

Religious-Secular Cleavage and Political Stability in Israel

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Abstract

Due to its artificial and unnatural structure, Israeli society has since the beginning of its establishment, been a context for the emergence of different kinds of cleavages and tensions. This state of affairs has endangered the political stability of the Israeli regime. The present research is trying to answer this question: what is the effect of religious-secular cleavages in Israel on the future of the political stability of the regime? The article hypothesizes that the religious-secular cleavage is one of the most important social cleavages in Israel and its expansion can be considered as a serious threat to the political stability of the regime. The present research indicates that there are three kinds of cleavages in Israel which constitute the most important social cleavages in society: the Arab-Jewish cleavage; the Ashkenazi-Sephardim cleavage; and the religious-secular cleavage. Although all these three cleavages affect Israel's political stability, we concentrate on the cleavage that exist between religious and secular forces in society as one of the most serious social cleavages in Israel. It undermines Israel's political stability in at least two ways: the cleavage undermines Israel's political legitimacy; and its shift from the social arena into the political arena transforms it into a political cleavage.

Keywords: Israeli society, political stability, religious-secular cleavage, social cleavage.

1. Introduction

As important factors influencing political stability, social cleavages play vital roles in the life or death of political systems. Historically speaking, leaders of different governing systems have mainly endeavored to preserve their governing system sustainably through maintaining the political stability of that system. For this reason, governing systems whose rulers did not have an accurate analysis of social cleavages in their realms have faced serious threats, sometimes even leading to the collapse of the political system. Political revolutions, uprisings, and civil wars are considered as critical forms of political instability. Accordingly, an accurate appreciation of social cleavages and an assessment of their effects on political stability are considered as one of the main concerns of political sociologists.

Israel has a unique society. It was formed without passing through natural procedures experienced by all other societies in the world. Rather, this society was created through coercion. Zionists established their society by occupying a territory that belonged to other people and banishing those people from their motherland. In such circumstances, a society was founded that was a combination of people belonging to diverse cultures and societies from different corners of the world. Naturally, this society suffers from fundamental inadequacies and shortcomings. It is a society with a heterogeneous structure that is satiated with numerous cleavages.

Based on this introduction, it should be pointed out that it is vitally important to make an assessment of these cleavages and their effects on the political stability of Israel. The article covers the time period since the establishment of the Israeli regime in 1948, with the explanation that the ground of religious-secular cleavages existed since its founding, while the effects of these

cleavages on the political stability of Israel have largely emerged since the start of the twenty-first century.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to explain how the religious-secular cleavage affect the political stability of Israel, it is necessary to present a theoretical explanation of the relationship between social cleavages and political stability. Social cleavages and political stability are among the most important concepts in political sociology.

Understanding social cleavages is considered the first responsibility of political sociologist. In order to assess the relationship between society and politics (state), political sociology should start from an understanding of the complexities, cleavages, and contradictions that exist in society. The concept of contradiction is actually a more general and abstract interpretation of the concept of cleavage. For this reason, some sociologists have used the terms *contradiction*, *incongruity*, and *clash* instead of *cleavage*. Social cleavages practically result in dividing the people of a society into different categories. This categorization can end in the emergence of political organizations (Bashirieh, 1374 [1995 A.D]: 95-99).

Based on an assessment of the viewpoints of different scholars, we can enumerate the main features of social cleavages (which are considered as criteria in the present article) as follows:

1. Existence of contradictory viewpoints
2. Collective self-consciousness
3. Organization in order to carry out political action in accordance with values and collective interests
4. Follow-up of interests through various methods (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967; Kriesi, 1998).

Stability and sustainability have always been one of the most important objectives of political leaders. All leaders are inclined to perpetuate their political systems. Political intellectuals, too, always consider the creation of stability and prevention of violent protesting against the governing authority as their first political objective (Mohamadi Lord, 1393 [2014 A.D]: 64). Political and governing systems that want to remain sustainable should not be faced with widespread oppositions, severe crises, and violent uprisings (Rajab Zadeh & Taleban, 1386 [2007 A.D]: 54). Different definitions are presented for the concept of political stability. The diversity of these definitions is the result of different approaches, conditions, and time/ place situations. David Summers (1380 [2001 A.D]: 117), one of the most important theorists of political stability, believes that a favorite definition of the concept of stability should refrain from superficial distinction between stability and instability and consider this concept as a continuous and relative phenomenon. In addition, he argues, this definition should specify how the level of stability in a country changes through the passage of time. Therefore, units of time used in the analysis must be based on short-term "political conditions."

