disqualifications by refraining from applying a test of “actual risk” to directly demonstrate that the law has met its purpose.⁷¹ By lacking a more specific mechanism for limiting political parties, the Knesset has enacted a law that limits the speech of knesset members and potentially discriminatory practices.

Most recently, members of Likud, who have ties to Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party, have furthered the bill by attempting to bar the Supreme Court from overruling decisions made by the Central Elections Committee regarding individuals and political parties to disqualify Arab-majority parties from running in elections.⁷² These policies directly “limit the political

⁶⁹“Law of Political Parties.” Adalah, 2002. <https://www.adalah.org/en/law/view/512>

⁷⁰ “Ban on Family Unification - Citizenship and Entry into Israel law.” Adalah, 2003. <https://www.adalah.org/en/law/view/511>

⁷¹ Kremnitzer, Mordechai. “Disqualification of Lists.” “The Israeli Democracy Institute.” The Israel Democracy Institute, 2005. <https://en.idi.org.il/publications/8702>

⁷² Times of Israel Staff. “Likud MK’s bill would give coalition power to ban political parties.” Times of Israel, July 28, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/likud-bill-would-give-coalition-power-to-ban-parties-sponsor-claims-its-a-stunt/>

freedoms of the Arab community” but also prevent Arab legislators from engaging in “substantive” criticism to benefit their Arab constituents.⁷³ Right-wing Knesset members take “particular issue with their allegiance to the broader Palestinian national cause,” demonstrating how advocacy for a Palestinian state can be tied with prejudice and discriminatory practices towards Arab lawmakers.

Moreover, the attempt to limit the scope of the Supreme Court reflects a broader strategy to legitimize these policies that conflate the views of Arab Knesset members as a national security issue. Further, the law continues to have consequences as most recently the Central Elections Committee attempted to block this party from running in the 2022 November Election. Moreover, Knesset Member Ofir Katz attempted to increase the scope of this law by constructing a visit to the family of an attack suspect as “support for terror,” which would likely disqualify most of the Arab members of the Knesset.⁷⁴ Similarly, the "Ban of Family Unification" law was passed as a security measure; however, critics argue that this law disproportionately affects Arab citizens of Israel and Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories, infringing upon their right to family life and perpetuating the fragmentation of Palestinian communities.

The “Ban of Family Unification” law, which was reauthorized until March 2024 was most recently justified by a Yinon Azoulay, a member of the Shas Party in the Knesset, who argued that “dozens” of terror attacks were conducted as a result of Palestinian access to Israel through family unification and to ensure safety for Israeli citizens.⁷⁵ However, both rights groups and members of the Knesset have criticized the law for being discriminatory. Arab lawmakers

⁷³ McBurney, Alice. “The New Wave of Israel’s Discriminatory Laws.” Mossawa. September 2014. <https://www.mossawa.org/eng/Public/file/04864.pdf>

⁷⁴ Times of Israel Staff. “Coalition said planning bill to ease disqualification of Arabs from Knesset.” Times of Israel. January 24, 2023.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/coalition-said-planning-bill-to-ease-disqualification-of-arabs-from-knesset/>

⁷⁵ Keller-Lynn, Carrie. “Knesset extends law banning Palestinian family unification for another year.” Times of Israel. March 6, 2023.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/knesset-extends-law-banning-palestinian-family-unification-for-another-year/>

have argued that the law is antidemocratic and discriminatory towards Arab citizens in Israel. Despite its continuation, the law has been criticized by rights groups and while it has been upheld by the Israeli Supreme Court, the law was supported both times by a very slim margin (6-5), demonstrating its controversy.

Further, left-leaning human rights organizations like B'TSelem, the Israeli Information Center for Palestinian Rights in the Occupied Territories, compiled a report in 2004 following the law's initial passing and cited that the state has only offered one statistic to support the law: 23 Palestinians who received legal status in Israel from their family were involved in carrying out terrorist attacks.⁷⁶ Moreover, during the law's initial passing, lawmakers cited various terrorist attacks sparked as a result of this cause, but failed to provide how many attacks were carried out, specific locations, and how holding Israeli citizenship benefited them to carry out the attack.

