

# **The Potentials and Limitations of Soft Power: Israel's Religious Right and the Dream of Greater Israel**

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## I. Israeli Democracy, Politicised Religion, and the Failure of Oslo

When Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shook hands on the lawn of the White House in September 1993, the world cherished great expectations of the Oslo Accords that were designed to initiate and structure a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians in order to resolve this longstanding conflict in the Middle East. But already in the mid-1990s, the Oslo process seemed to be trapped in a renewed cycle of violence, mutual mistrust and stiff power politics. With the outbreak of the Al Aqsa Intifada a mere seven years after the signing of the Oslo Accords, the peace process finally collapsed and violence recurred with unprecedented weight.

The literature that analyses the breakdown of the Oslo process is rather diverse. Some authors blame either Israel<sup>1</sup> or the Palestinians<sup>2</sup> to bear the responsibility for the renewed escalation of the conflict, arguing that their respective leaders never really intended to make substantial concessions for peace. The more balanced analytical studies<sup>3</sup> differentiate three elements of the peace process that proved to be problematic: First, they refer to the structural deficits of the Oslo Accords, which introduced the principle of gradualism and postponed the negotiation of the end status issues, thereby leaving the target of the process in ‘opacity’ (Morag 2000).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the structure of the Oslo Accords mirrored the power asymmetry between the State of Israel and the fragmented Palestinian entity, thereby hampering negotiations at eye level. Second, most scholars contend that the principles of gradualism and opacity opened up too much space for differing interpretations of the agreements. The contents and implications of the peace process were transferred from the level of negotiation *between* the parties to the interpretation and implementation of the Accords *within* each society. This allowed the politicians to interpret the agreements in their own favour – and it provided those who were determined to sabotage the process with many opportunities to do so: “The opponents – who objected to the process on historical or religious grounds – could exercise violence (on the Palestinian side) or establish new settlements and strongholds (on the Israeli side) to destroy whatever measure of goodwill existed among the two communities in the immediate aftermath of Oslo.” (Aly/Feldman 2003: 11-12) The first

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<sup>1</sup> For example Slater 2001; Roy 2002; Rabbani 2001.

<sup>2</sup> For example Ben-Aharon 2002; Rynhold/Steinberg 2004; Lister 2002.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Schulze 2001; Ma'oz 2002; Kittrie 2003; Mahle 2005; Hermann/Newman 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Or, put in a more positive way, the peace process was based on the principle of “constructive ambiguity” (Kittrie 2003).

two elements, the structural deficits and the poor implementation of the Oslo Accords, resulted in the failure of the third element, the negotiation of the end status issues in Camp David and Taba. The effort to hammer out a deal at the last minute could not compensate for the missed opportunities of confidence building during the Oslo years. How far apart the different perceptions of the peace process and the end status negotiations had grown became obvious in the official statements made by both parties and the United States in the aftermath of Camp David (Kacowicz 2005; Pressman 2003). It almost seemed as if Israeli, American and Palestinian officials had attended different peace talks.

Drawing on their analysis of the three elements of the peace process, many analysts suggest that Oslo's most significant shortcoming was the failure to involve both societies in a shared vision of a peaceful future. Instead, the spoilers on both sides – and especially the religiously motivated spoilers - were able to disrupt and reverse the whole process. Though this conclusion is quite common in the literature, there are very few studies that inquire systematically the ways in which religious spoilers were able to exert such an escalating influence on the Oslo process. Concerning the Palestinian side of the equation, the studies of Kydd/Walter (2002), Bueno de Mesquita (2005) and Berrebi/Klor (2006) have employed game theory and modelling in order to demonstrate the devastating effect of terrorist attacks by Palestinian extremists for the peace process.<sup>5</sup> There are also a number of articles which discuss the importance of religion in the Jewish-Israeli debate on the peace process, but they do not engage in a systematic empirical analysis that would shed light on the specific contribution of religiously motivated actors to the failure of Oslo.<sup>6</sup> Most studies adopt a sort of top-down perspective and stress that the political elites did not succeed in winning over public opinion and constraining the politicised religious actors' impact (for example Ben-Moshe 2005). They only cursorily analyse the politicised religious actors themselves, their ideological outlook and preferred modes of political action in relation to their actual impact. The assumption that religious spoilers were at least partly responsible for the conflict to escalate again after a short period of calm in the early 1990s is especially interesting in the case of Israel. The Jewish state is usually considered to be a fairly stable, Western-style democracy, albeit with some flaws in its institutional makeup and rule of law.<sup>7</sup> A variant of a

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<sup>5</sup> Yet these studies do not explicitly introduce 'religion' as specific variable or as a defining characteristic of the actors.