Results obtained from these definitions are similar to Summers' classification. Generally speaking, two sets of definitions can be identified: the first set of definitions define the concept of political stability based on the continuity of a specific procedure or the balance of the political system; the second set of definitions, classified by Summers as the *school of frequency*, highlight the symptoms of political stability or instability and endeavor to deal with different indicators. In some systems, these indicators can be considered as symptoms of stability or instability (Ahmadi, 1390 [2011 A.D]: 14). In this paper we elected the first set of definitions and we consider the continuity or balance of a specific political system. Accordingly and based on this set of definitions, as a combinatorial theory

and by studying viewpoints of a number of outstanding scholars, social cleavages can influence political stability in at least two ways and the present research elaborates on them:

- **Through undermining political legitimacy.** When there is an active social cleavage in a society, political alliances, actions, and awareness in that society will evolve according to that cleavage (Bashirieh, 1374 [1995 A.D]: 99), it influences the political legitimacy of the ruling regime in that society and weakens that regime, because, in such circumstances, each of the social groups who are identified according to the active social cleavage nurture their own specific attitude towards the political legitimacy of the regime. In other words, each of these groups highlights a particular set of criteria for the legitimacy of the regime and, therefore, they have specific expectations from their regime. In such circumstances, the regime is obliged to either act according to the interests of one of these groups (which will result in the dissatisfaction of other groups and illegitimacy of the regime among them) or adopt a middle-of-the-road approach (which will, to some extent, be associated with dissatisfaction among all social groups and result in the illegitimacy of the regime among them). Both cases will inevitably weaken the political legitimacy of the regime. Since political legitimacy is one of the most effective factors in the political stability of societies (Parsons, 2005: 57-67), any action which results in undermining the legitimacy of a regime, will weaken political stability in the society.
- **Evolution into a political cleavage.** Social cleavages can also develop from covertness into political plainness and transform to a "political cleavage." This is a perception that is elaborated in Heather Stoll's studies.

James Scarritt, Mozaffar Shahin, and Glen Galaich have also referred to this concept in their joint article. According to this outlook, social cleavage is transferred into the political arena in several stages. This evolution from covert into overt status is associated with a set of other conditions. As a result, social cleavage becomes politically important and adopts political tinge. Based on this interpretation, a religious-secular cleavage undergoes a procedure and shifts from political covertness into political plainness. In other words, the emergence of a religious-secular cleavage is no longer limited to a totally social arena and adopts social and political dimensions simultaneously (Mozaffar et al., 2003; Stoll, 2004). In a nutshell, these levels are as follows: 1. value and behavior level; 2. organizational and institutional level; and political emergence.

In this paper, we try to show that the religious-secular cleavage, as one of the most important social cleavages in Israel, influences its political stability in both ways.

3. Israeli Society

As discussed earlier, Israeli society, unlike other societies, did not evolve through natural and historical processes, rather it was formed unnaturally. This society was created via coercive methods and through usurping a territory belonging to another nation and banishing that nation from its motherland. People from different cultures and societies, whose only commonality was affiliation to Judaism, were gathered in an occupied land in order to form a new society. Such a society is naturally faced with different kinds of serious cleavages and contradictions. From the point of view of various researchers, Israeli society has four basic features:

- Artificial and unnatural structure (Eftekhari, 1380 [2001 A.D]: 56)
- Heterogeneity and existence of numerous cleavages (Mottaghi & Sabet, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 163)
- Identity crisis (Mu'asesah(t) Al-der s t Al-felestiniyah(t), 1384 [2005 A.D], vol. 2: 309)
- Serious influence of the issue of security (Norris & Keddie, 1388 [2009 A.D]: 193).

Israeli society is a society satiated with different cleavages. Various classifications have been devised for the social cleavages in Israel. Considering the comprehensiveness of these classifications and their weight in Israel's social and political spheres, we can enumerate three kinds of cleavages as the most important cleavages in that society:

- Cleavage between Arabs and Jews (Rajabi Ghareh Gheshlaghi, 1388 [2009 A.D]; Ben-Porat, 2000: 3-5)
- Cleavage between Ashkenazi and Sephardim Jews (Mohammad Mazi, 1379a [2000 A.D]: 70)
- Cleavage between religious Jews and seculars (Adler, 2014).

A number of scholars such as Cohen and Zisser (2003), as well as Zeyd Abadi (2002) believe that the religious-secular cleavage is the most important cleavage in Israeli society. We also consider this cleavage as one of the most important cleavages in Israel.

3.1. The Religious-Secular Cleavage

In terms of religious inclinations, Jews who supported the creation of Israel during the years close to the establishment of this regime were divided into three main categories:

1. Secular Zionists who, generally speaking, considered Judaism as an instrument for obtaining their objectives in the establishment of Israel.
2. Religious Zionists who supported the establishment of the Israeli regime through presenting a different interpretation of Judaism.
3. Orthodox religious groups, the majority of whom had been forced to cooperate with Zionists due to encountering socio-political realities and the pressures exerted on them by other Jews (Zeyd Abadi, 2002).

When the Israeli regime was established, religious Jews, including both religious Zionists and Orthodox Jews, merged together and got united. As a result, the three previously mentioned groups of Jews were reduced to two groups: secular Jews and religious Jews. Religious Jews had their own peculiar and unique outlook towards the functions of the regime which was going to be established in the future. On the other hand, secular Jews also nurtured their own specific viewpoints in this regard.

Due to the prevalence of this structural duality, on the eve of the establishment of the Israeli regime, David Ben-Gurion invited leaders of Orthodox Jews and religious Zionists, who had been organized within the framework of "Mizrachi" and "Agudat Israel" parties, to reach a principled agreement with secular parties over functions and responsibilities of the future regime. This agreement, which is referred to as the "Status Quo Agreement," resulted in the commitment of the upcoming Israeli state to observe some religious verdicts such as the reverence of Saturday as the Jewish Sabbath at a national level and recognition of orthodox rabbinical courts in Israel (Zeyd Abadi, 2002: 7-8).