Overall, the reauthorization of these laws in the twenty-first century suggests an enduring trend toward that counteracts pluralism within Israeli governance. By maintaining and even expanding laws that target specific ethnic or national groups, the government risks exacerbating tensions and perpetuating inequalities based on ethnicity. This reflects a broader global trend where governments, particularly those facing security challenges, may prioritize national interests over individual rights and freedoms, leading to the erosion of democratic norms and principles. Specifically, in the case of Israel, as noted by previous researchers, illiberal legislative initiatives and a narrowed space for civil society demonstrate the “ the institutional risks of democratic backsliding in Israel.”⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Stein, Yael. “Forbidden Families: Family Unification and Child Registration.” B'TSelem. January, 2004. https://www.btselem.org/sites/default/files/sites/default/files2/publication/200401_forbidden_families_eng.pdf

⁷⁷ Hirsch, Michal Ben-Josef. 2022. “Democracy at Risk? Assessing Israel's Democratic Backsliding.” Research Gate.

In addition to laws passed during the Second Intifada, 34 discriminatory laws have been passed by the Knesset after 2005, according to Adalah. Two of note include one colloquially known as the “Nakba law,” passed in 2011, and the Nation-State Law, passed in 2016. One of the main provisions of the law allows government institutions to be fined for commemorating the Nakba.⁷⁸ As argued by Human Rights Watch, this measure ultimately fosters a “single government-approved view of Israel’s history.”⁷⁹ Before its passing, Israeli academics and local NGOs criticized the law and argued that it “serve[s] primarily to stigmatize and to silence the human rights concerns of the Palestinian Arab minority.”

The former authorizes the Minister of Finance to withdraw state support from institutions that observe Palestinian Nakba Day as a day of mourning. For Palestinians, Nakba Day refers to the displacement of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The law ultimately restricts freedom of expression, aims to prevent “legitimate criticism of the state,” and disregards a “seminal” moment of Palestinian history.⁸⁰

The law's provision targeting organizations that deny Israel's existence as a Jewish and democratic state implies a link between Palestinian historical narratives and national security. By framing any challenge to Israel as a threat to the safety of civilians, the law suppresses dissenting voices and alternative perspectives on the conflict. This conflation suggests that acknowledging Palestinian historical grievances undermines Israel's security and legitimacy as a state, utilizing this line of reasoning to suppress different voices. Overall, by restricting freedom of expression and attempting to control how Palestinian history is remembered and discussed, the Nakba law

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Michal-Ben-Josef-Hirsch/publication/371598604_Democracy_at_Risk_Assessing_Israel's_Democratic_Backsliding/links/648b463ec41fb852dd093f13/Democracy-at-Risk-Assessing-Israels-Democratic-Backsliding.pdf

⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch. “New Laws Marginalize Palestinian Arab Citizens.” March 30, 2021.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/30/israel-new-laws-marginalize-palestinian-arab-citizens>

⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch, 2011.

⁸⁰ “Nakba Law - Amendment No. 40 to the Budgets Foundations Law.” Adalah, 2011.

<https://www.adalah.org/en/law/view/496>

not only undermines democratic principles but also perpetuates a narrative that equates Palestinian narratives with a threat to Israel's national security. This conflation serves to delegitimize Palestinian perspectives, fostering division and limiting pluralistic views within Israeli society.

Finally, the Nation-State Law constitutionally defines Israel as a state for Jewish people, which caused controversy as the law does not mention equality, define Israel as a “Jewish and Democratic state” and makes no mention of the Arab minority within Israel. As many others have, the Israel Democracy Institute noted that the law is declarative in nature.⁸¹ However, some academics have argued that the law will likely have a substantive impact on Arab-Jewish relations within the state, and as a whole, the law weakens Israel’s liberal-democratic claims.⁸²