<sup>6</sup> See Barnett 2002; Ben-Moshe 2005; Peleg 1997; Ben-Porat 2005. There are many books and articles that deal with the many facets of politicised Jewish religion in the modern State of Israel, but they do not examine how exactly these actors helped to bring down the peace process. Compare for example Aran 1997 Schäfer 2004 Cohen/Susser 2000 Heilman 1997 Jones 1999 Kimmerling 1999 Liebman 1993 Ravitzky 1996 Wald 2002 Aran 1991 Sprinzak 1993

<sup>7</sup> See amongst others Neuberger 2002; Dowty 1999; Sa'di 2002; Smootha 1997; Yiftachel 2006; Yonah 1999.

very popular theory of International Relations claims that democracies prefer to handle their conflicts with other states in a non-violent, peaceful manner. The reason for this tendency is mainly seen in the liberal normative and utilitarian preferences of citizens. On the one hand, citizens in democracies appreciate human rights and opt to externalise the non-violent or lawful way of domestic conflict resolution to their state's international relations; and on the other hand, they reject the use of force because they want to avoid the casualties as well as the material costs of war. Transmitted by democratic institutions, these preferences then ideally shape the foreign policy of democracies and result in peaceful behaviour (see for example Russett/Oneal 2001). Yet a new generation of critical studies in democratic peace research have argued that in some cases democracies exhibit a specific inclination to go to war, albeit for the same democratic, liberal reasons. They transmit the appreciation for human rights to their foreign policy - and therefore might use military force to stop genocide or liberate people from dictatorial rule (Brock/Geis/Müller 2006). They tend to justify these actions by designating the opponent as a sort of rogue state or terrorist who consciously objects to peace, cooperation and the rule of law.

Bearing this expectation of a specific liberal justification of peace and war in mind, the question arises whether the 'soft power' of religious actors could be an additional factor in democratic decisions on peace and war. This article sets out to examine whether and to what extent politicised religious actors in Jewish Israeli society had a hand in the renewed escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It looks at the ways in which religiously motivated actors used their 'soft power' and took advantage of the democratic political system, but also considers the limits of religious 'soft power' in democratic politics.

The first section of the paper seeks to clarify the term 'politicised religious actors' and discusses how the concept of 'soft power' might be applied to them. The specific ideology of the Jewish settler community and religious Zionism is presented in the following section. The remainder of the article presents an analysis of two periods of escalation in 1996 and in 2000, employing the methods of process tracing and content analysis in order to demonstrate the potentials and limits of religious soft power in affecting Israel's policy towards the Palestinians.

## II. The 'Soft Power' of Politicised Religious Actors

For decades, the social sciences adhered to secularisation theory. Reflecting on Europe's history since the Reformation and the Wars of Religion, the great social thinkers of the 19th century like Weber or Durkheim concluded that the process of secularisation should be

considered one of the essential and characteristic features of modernity. The indisputable position of religion as the only source of meaning and social order crumbled and was gradually replaced by rationality, reason and scientific knowledge. The classical sociologists argued that the process of cultural and political disempowerment of religion in the wake of the Enlightenment was a prerequisite for modern phenomena like the rational state, industrialisation, capitalist economy and civil society to fully develop (Casanova 1994: 18). Social scientists in the 20th century, walking in the footsteps of their classical predecessors, adopted this analysis of European modernity and projected the theoretical insights towards other regions of the world. They thought that modernisation, comprising rapid developments in technology and industrial production, increasing division of labour, social mobility, urbanisation, and the rationalisation of political authority, would inevitably lead to an accelerated demise of the social significance of religion on a global scale (Mills 1959: 32f; Wallis/Bruce 1992). Secularisation was conceptualised as consisting of three interrelated processes: 1. the functional differentiation of the secular spheres like the state and the economy from the religious sphere, 2. the relocation of religion from the public to the private realm, and 3. the general erosion of religious beliefs and practices.<sup>8</sup> Secularisation theory became what Inglehart/Norris have called “the master model of sociological inquiry” (2004: 3) - or, in the words of Hadden: “[...] the idea of secularisation became sacralized.” (1987: 588)

But religion did neither vanish, nor lose its social and political significance. Since the 1970s, the world witnesses what has been called a ‘resurgence of religion’. Around the globe, people rediscover their religious roots or turn to new religious movements (Moghadam 2003; Berger 1999). In an ironic twist, today the same processes that were held responsible for causing secularisation are said to encourage the revitalization of religion, because people are yearning for the orientation, certainty and warmth of the religious community in the midst of the upheavals of secular modernisation (Fox/Sandler 2004: 12) Furthermore, a growing number of believers do not content themselves with the distinction of spheres that are either religious or secular, and they are not ready to restrict their beliefs and practices to the private realm. The most visible expression of the global resurgence of religion, therefore, are the religious movements that deliberately strive to tear down the wall between religion and the state which is central to the Western, liberal conception of politics.