As a matter of fact, religious cleavage among Jews is

associated with the level of their religiosity and their concern towards religious values. Based on this argument, many researchers categorize the different walks of life in Israeli Jewish society into three main groups:

1. Those who are religious. They are a group of Jews who abide by the tenets of Judaism in all aspects of their lives.
2. Those who are traditionalists. They are not solid followers of Judaism, but observe those religious tenets that have social dimensions, such as Jewish festivities, Jewish religious dietary laws (Kashrus), Jewish marriage traditions, and Jewish funeral ceremonies.
3. Those who are not abiding by Jewish religious verdicts. Wide spectra of Jews are included in this category, from those who are not practicing religious rituals to those who are opposed to it (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 127-128).

A survey of practical field assessments, carried out by the Gutman Center (from 1991 to 1999), indicates that there was a decline in the percentage of those who believed that relations between the religious and the nonreligious are fairly good or very good, (29% in 1991, 17% 1999). It also indicates the proportion of Israelis who define their religious identity by introducing themselves as "religious" has increased compared with those who refer to themselves as "nonreligious"; on the contrary, the number of Israelis who consider themselves as "traditionalists" or "a bit religious" has reduced to some extent. This is an indicator of two contradictory processes which are developing divergence and convergence between religious and nonreligious groups (Levy et al., 2002: 3-5).

4. The Religious-Secular Cleavage and Political Stability in Israel

As it was pointed out in the theoretical discussions, the

religious-secular cleavage is one of the most important and serious social cleavages in Israel and it is threatening political stability in two ways.

4.1. Undermining Israeli Political Stability through Abating its Legitimacy

Religious and secular groups in Israel have developed their own particular criteria for defining the legitimacy of the Israeli regime. If Israel embarks on any initiative to meet the requirements of one of these two social groups, the opposing group will protest. This phenomenon threatens Israel's political stability in one way or another, i.e. social protests such as demonstration and strike; noncompliance of protesting political groups; violent confrontations between supporters of the two groups in political and social arena; civil disobedience, etc.

4.1.1. The Regime's Legitimacy from the Perspective of Israeli Religious Jews

Religious Jews argue that Judaism is not just limited to religious rituals. They believe that Judaism is a pattern of life based on the tenets of Judaism (or Halakha) reflected in the Torah and Talmud and covers all times and places. According to this argument, the implementation of Jewish religious laws and tenets has been the basic objective of the religious founders of the Zionist regime. As a matter of fact, orthodox rabbis who were involved in efforts for the establishment of the state of Israel were mainly pursuing one objective, i.e. the creation of an entity for implementing the Jewish religious tenets. Nevertheless, Zionist seculars were endeavoring to establish a modern state based on the separation of state and religion.

A survey of attitudes of different Jewish religious groups in Israel indicates that these groups consider the following factors as major features that give legitimacy to a political regime: to

consider Judaism as a pattern of life; to act according to Jewish instructions (Halakha) based on the Torah and Talmud; to implement Jewish religious tenets; to consider the political regime as an instrument for executing Jewish religious verdicts; to look at Judaism as a factor for the unity and integrity of society; to think about Judaism as a real practical plan for people from different walks of life; and to view the Old Testament as the source of authority and guidance (Aran, 1378 [1999 A.D]: 88-111).

Due to the kind of attitudes that is prevalent among Israeli religious Jews towards the legitimacy of the Israeli government, they are by no means satisfied with the current state of affairs. As a result, the Zionist regime is always associated with a certain level of illegitimacy among Jewish religious groups. Therefore, this situation is no longer favorable for these Israeli religious groups. Accordingly, any effort by the Israeli regime to constrain Jewish religiosity in society will further increase that regime's illegitimacy among religious factions. Certainly, such a state of affairs undermines the Zionist regime's political stability and will further undermine it in the future.

4.1.2. The Regime's Legitimacy from the Perspective of Israeli Seculars

In major English dictionaries, such as Merriam Webster¹ and Longman², a number of synonyms have been enumerated for the term 'secular' all of which indicate that this term is associated with concepts such as *terrestrial*, *mundane*, *material*, *ephemeral*, etc.

Politically, secularism means that religious beliefs and

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1. Secularism. (updated in 2016 a). In Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved from: www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secularism
 2. Secularism. (updated in 2016 b). In Longman Online Dictionary. Retrieved from: www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/secularism.

institutions are not allowed to get involved in the public and social life of a society; at the same time, political life, too, is totally excluded from any interference by religious tenets and instructions. Accordingly, it can be argued that from the perspective of seculars, both in Israel and anywhere else, the legitimacy of a regime is dependent on observing the following issues by that regime: paying due attention to the mundane world and ignoring other levels of the hereafter; setting religion aside and acting based on pure rationalism; adopting a rational, non-spiritual and materialistic worldview; moving towards the marginalization of religion in the social arena and conscious exclusion of it from politics; giving a non-religious dimension to the state; assuming a rational and scientific approach for managing the administrative affairs of society; separating religion from the state and interpreting world developments independent from religious tenets and instructions; and looking at religion as a private affair and personal choice (Fenn, 2001).