Overall, since the Second Intifada, the Israeli government has enacted legislation that reflects a prioritization of certain elements of Israeli society over others under the guise of national security imperatives or maintaining the state’s Jewish identity. Heightened tensions during the Intifada prompted policies justifying these measures to ensure the safety and security of Jewish Israelis. Notably, laws such as the Law of Political Parties - Amendment No. 12 and the "Ban of Family Unification" law, passed during the Intifada, demonstrate this shift. These laws restrict political dissent and limit family unification between Israeli citizens and Palestinians, respectively, purportedly to enhance security but at the expense of democratic principles. Furthermore, post-Intifada legislation, exemplified by the Nakba Law and the Nation-State Law, further entrenches ethnocentric narratives by stifling Palestinian historical perspectives and formally defining Israel as a state for Jewish people, without addressing

⁸¹Fuchs, Amir and Navot, Suzie. “Nation-State Law Explainer.” Israel Democracy Institute. December 11, 2023. <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/24241>

⁸² Waxman, Dov, and Ilan Peleg. "The Nation-State Law and the Weakening of Israeli Democracy." *Israel Studies* 25, no. 3 (2020): 185-200. doi:10.2979/israelstudies.25.3.16.

equality or acknowledging the Arab minority. Such legislation, alongside the alarming number of discriminatory laws passed since 2005, as documented by Adalah, reflects a troubling trajectory towards ultimately undermining the pluralistic fabric of Israeli society.

V. The Influential Role of Social Identity Theory

The framework of social identity theory (SIT) provides insights into Israeli society and the ideological evolution of the Israeli political system. This theory explains how groups and individuals interact, with people deriving some part of their identity from group membership and members of a dominant ingroup typically more strongly justifying their stance and demonizing those within the outgroup. Previous research has applied aspects of social identity to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, finding that this conflict has led to the perception of the opposing group in “zero-sum terms” in respect to national identities and existence.⁸³ While this interaction has implications for Israeli policy regarding Palestinians, this paper will look at the interactions between the Israeli right with Israeli Arabs and the Israeli Left to examine how these interactions have been affected by the more widespread adoption of right-wing policies. For the sake of this paper, right-wing Jewish Israelis are defined as the ingroup and Israeli Arabs and the Israeli Left as the outgroup.

As stated previously in the paper, integral to the right-wing identity in Israeli politics is the maintenance of safety for its citizens. This concept is related both to the physical security of citizens — seen through the implementation of safety measures during the Second Intifada — but also is tied to maintaining Israel’s identity as a Jewish state as well. The increasing adoption of Israeli right-wing policies has cultivated an environment that ties one’s political association

⁸³ Kelman, Herbert. “National Identity and the Role of the “Other” in Existential Conflicts: The Israeli-Palestinian Case.” Harvard University. January 2005. <http://www.complexitycourse.org/kelman.pdf>

with their identity on a heightened level. Further, with little international support, this idea is further heightened by the acceptance that Israel is a “nation that dwells alone.”⁸⁴ Therefore, any threat — legitimate or perceived — that appears to weaken the state is viewed with distrust, leading to tensions within Israeli society. I argue that both the Israeli Left and Israeli Arabs can be seen as a threat both to the safety of the state and the Jewish identity of the state.

The perceived threat to the Jewish community strengthened Jewish identity, reinforcing the notion of a distinct and separate group from Arabs and Palestinians. In this context, the right-wing bloc frames the conflict as an existential struggle, arguing that only by adopting more nationalistic policies can Israel ensure the safety and preservation of the Jewish people. By leveraging the emotions and fears associated with this conflict, right-wing politicians can tap into the social identity of Jewish citizens, fostering a stronger identification with their group and further distancing themselves from other groups. The emphasis on distinctions between groups can also be seen through the increasingly charged rhetoric used against Israeli Arabs by newly elected Knesset members.