Issues such as Jewish religious laws, existence of rabbinical judicial courts and their prerogative right in determining who is (or is not) a Jew, financial support to religious schools and institutions, advantages and exemptions peculiar to religious groups and individuals, and several other identical issues are also important factors that undermine the legitimacy of the Zionist regime among Israeli seculars. Such circumstances weaken political stability in Israel. From the point of view of these secular groups, any effort by the Israeli regime to boost the role of Judaism in political affairs undermines that regime's status and will leave totally negative effects on its political stability.

4.2. Undermining Israel's Political Stability through the Development of Political Cleavage

The religious-secular cleavage can develop into a political

cleavage and result in undermining political stability. This development has a gradual procedure, after the completion of which the religious-secular cleavage is conveyed from the social into the political arena. This development can take place in three stages.

4.2.1. First Stage: Value and Behavioral Level

Indicators of religious-social cleavage between Jews are included among a set of values that separates Jewish religious groups from the rest of Jewish secular society. At this level, we merely witness that religious and secular factions behave according to their own values in society:

4.2.1.1. Adoption of Different Stances by Religious and Secular Groups towards the Law

The adoption of stances towards the law is one of the indicators of differences of opinion over values that result in social acts. A field survey which included samples of religious inhabitants of Jewish settlements indicated that Haredim religious Jews pay the least possible respect to the law and abide by it to the least possible extent, because they believe that religious laws are prioritized over mundane laws formulated by human beings (Yagil & Rattner, 2002: 184-185). In such circumstances, they stamp on every law that is contradictory to Jewish religious tenets and protest against it. For them, the criterion for righteousness is abidance by these Jewish tenets rather than actions based on law.

On the contrary, secular Jews have also protested against religious laws. They have especially opposed laws concerning the qualification of rabbinical courts to deal with people's personal affairs (including marriage and divorce) and argue that these laws have deprived them from adopting a totally secular life. The exemption of Jewish religious school students from military service is considered another issue which has created a

lot of protests and confrontations in Israel. Such protests and confrontations have been transferred from the realm of laws and regulations into the realm of politics. This is discussed in the following pages.

4.2.1.2. Inclination for Isolation among Jewish Religious Groups

Members of religious groups (especially Haredim Jews) nurture powerful proclivity to isolation and separation from other social groups in Israel. The social atmosphere in Israel, which has mainly been formed based on secularism, has no attraction for them. Therefore, they endeavor to protect themselves from such a society which is, in their opinion, a context for the emergence of a variety of sins and disobedience. These religious Jews prefer the atmosphere of their schools and their religious circles over any other atmosphere (Adler, 2014; Abstract).

4.2.1.3. Penchant toward Violence and Protest among Religious Groups

In case of witnessing any kind of contempt to their religious laws, Jewish religious groups in Israel will rapidly mobilize against it and even in some occasions resort to violent protests. For instance, when some religious laws, such as the prohibition of the entrance of cars into Jewish religious districts on Saturdays or the necessity of observing Jewish religious dietary laws in these districts, are violated, religious factions and groups react very severely. Tensions are always concentrated in and around those districts that are populated by religious Jews and surrounded by districts that are mainly accommodating seculars. Religious districts, such as Jerusalem, Safed, and Beni Brak, are good examples of such developments. These tensions are sometimes associated with severe violence and extensive demonstrations; i.e. throwing stones to cars that move about on Saturdays in the streets of mainly religious-populated districts or

attacking cinemas and restaurants that refrain from observing Jewish religious dietary laws (Kashrus) (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]): 140-145).

One of the historical examples of these remonstrations was the protesting demonstration of hundreds of religious Jews in Jerusalem as a complaint against the openness of cinemas on Saturdays. In this demonstration that occurred in August 2015, demonstrators threw stones to police forces and broke the windows of a cinema which was open on Saturday (Pileggi, 2015). As another example, we can refer to the protest and demonstration of religious Jews in Jaffa against the establishment of a trade center in a lot of land which had been a Jewish cemetery in the past. Protesters believed that any disrespecting act against the remnants of Jews bodies is prohibited (*About Haaretz*, 2001).

4.2.2. Second Stage: Organizational and Institutional Level

The existence of independent networks of services for religious and secular Jews in Israel is a good indicator of the religious-secular cleavage in Israeli society. In the following sections, we will elaborate on the most important organizational and institutional aspects of the development of this religious-secular cleavage from the social to the political arena.

4.2.2.1. Rabbinical Institutions and Synagogues

The creation of rabbinical institutions and synagogues is an indicator of the religious-secular cleavage at an institutional level in Israeli society. These institutions have extensive power and authority and have penetrated various aspects of people's lives in Israel. The General Assembly of Rabbis, local religious assemblies, and representatives of Jewish rabbis in the Israeli army are main symbols of the authority of Jewish clergies in Israel.

The General Assembly of Rabbis is one of the main institutions involved in the process of religious and social activities of Israeli Jews. The leadership of this Assembly has a vitally important politico-religious significance in Israel. It has generally been controlled by rabbis affiliated to Mafdal Party (or the National Religious Party) which nurtures Zionist proclivities. Other local religious assemblies in Israel are good examples of rabbinical institutions in Israeli society. Based on legal procedures, 45 percent of members of each local assembly should be selected by the Israeli minister of religious affairs, 45 percent should be assigned by local forces, and the remaining 10 percent should be appointed by the highest religious authority in the region. At the same time, Jewish religious tenets and instructions are pursued and propagated in the Israeli army by representatives of rabbis (Mohammad Mazi, 1379b [2000 A.D]: 113).

4.2.2.2. The Press

The religious-secular cleavage has also extended to the Israeli press. In societies that are suffering from numerous cleavages, social tensions can result in the growth and development of the press based on these cleavages (Olzak & West, 1991: 460-470). Accordingly, the religious-secular cleavage is considered as one of the basic lines of division among the Israeli press. The majority of Israeli publications pursue secular proclivities; however, there are also some religious publications in Israel, which attack secular institutions and procedures. In such circumstances, religious and secular publications represent the forces that are supporting them and, at the same time, they broaden cleavages in social and political arenas (Evans, 2011: 250-251).

There are four major large-circulated newspapers in Israel which pursue secular approaches, namely *About Haaretz*, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, *Maariv*, and *Globes*. *About Haaretz* has a liberal and secular approach and its circulation is lower than

Yedioth Ahronoth and Maariv. The editorial board of About Haaretz (2001) has actually managed to present an elite-oriented image of this newspaper. Yedioth Ahronoth is the largest-circulated newspaper in Israel. It has adopted a secular approach and created a popular image of itself by addressing people from different walks of life (*Israel Society and Culture: The Press*, 2016). Maariv (2010) is mostly appealing to intellectuals as well as middle and upper classes of society which nurture democratic outlooks.

There are three Hebrew newspapers in Israel that are affiliated to Jewish religious groups: Hetsoufia, Hamoudi ,and Yetid Noaman. Hetsoufia is the oldest religious newspaper in Israel and reflects the viewpoints of Haredim Jews. This newspaper deals with challenges of the secular world and the approaches of religious life. In addition, religious groups have a large number of weeklies and monthlies. For instance, Yum Shishy is the largest-circulated weekly in Israel that is owned by the private sector. This weekly nurtures rigorous religious proclivities and attacks the secular world repeatedly (Mu'asesah(t) Al-der s t Al-felestiniah(t), 1384 [2005 A.D], vol. 2: 37-38).

4.2.2.3. Educational System

There are three distinct educational systems in Israel:

1. The public state educational system (controlled by seculars)
2. The religious state educational system (controlled by religious groups)
3. The independent religious educational system, peculiar to Haredim Jews (controlled by religious groups).

The public educational system in Israel is completely controlled by the state (and more specifically the Israeli ministry of religious affairs). It is not influenced by any party, tribe, or

NGO. The public state educational system is actually concentrated on training students according to Israeli cultural values and based on scientific achievements, love of Israel, and allegiance to the Israeli state and nation. For example, this educational system highlights the significance of the *Holocaust*. It aims to develop agricultural and professional expertise. Israel's educational system claims to teach students to search for a society based on freedom, equality, tolerance, cooperation, and love towards others (Mu'asesah(t) Al-der s t Al-felestiniyah(t), 1384 [2005 A.D], vol. 1: 325-421).

There are specific curricula on Judaism and Jewish religious thought in the state's religious educational system. However, parts of the textbooks on Israeli history, civilization, literature, and territory are the same that are taught in the public state educational system. Schools that follow this kind of state religious educational system teach Torah, Talmud, Jewish religious laws, and Jewish jurisprudence to their students. Independent religious education system peculiar to Haredim Jews was common in Safed, Tiberias, and Jerusalem before the establishment of the Zionist regime. When Israel was created, this education system was preserved based on the provisions of the status quo agreement. This educational system, named "acceptable informal education", was recognized by the state and its authorities and managed to receive up to 60% of its budget from the state. As institutions independent from the mainstream state educational systems, these schools teach their students in Hebrew. In return for its financial support, the Israeli ministry of religious affairs controls and reviews their performance. However, the majority of inspectors that visit these schools are Haredim Jews (Mu'asesah(t) Al-der s t Al-felestiniyah(t), 1384 [2005 A.D], vol. 1: 395-429).

These three educational systems have also extended into Israel's higher educational system. The majority of Israeli

universities follow secular approaches. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem is one of the most important secular universities in Israel. It is a state university located in Jerusalem on Mount Scopus. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem is amongst the top 100 academic centers of the world. Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Martin Buber, and Chaim Weizmann were the first faculty members of this university (Hebrew University of Jerusalem Website, 2016). The Universities of Ben-Gurion, Haifa, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv are other important universities in Israel that follow a secular system. In contrast, Bar-Ilan University can be considered as an extension of the state religious educational system in the higher educational sector (Bar-Ilan University Website, 2016).