Past scholarship has noted that the Israeli right adopts an “exclusionary posture” towards Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, stemming from a belief that these groups threaten the country’s national security and Jewish identity.⁸⁵ This belief system aligns and is further highlighted by both the rhetoric used by Knesset Members and public opinion polling in Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s political party, Likud, as well as its allies in the Knesset, have labeled Ra’am, an Arab party in the Knesset, as “terrorist supporters.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Paul Scham. “‘A Nation That Dwells Alone’: Israeli Religious Nationalism in the 21st Century.” *Israel Studies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 207–15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/israelstudies.23.3.25>

⁸⁵ Peffley, Mark, Yair, Omer, and Hutchison, Marc I. “Left-Right Social Identity and the Polarization of Political Tolerance.” Sage Journals. July 20, 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/10659129231189759>

⁸⁶ Times of Israel Staff. “Nazareth mayor: Netanyahu in talks about cooperating with Ra’am after elections.” Times of Israel. October 22, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/nazareth-mayor-netanyahu-in-talks-about-cooperating-with-raam-after-elections/>

In contrast, the Israeli Jewish left wing has been typically more supportive of negotiation efforts with the Palestinians, specifically seen through the peace negotiations in the 1990s with the Palestinian Authority.⁸⁷ Moreover, the Israeli left also advocates for the inclusion of Israeli Arabs with the belief that this integration ultimately helps Israeli society succeed.⁸⁸

Israeli Arabs make up one-fifth of Israel's population, making up a large minority of Israeli society. Over 80 percent of this population is Muslim, speaks Arabic rather than Hebrew, and typically lives in separate towns and attends different schools. Past researchers also have been identified as an "unassimilable minority" as these populations "do not intermarry with Jews and...want to keep their existence separate."⁸⁹ Further, they have also been identified as an "enemy-affiliated minority" stemming from the view that this population is potentially hostile due to their affiliation with the Arab world and their rejection of Zionism. In turn, the Jewish narrative is shaped by an identity that views themselves as indigenous to the land and having returned to a land full of outsiders, demonstrating that "both sides reject the most cherished values of the other."⁹⁰

Overall, past research has noted the integral aspects of each group's identity. However, these group differences have ultimately led to increased tensions and polarization both between the Israeli right and left and between the Israeli Jewish right and Israeli Arabs. This divide, while being exacerbated by members of the far-right and their rhetoric against both outgroups, has also existed prior to the rise of Religious Zionism.⁹¹

⁸⁷Rettig Gur, Haviv. "The Israeli left has lost more than an election." Times of Israel. November 7, 2022. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-israeli-left-has-lost-more-than-an-election/>

⁸⁸ Peffley et al., 2023.

⁸⁹ Smootha, Sammy. "Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel. Alienation and Rapprochement." United States Institute of Peace. 2010. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PW67_Arab-Jewish_Relations_in_Israel.pdf

⁹⁰Smootha 2010.

⁹¹ Telhami, Shibley. "How Israel's Jewishness is Overtaking its Democracy." Brookings. March 11, 2016. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-israels-jewishness-is-overtaking-its-democracy/>

Increased tensions and violence between Jews and Arabs are a symptom of this rightward shift. Unlike previous moments of conflict, recent disputes between the two groups have occurred due to civilian-on-civilian violence, with outbreaks occurring in mixed-society cities.⁹² The situation has worsened as Arab citizens feel frustration over continued oppression, discrimination, and legislative reforms such as the Nation-State Law, which acknowledges Israel as a Jewish state and disregards the country's significant Arab population.⁹³ Further, public opinion polling also reflects increased tensions as 61 percent of Israeli citizens believe that Arabs and Jews have the highest level of tensions between them in 2022 compared to 46 percent in 2021.⁹⁴

In addition to IDI, the aChord Center published a report on intergroup relations in Israel in 2021 after the intergroup violence of May 2021. They found that a large majority of youth from both groups report feelings of despair and anger directed at members of the opposing group with particularly salient feelings among religious and ultra-Orthodox Jewish youth.⁹⁵ Further, the findings also demonstrated higher levels of hatred and fear experienced by Arab youth towards Jews with their willingness to associate with Jewish Israelis declining.⁹⁶

Primarily, multiple sources have found the highest source of tension within Israeli society to either stem from Israel-Arab relations or the Left-Right dichotomy. According to the Israel Democracy Institute, yearly tensions between Jews and Arabs in Israel have fluctuated

⁹² Milshtein, M. (2021, June 16). *The crisis in relations between Jews and Arabs in Israel: Can the rift be healed?*. The Washington Institute. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/crisis-relations-between-jews-and-arabs-israel-can-rift-be-healed>

⁹³ Robbins 2023..