4.2.2.4. Banking System

There are four banking groups in Israel: Bank Hapoalim; Bank Leumi; Discount bank; First International Bank; and Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank (*Banking System*, 2005). Among these banks, Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank has been created to provide banking and economic services to Jewish religious groups. This bank with its 140 branches spread all over Israel is the fourth major banking group in the Jewish state. Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank provides low-interest loans with long-term installments to its customers. In terms of providing banking facilities, it ranks first amongst Israeli banks. The majority of religious citizens in Israel refer to Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank (2016) in order to receive financial facilities for their economic activities.

4.2.2.5. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs are considered as another institutionalized arena envisaging the religious-secular cleavage in Israel. Religious Jews have established such NGOs in order to protect and defend Judaism. On the contrary, seculars have formed their NGOs for advocating modern values. By creating such NGOs, Israeli seculars stand against "religious compulsion" and warn over

Israel's shift towards becoming a fundamentalist state headed by Jewish religious leaders (sometimes referring to this phenomenon as Khomeinism; Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 144).

4.2.2.6. Religious and Secular Courts

Israel's judicial system is comprised of two separate sections: secular courts and religious courts. Religious courts are called Rabbinical Courts and have judicial authority over the personal status of all Israeli Jews. Therefore, it is impossible for Israeli Jews to pursue a totally secular life. Based on a law ratified in 1953, all Israeli Jews, regardless of their proclivities, are required to observe Jewish religious laws in their marriage and divorce. Therefore, there is no secular marriage or divorce in Israel and rabbis have total authority over issues of marriage, divorce, funeral ceremonies, and converting to Judaism (Weiss & Gross-Horowitz, 2012: 2-3).

Religious Israeli Jews believe that verdicts issued by Israel's Supreme Court (which is considered as the main proponent of secularism in Israel's judicial system) threaten the status and influence of Judaism in the Israeli regime's institutions. For this reason, they have, on numerous occasions, protested against judicial verdicts issued by this court, arguing that such judicial verdicts are interfering in religious affairs and contradictory to Jewish tenets (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 145-146).

4.2.2.7. Ministries

The religious-secular cleavage has also penetrated into formal state institutions. For instance, we can refer to tensions between the Ministry of Religious Affairs and other ministries, especially the Ministry of Immigration. There is an independent ministry in Israel, namely the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which is tasked with supervising over all political, educational, and social activities in the Jewish state. Based on an analysis of the political proclivities of the authorities of this ministry since its

establishment, we can argue that the majority of these authorities have been affiliated to pro-Zionist religious groups (Mohammad Mazi, 1379 b [2000 A.D]: 112).

4.2.2.8. Regions and Districts

The religious-secular cleavage is geographically a cleavage between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Most of the voters who support secular parties reside in Tel Aviv. On the contrary, the majority of religious voters live in Jerusalem and its neighboring areas, as well as, districts such as Beni Brak, Safed, and Tiberias (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 299). Due to their proclivity to isolation and separation, religious groups are mainly living in independent districts which are peculiar to their own. Any disregard to Jewish religious tenets in such districts will result in violent and severe reactions.

4.2.3. Third Stage: Political Exposure

The third and final stage of the development of religious-secular cleavage from the social into the political arena is political exposure. At this stage, the religious-secular cleavage adopts a totally political image. This can actually lead to further weakness of political stability. We will deal with the most important cases of the political exposure of the abovementioned cleavage in Israel's history.

4.2.3.1. Quarrel over Formulating the Constitution

Israel was established after the issuance of the declaration of independence in 1948. However, various Jewish factions have had different attitudes towards the nature of the Israeli government since that time. Religious parties insisted that the Israeli government should have a religious nature. They argued that this government should mainly concentrate on the implementation of Jewish religious laws and regulations. On the contrary, secular parties highlighted the non-religious and

democratic nature of Israel. Such diverging attitudes emerged immediately after the declaration of Independence was issued and has continued since then. It was due to these differences that various Israeli parties could not come to an agreement over Israel's constitution (Zeyd Abadi, 2002: 128-129).

In such circumstances, Ben-Gurion, the first Israeli prime minister and one of the founders of the Zionist regime, had to grant some privileges and exemptions to Jewish religious groups in order to encourage these groups to lend their support to him. For this purpose, an agreement was concluded which emphasized the necessity of maintaining the existing status quo. Ben-Gurion was quite aware that without the support of Jewish religious groups, the newly emerged regime would be faced with serious problems (Elizur & Lawrence, 2013: 53).

4.2.3.2. Political quarrel over religious laws

As it was pointed out Israeli Jews are subject to Jewish religious laws in their private affairs such as marriage, divorce, etc. Therefore, it is practically impossible to live in a completely secular manner in Israel. This issue has resulted in numerous tensions and confrontations in the political arena. Also, religious groups have always protested to those secular laws that they have considered as violation of religious tenets. As a result, both sides have been involved in a permanent confrontation with each other. As an example of tensions over religious laws in the political arena, we can refer to stances adopted by the Shas Party in its defense of religious laws (*Shas Party Platform*, 2006) and continuous attacks of the Shinui Party against such laws (*What is shinui?*, n.d.).

4.2.3.3. Opposition to the Exemption of Religious Jews from Compulsory Military Service

The exclusion of Jewish religious school students from compulsory military service is one of the most important

privileges bestowed on religious groups and factions. This has resulted in rigorous protests in Israeli secular circles, because they consider this privilege as incompatible with the principle of the equality of Israeli citizens (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 135).

It was in 1949 that Israel decided to exempt Jewish religious students from compulsory military service. Due to the fact that a great number of Jewish rabbis had been killed during World War II, Israeli authorities decided to exempt some 400 male students of Jewish religious schools from compulsory military service, so that they can allocate their lives to Judaism and the Torah. This procedure, which was an annoying and irritating issue for secular Israelis, has continued in past decades (Adler, 2014: 29-33).

In 2014, however, the Israeli parliament (Knesset) ratified a law according to which students of these religious schools were required to conscript for compulsory military service. During the ratification process, some 300,000 Haredim Jews poured in Jerusalem streets in order to express their opposition and protests against this ratification. Nevertheless, this law requires only a small fraction of physically sound and fit Haredims to conscript for military service. It is stipulated that some 1800 students of these Jewish religious schools, who are salient researchers of the Torah, should still remain excluded from compulsory military service (Adler, 2014: 36-38).

4.2.3.4. Political Conflict over "Who Is a Jew"

This issue has created a lot of conflict over the precise definition of *Jewishness* and the authority of rabbinical courts in Israeli political circles. The most important subjects in this issue are as follows:

- a) Differences over out-group marriages and Jewishness of individuals who have not been born of Jewish parents has created a lot of conflict in Israeli politics. Judaism

prohibits marriage of Jews with non-Jews. As a result, the lives of children born of such marriages, especially when the mother is a non-Jew, are associated with numerous ambiguities, because, in Judaism, for a person to be considered a Jew, it is necessary that he/she is born of a Jewish mother rather than only a Jewish father.

- b) *Differences and conflicts over converting to Judaism*: this issue is rooted in measures and rituals that should be observed by those who intend to convert to Judaism. Rabbinical courts argue that converting to Judaism should be conducted only through a procedure that is determined by them and that any other procedure is not acceptable. It is an issue that has provoked secular Jews to raise vehement protests. Rabbinical courts have expressed their doubts over the Jewishness of migrants who have come to Israel from India, Ethiopia, and the former Soviet Union. Therefore, these migrants had to reconvert to Judaism according to the procedure introduced by religious Jews.
- c) *The issue of conversion from Judaism*: Religious Jews argue that a Jew who has converted from Judaism is still a Jewish person. However, seculars emphasize that adoption of religious identity is a personal affair and no one is allowed to interfere in it (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 135).

4.2.3.5. Competition among Political Parties

Israel has an election system that is based on proportional representation. In this electoral system, Israel in its totality is considered as one election constituency. Compared with other regimes that follow this election pattern, the threshold of victory in Israeli elections is very low. As a result, governments in Israel are increasingly formed through the coalition of main parties and smaller ones. This has resulted in further instability in Israel

and has reduced the optimal efficiency of its government (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 165-270).

In other words, the election system in Israel has been one of the main reasons of the continuation of cleavages in its sociopolitical system. The Israeli election system encourages smaller parties and weakens large parties. Accordingly, the existence of various political parties in Israel is an indicator of the social and political cleavages in Israeli society and its election system adds up to the further exasperation of such cleavages (Saki, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 12-13). As a matter of fact, frequent cleavages between political parties and the lack of internal stability in these parties, accompanied by the relative weakness of major political parties in Israeli general elections, have further complicated the formation of governments in Israel. Due to this state of affairs, the bargaining power of minor political parties, especially religious ones who play the role of third power in the party-based political system, has significantly increased.

The secular or religious inclination of parties is one of the main lines of division among political parties in Israel. Based on this argument, we are witnessing the emergence of two opposing groups. On the one hand, Israeli society is exposed to the emergence of religious parties that reject the separation of religion and state. These religious parties emphasize that Israeli governments should act according to Jewish religious tenets and guidelines. On the other hand, some secular parties have emerged in Israel that are opposed to the interference of religion in the life of Israeli citizens. Emphasizing the necessity of the marginalization of religious laws and regulations in Israeli society, these secular parties advocate the total separation of religion and state (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 224).

The classification of Israeli Jewish political parties into rightists or leftists is carried out according to their stance

towards issues that are related to Israel's security. Stances that are adopted towards the Peace Process with the Palestinians, the occupied territories, and Israeli Arab minorities are some of the most important security-related issues. Leftist parties have raised the idea of exchanging land for peace. On the contrary, rightists advocate the idea of Greater Israel and oppose any exchange of land for settling the disputes with the Palestinians (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 171-193). Generally speaking, Israeli religious Jews are mainly affiliated to religious parties. Israeli traditionalists, too, have extensive links with religious and rightist parties, such as Likud, and usually vote for such parties. Meanwhile, Israeli seculars are mainly inclined towards leftist parties, such as Labor, Shinui, and Meretz (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 315-316).