⁹⁴ Hermann, T., Be'ery, G., Heller, E., Cohen, C., Lebel, Y., Mozes, H., & Neuman, K. (2014). *The National-Religious Sector in Israel 2014*. Israel Democracy Institute. https://en.idi.org.il/media/4663/madad-z-english_web.pdf

⁹⁵ aChord. 2021. "The Index for Shared Society Progress in Youth 2021." aChord and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. https://en.achord.huji.ac.il/sites/default/files/achord/files/isspy_2021_exec_summary_english.pdf

⁹⁶ aChord 2021.

year-to-year; however, this division reached an all-time high in 2022, with 61 percent of the sample finding the tensions between these two groups to be the highest.⁹⁷ However, it is important to note that other surveys indicated similar feelings of intolerance towards other groups prior to 2022. For example, in 2015, public opinion polling found that Jewish respondents ranked foreign workers (48.5 percent) and Arab families (36.1 percent) as their “most unwelcome neighbors” while Arab respondents cited ultra-Orthodox Jews (42.6 percent).⁹⁸ In 2023 (prior to the events of October 7), the organization found these tensions to be ranked second-highest — only below tension related to right or left affiliation.⁹⁹ Pew Research also found a large impact on tensions in Israeli society stemming from divides between the Left and the Right.¹⁰⁰

When examining these tensions, past works have argued that these tensions culminated in Arab-Israeli violence following the May 2021 Israel-Gaza War. During this time, violence erupted in mixed-cities, leading to three deaths, injuries, and property damage.¹⁰¹ One study found that this reaction stemmed from feelings from Arab citizens that the “Israeli establishment is to blame for their inferior situation compared to that of the Jews.”¹⁰² Further, the author argued that the violence stemmed from a civil-national clash — further heightened by religious tensions over the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

⁹⁷ Hermann et al., 2022.

⁹⁸ Israel Democracy Institute. “Despite reported tensions, discrimination and intolerance, Israelis say their personal situations are good.” November 10, 2015. <https://en.idi.org.il/press-releases/12742>

⁹⁹ Hermann, Tamar, et al. “The Israeli Democracy Index 2023.” *Israel Democracy Institute*, Dec. 2023, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/53380>

¹⁰⁰ Silver, Laura. “Israelis Have Polarized Views of Netanyahu, Reflecting Conflicts Many See in Israeli Society.” Pew Research Center, August 1, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/01/israelis-have-polarized-views-of-netanyahu-reflecting-conflicts-many-see-in-israeli-society/>

¹⁰¹ Hitman, G. (2023). May 2021 Riots by the Arab Minority in Israel: National, Civil or Religious? *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, 10(4), 346-363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23477989231198326>

¹⁰² Hitman 2023.

While a civil-national clash was likely responsible for this period of violence, I would also argue that this period of violence — and recorded tensions between Arabs and Jews— also stemmed from clashes related to each group’s identity. This conflict ultimately fostered higher levels of polarization and tension, contributing to a higher likelihood of violence sparking within mixed-cities.

One study examined the role of the multi-party system on affective polarization in Swedish voters within a multi-party system, finding that political solid and ethnic identities were significant drivers in polarization.¹⁰³ Similarly, as stated previously in the paper, the Israeli context is characterized by both strong ethnic and political ties. This phenomenon can be seen through the rhetoric of members on the right — aimed both at Israeli Arabs and members of the Left. Following the 2019 election, Times of Israel analyzed the most influencing factors in this election, citing religious differences but also the use of anti-Arab rhetoric. Secular parties that “appealed to voters’ anti-Arab sentiment” won more votes. At the same time, Prime Minister Netanyahu attempted to scare voters by arguing Arab parties would support a left-wing government.¹⁰⁴ Members of parties associated with the far-right, such as the Jewish Power party, also ran campaigns that “appealed to voters’ anti-Arab instincts” by advertising “it was better to kill a thousand terrorists than allow harm to even one hair of a Jewish soldier.”¹⁰⁵ These appeals demonstrate how group identities, and the perception of outgroups, can foster strategies used by political actors that ultimately contribute to the polarization and tension within Israeli society.