The National Religious Party, known as *Mefdal*, along with *Agudat Yisrael*, *Mimad*, and *Shas* are amongst the most important religious parties in Israel. For instance, the National Religious Party is a Zionist party that was established in 1955. The party's motto which was "*based on Torah, the Israeli territory does not belong to anybody else but the people of Israel.*" This party invited Jews to form Greater Israel and put greater emphasis on preserving Jewish and Zionist values. As another religious party, *Agudat Yisrael*, too, conditioned its alliances with other parties on further financial support of Jewish religious schools and continuation of some religious laws, such as observing Saturdays as Sabbath and abiding by Jewish religious dietary laws (Kashrus) (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 207-211). In the Israeli elections of 2006, the *Shas* party for the first time highlighted some priorities in its platform which were as follows:

- The Israeli state is the state of the Jewish nation which is based on democratic principles and the tenets of Torah.
- Collecting all Jewish minorities from all over the world

in order to create the Jewish homeland and the powerful and grandiose Jewish state in Israel.

- Continuation of the development of Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria based on the government's and parliament's ratifications on the development of Al-Jalil and Negev in order to support neighboring inhabitants (*Shas Party Platform*, 2006).

Israeli public opinion has been rigorously concerned over the so-called dual standards adopted by Jewish religious parties. This has resulted in the enhancement of the popularity of Israeli secular parties among the masses. Due to the escalation of tensions between unyielding religious parties and flexible secular parties in the 2003 elections, for instance, a formerly small party, such as Shinui (which is a secular party) managed to rank itself as the third victorious party. This was actually due to the fact that Haredim religious parties were the subject of vehement criticisms during election campaigns (Alder, 2014: 39).

The party system in Israel underwent a tremendous shift between 2006 and 2009 as a result of Israelis experiencing a multilateral party system based on the involvement of four major parties. The status of the Israeli election system after 2006 became compatible with patterns of political party put forward by Alan Siaroff (2000: 73), i.e. "excessive party pluralism with relative balance at the level of major parties" or "excessive party pluralism with the presence of two major parties (Kadima and Likud)." This state of affairs is an indicator of the importance of the further extension of religious and racial cleavages during the revival of the power of the Shas Party after the 2006 elections.

4.2.3.6. Political Gatherings

Haredim Jews are the most disciplined Jewish religious group in Israel. They are also the most obedient group in terms of commitment to their religious leaders. Haredims can quickly get

mobilized by their religious leaders whenever they consider it as necessary to stand against threats and dangers (Abdol-ali, 1391 [2012 A.D]: 132). Accordingly, when religious Jews, especially Haredims, feel that they are exposed to a threat, they will immediately get organized and react to that threat. As it was pointed out previously, for instance, when the Israeli government amended the law concerning the exemption of students of Jewish religious schools from compulsory military service, more than 300,000 Haredim Jews poured into Jerusalem streets and expressed their protest against the amendment. Such gatherings are sometimes associated with violence and may result in civil disobedience.

5. Conclusion

Social cleavage is a phenomenon that is common and current in all human societies. The issue that highlights social cleavage as an important phenomenon for political sociology is its significance in political alliances, actions, and understandings. Politicians who have no accurate analysis of the effects of social cleavages on political stability, will be faced with serious problems, such as uprisings, revolutions, civil wars, and even political collapse.

Due to its peculiar nature, Israeli society has been faced with extensive defects and shortcomings. Based on the assessment of the viewpoints of various researchers, we can enumerate four major features of Israeli society as follows: 1. artificial and unnatural structure; 2. heterogeneity and existence of numerous cleavages; 3. identity crisis; and 4. the issue of security. Moreover, the major cleavages in Israeli society are as follows: 1. cleavage between Arabs and Jews; 2. cleavage between Ashkenazi and Sephardim Jews; 3. cleavage between religious and seculars Jews.

Nevertheless, the cleavage between religious Jews and

seculars has been one of the most important and threatening phenomenon in Israeli society since the establishment of the Jewish state. The religious-secular cleavage can weaken political stability in Israel in at least two ways:

- *First, by undermining the political legitimacy of the Israeli regime:* religious and secular factions in Israel are totally at odds over the bases of the legitimacy of the Israeli regime. This has undermined the legitimacy and consequently the political stability of the Israeli regime.
- *Second, by proceeding from the social arena to the political arena, it is getting transformed into a political cleavage:* the religious-secular cleavage can actually proceed from the social into the political arena by passing through several stages: 1) value and behavior stage; 2) organizational and institutional stage; and 3) political updating stage.

As it was discussed earlier, there are numerous tangible examples which indicate how religious-secular cleavages in Israel have proceeded from the social into the political arena.

Finally, it can be argued that social cleavages, especially the religious-secular cleavage, are so vehement that some researchers have referred to them as "a thoroughgoing cultural war inside Israel" (Yates, 2012). Although some scholars, such as Asher Cohen and Baruch Zisser (2003), believe that external threats against Israel have been able to reduce the threats caused by the influence of secular-religious cleavages on Israel's political stability, this cleavage has always been one of the most important factors undermining political stability in Israel. Generally, it can be predicted that the political system in Israel will face more extensive challenges in the future.

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