The support on the right is further strengthened through the use of anti-Arab sentiment,

¹⁰³ Renstrom, Emma A, Royce Carroll, and Hanna Back. “Intergroup Threat and Affective Polarization in a Multi-Party System.” *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, November 18, 2021. <https://jspp.psychopen.eu/index.php/jspp/article/view/7539/7539.html>.

¹⁰⁴ Ahren, Raphael. “How religion and anti-Arab sentiment helped the right wing win this election.” *Times of Israel*. April 11, 2019.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/how-religion-and-anti-arab-sentiment-helped-the-right-wing-win-the-election/>

¹⁰⁵ Ahren 2019.

generating outgroup hostility towards Israeli Arabs and members of the Left who are aligned with them.

Another effect of these group dynamics has caused a reinforcement effect, with both sides responding with the opposing sides' need to assert their identity — ultimately leading to a cycle that entrenches either side more deeply in their views. The security policies implemented after the Second Intifada have been largely successful at reducing casualties due to terrorism¹⁰⁶; however, despite these statistics and very low numbers, members of the right bloc continue to advance notions that have “radicalized” the public to adopt more extreme views on the right.¹⁰⁷ For example, members of the far-right bloc have run on platforms that advocate for the deportation of Arab Israelis deemed disloyal to the state.¹⁰⁸ In addition, in response to the increasingly right-wing government, police raids, and evictions, Israeli Arabs protested. Moreover, according to the Washington Post, more and more Arabs in Israel prefer to be recognized as a “Palestinian citizen of Israel,” indicating the desire to be more closely associated with their Palestinian roots and create their identity separate from Israeli society.¹⁰⁹

Some scholars have argued that this cycle has occurred since before the founding of the state of Israel in the 1880s with the first stage of Jewish migration to the region.¹¹⁰ However, I believe this cycle appears to have started as a modern phenomenon beginning when the right wing began to dominate Israeli politics in the early twenty-first century.

¹⁰⁶ IDF Editorial Team, 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Lavie, E., Elran, M., Shahbari, I., Sawaed, K., & Essa, J. (2021). *Jewish-Arab Relations in Israel, April-May 2021*. Institute for National Security Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep33836>

¹⁰⁸ Rosenberg, David E. “What Makes Israel’s Far Right Different.” *Foreign Policy*. October 30, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/30/religious-zionism-israel-far-right-different/>

¹⁰⁹ Witte, Griff, and Taha, Sufian. “Long overlooked, Israel’s Arab citizens are increasingly asserting their Palestinian Identity.” *The Washington Post*. June 11, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/palestinian-arab-israeli-citizens-identity/2021/06/10/2591ef56-c861-11eb-8708-64991f2acf28_story.html

¹¹⁰ Ersoy-Ceylan, T. “Social identities in conflict: Israeli Palestinians and Israeli Jews.” *Digest of Middle East Studies*. July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12300>

Prior to the twenty-first century, there were more substantial peace efforts at reconciling the positions of Palestinians, Israeli Jews, and Israeli Arabs such as the Oslo Accords. In addition, the views of Jewish leadership and the role of Arabs in Israeli society was not a “monolith” but rather subject to debate with some leaders arguing for more integration while others stressed the importance of majority-Jewish state.¹¹¹

However, beginning in 2000, the Second Intifada marked a period of a significant escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict, sparking increased feelings of unease, tensions, and polarization in Israeli society.¹¹² The Israeli response to this escalation of violence was not only increased security measures and policies aimed at countering terrorism, but also was followed by the dominance of right-wing governance since the early 2000s. These policies, as mentioned earlier, curbed the civil liberties of Arab citizens, contributing to a sense of marginalization and “growing mistrust, fear, and hostility” in Israel between ethnic groups.¹¹³ Further, rates of polarization have been documented to be especially high in the twenty-first century with one study finding that between 2009 and 2022, polarization increased by over 100 percent in Israeli society.¹¹⁴ Overall, while tension has likely existed between Jews and Arabs since Israel’s founding, the turn of the twenty-first century marks a period of increased polarization between ethnic groups with both sides growing closer with their in-group and viewing outgroups more negatively.

VI. Conclusion

¹¹¹ “Israel-Arab Conflicts: Before the Creation of the State of Israel.” ADL. January 1, 1999. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/israel-arab-conflicts-creation-state-israel>

¹¹² Eklund, Lina et al. “The Middle East and 20 years of the War on Terror.” June 15, 2023. <https://www.cmes.lu.se/article/middle-east-and-20-years-war-terror>

¹¹³ Waxman, D. “A Dangerous Divide: The Deterioration of Jewish-Palestinian Relations in Israel.” *Middle East Journal*, 66(1), 11–29. 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41342767>

¹¹⁴ Porat, Iddo. “Political Polarisation and the Constitutional Crisis in Israel.” *Israel Law Review* 56, no. 3 (2023): 369–84. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021223723000213>.

Overall, various factors — including the influence of Hamas’ growing arsenal, dissatisfaction with the status quo, and the psychological implications of the Second Intifada — have contributed to the widespread adoption of right-wing policy and the growth of more extreme views on the right throughout Israeli society.¹¹⁵ Israel’s political direction since the turn of the century illustrates complex internal and external dynamics that have ultimately promoted the growth of the rightwing in Israeli society.

The rise of Hamas and its escalating rocket attacks on Israel have contributed significantly to the rightward shift in Israeli politics, with the Israeli right positioning itself as the protector of national security and Jewish identity. Especially as Hamas increases the number and range of their arsenal along with feelings of insecurity among Israelis, the desire to ensure one’s own safety, and as a result, rally behind more assertive policies in the name of national security.¹¹⁶

The disillusionment with the political status quo, as evidenced by the declining trust in political institutions, has propelled more moderate voters to the right and pushed right-wing voters towards more extreme positions. The rise of parties like Religious Zionism reflects this trend, with their growing influence and extremist ideologies resonating with a significant portion of the Israeli population.¹¹⁷

Furthermore, demographic changes, particularly among younger voters, have also played a role in the rightward shift. The generation that grew up during the Second Intifada and its aftermath has been deeply influenced by the conflict and its implications for Israel's security and identity.¹¹⁸ By heightening both feelings of helplessness and increasing desensitization among

¹¹⁵ See citation 19.

¹¹⁶ See citation 24.

¹¹⁷ See citation 31.

¹¹⁸ See citation 54.

youth, the impact of the Second Intifada have further contributed to this shift. This period fostered a climate of fear, mistrust, and polarization between Israelis and Palestinians, fueling further support for right-wing policies between Israelis and Palestinians and likely contributing to increasing levels of intolerance and ethnocentrism.¹¹⁹ Specific security measures enacted during this time including checkpoints and the security barrier have been effective in reducing violence and contributing to feelings of safety for some; however, these changes have also aided in the separation and interaction between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. The shift towards the right is reflected through policies adopted following the Second Intifada, which prioritize certain elements of Israeli society over others and undermine pluralism within the state.

Social Identity Theory provides valuable insights into understanding these dynamics of the expansion of the right and highlights how group identities can influence political beliefs and attitudes. In the context of Israel, the Israeli rightwing views themselves as the ingroup while the Israeli Left and Israeli Arabs are perceived as the outgroup.

The Israeli right's emphasis on national security and Jewish identity has led to the demonization of outgroups, particularly Israeli Arabs and the Israeli Left, exacerbating existing tensions and divisions within Israeli society. Further, the right has advocated for more nationalistic policies to ensure the safety of the Jewish people and the state as a whole — reflected both through the rhetoric of policymakers in Israel and public opinion polling.

Specifically, the tensions and violence between Jews and Arabs has been exacerbated by legislative reforms and perceived discrimination of Arab citizens. These trends are reflected through public opinion polling through the acknowledgment of heightened tensions both between Jews and Arabs and across the political aisle as well.

¹¹⁹ See citation 61.

In conclusion, the rightward shift in Israeli politics is a multifaceted phenomenon driven by a combination of security concerns, exacerbations with the current system, historical events, and ideological shifts. This shift has had profound implications for Israeli society, leading to increased polarization, heightened tensions between ethnic and political groups, and a narrowing of the political discourse. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of these divisions and seeks to foster dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation among all segments of Israeli society.

VII. Postscript: Applying This Framework To a Post-October 7th Reality

As stated in the introduction, this paper did not discuss the implications of its findings regarding the violence of October 7th and its aftermath. However, following the October 7, the research above holds important implications.

Primarily, the violence that led to the death of approximately 1,400 Israelis has led both to even more adoption of rightwing policies and rejection of the ideas associated with the left bloc out of a desire to ensure the safety of its citizens — despite the rapidly declining support for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.¹²⁰ Public opinion polling demonstrates a “consensus has emerged that Israel needs to take a harder line with the Palestinians and embrace an even more militarized state” with calls for ceasefire within Israel mainly stemming from those who have family members as hostages in Gaza. 36 percent of Israelis have reported moving farther to the right and endorsement for policies that support settlers and far-right politicians is rising.¹²¹ Further, according to Tel Aviv University, support for a two-state solution among Israelis has

¹²⁰ Frenkel, Sheera. 2023. “Israelis Abandon Political Left After Security Concerns Regarding Oct. 7.” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/19/world/middleeast/israel-oct-7-left-wing-peace.html>

¹²¹ Marsden, Ariella. 2023. “Israel-Hamas war: Did Oct. 7 change Israeli left-wing views on peace?” *Jerusalem Post*. <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/gaza-news/article-774822>

declined even further with over 70 percent of Jewish respondents either being “moderately opposed” or “very much opposed” to peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.¹²² It is important to note that these numbers may fluctuate and change as time progresses.

More aggressive policies have also been adopted by government officials in the aftermath of October 7 that promote additional violence in the West Bank as a means of attempting to achieve additional security. Citing the defense of Israel, policymakers partnering with the IDF distributed 300 assault rifles to West Bank civilians.¹²³ Violence has also increased in the West Bank, with Israeli settlers allegedly killing at least 10 Palestinians and setting homes on fire.¹²⁴

Beyond public opinion, the rhetoric used by Israeli officials mirrors not only polarization but an “us” versus “them” mentality sparked by the conflict.¹²⁵ Under the goal of ensuring Israel’s safety against a similar attack like this in the future, the Israeli ingroup — rightwing Israelis — have rallied more closely together to combat outgroups.

Beyond these observations, while it appears that parts of Israeli society are becoming more tense, some parts are becoming more unified. According to polling conducted by IDI following October, a majority of Jewish Israelis believed that divides between the left and right were at the top of sources of tension. In contrast, Arabs in Israel cited tensions between Jews and

¹²²Rosler, Nimrod and Yakte, Alon. 2023. “Findings - The Peace Index - November 2023.” Tel Aviv University. https://social-sciences.tau.ac.il/sites/socsci.tau.ac.il/files/media_server/social/2023/Findings-November-2023-EN.pdf

¹²³ Sharon, Jeremy. 2023. “Distribution of 300 assault rifles to West Bank civilian security squads underway.” *Times of Israel*.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/distribution-of-300-assault-rifles-to-west-bank-civilian-security-squads-underway/>
¹²⁴ Times of Israel Staff. 2024. “300 assault rifles to West Bank civilian security squads underway.” *Times of Israel*.
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/2023-most-violent-year-for-west-bank-settler-attacks-watchdog-says/>

¹²⁵ Chiappa, Claudine and McElvoy, Anne. 2024. “Israeli envoy: Hamas ‘animals’ must be destroyed.” *POLITICO*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/ron-prosor-israel-evoy-hamas-animals-must-be-destroyed/>

Arabs as their main source of divisiveness.¹²⁶ However, percentages increased both among Jews and Arabs both for feelings of togetherness and the sense of belonging to the state of Israel.¹²⁷

Overall, the resulting political landscape following October 7 mirrors some predictions of the research above with this event spurring a significant shift across the Israeli political stage, pushing the country even farther to the right and lessening the likelihood of a two-state solution.

¹²⁶ Hermann, Tamar, et al. 2023. "The Israeli Democracy Index 2023." *Israel Democracy Institute*, December. <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/53380>.

¹²⁷ Hermann et al., 2023.

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