While these movements are mostly called ‘fundamentalist’, for the discussion at hand the notion of ‘politicised religion’ will be preferred. While fundamentalism in a broad sense

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<sup>8</sup> Riesebrodt 2001: 9; Willems 2001: 215f; Thomas 2005: 52.

encompasses conservative, quietist groups that reject any entanglement with politics, politicised religion aims to remodel the social and political order according to a religious utopian ideal which religious leaders construct by selecting and reinterpreting parts of the religious tradition. They are, as Eisenstadt convincingly argues, genuinely modern movements. Modernity questioned the overarching, transcendental legitimisation of politics and society and left the now autonomous individuals with the task to order human life all by themselves - a task that in the context of reflexive modernity can be fulfilled only through political action. Politicised religious actors do just that: they seek to replace modernity's pluralism and existential uncertainty with their seemingly backward, absolute, totalitarian vision - but they do it by way of distinctively modern political action ([=332 Eisenstadt 2000 The Reconstruction o...=], 1995: 264ff).

Politicised religious movements got much attention by the media and the academia alike because their missionary zeal is often associated with the readiness to use violence. The examples of religious extremists performing acts of excessive violence abound. But these cases of 'hard power' cannot sufficiently explain why some of these movements are surprisingly successful in attracting a broader public and shaping their respective government's policies, particularly in the context of democratic societies.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, politicised religion also has a considerable amount of 'soft power' at its disposal, and sometimes dismisses violence entirely. 'Soft power' is a term coined by Joseph S. Nye to denote "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. [...] Hard power, the ability to coerce, grows out of a country's military and economic might. Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in they eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced." (2004: 265) Soft power, Nye argues, is the ability to "set the political agenda and determine the framework of debate in a way that shapes others' preferences" (Nye 1990: 166).

In order to apply the term 'soft power' to politicised religious actors, Nye's definition has to be adjusted to the subject at hand. The more obvious modification concerns the level of analysis: While Nye conceived of 'soft power' as a specific form of states' ability to accomplish their goals in foreign policy, the term is translated to the level of societal actors in domestic politics. Yet the substance of the definition remains the same: It is attraction rather than coercion that confers soft power. The second adjustment seeks to rid the term 'soft power' of its hidden normative bias. Nye proposed 'soft power' as a guideline for the United States' foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. America's cultural and ideological

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<sup>9</sup> Examples are the Christian right in the United States or the Hindu nationalists in India.

attractiveness, its democratic, liberal values and institutions should assure its leading role in the world instead of hard military power. The message conveyed is that soft power is good power, for the benefit of all. But soft power does not necessarily mean good power - neither if the United States feel obliged to import their way of life to other parts of the world, nor if societal actors pursue their political ideas in non-coercive yet powerful ways. Soft power abstains from coercion and violence, but it might aim for goals that are not so 'soft'.

### III. The Jewish Religious Right and the Dream of Greater Israel

The most fervent opposition to the Oslo process in the 1990s came from the Jewish settler community and the religious Zionist camp. The settlers raged against the government's policy to return part of the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 to the Palestinians. For them, the slogan "land for peace" meant that the Rabin government was ready to relinquish the holy land which God himself had promised to the Jewish people. Radical religious Zionism discerned signs of the beginning redemption in the sequence of historical events in the 20th century: Zionist mass immigration, the founding of the State in 1948, and then the miraculous 'liberation' of the heartland of Jewish civilisation in the 1967 war - in their terminology, Judea, Samaria and East-Jerusalem with the Temple Mount. Therefore, they vehemently opposed a peace process which seemingly aimed to reverse this redemptive process.

That religiously orthodox Jews would interpret Zionism and the secular Jewish state as signs of redemption had been unimaginable just a century earlier.<sup>10</sup> When Zionism entered the stage of history in the late 19th century, traditional Judaism rejected this overtly secular national movement on religious grounds. Over the centuries of Jewish diaspora in Europe, the rabbinical authorities had developed a theology that kept alive the longing for Zion and the Land of Israel in liturgy and prayer. But they adopted a passive stance, prohibiting any action by Jews that tried to 'force the end'. God imposed the exile on the Jews - and only he would redeem his people and bring them back to the Land of Israel under the rule of the coming Messiah. The only way to hasten redemption was prayer and strict observation of Jewish law. When the secular, assimilated and mostly socialist leaders of Zionism set out to immigrate to Israel and settle the land, the majority of orthodox rabbis condemned this movement as false messianism. Only a few sought to cooperate with Zionism in a pragmatic way in order to escape the deteriorating situation for the Jews in Europe due to rising antisemitism. Zionism itself, despite its being a secular nationalist movement in line with European nationalisms of

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<sup>10</sup> For the historical dimension of Jewish reactions to Zionism, see amongst others Salmon 2002; Eisenstadt 1992; Hertzberg 1997.

the time, was nevertheless reliant on the rich cultural fabric of stories, motifs and symbols offered by the Jewish religious tradition in order to construct a national narrative that would attract and mobilise the Jewish communities who were scattered all over Europe and beyond (Zuckermann 1999). Not least of these motifs is the Land of Israel which served as a focal point for the Zionist efforts to forge a modern Jewish nation that would leave behind the humiliating state of exile.

The first orthodox scholar who found an innovative, systematic theological answer to the challenge of modern secular Zionism was Abraham Isaac HaCohen Kook (1865-1935), the first Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community in Palestine, the yishuv. While traditional rabbinic theology believed that the holiness of the Land of Israel was conditioned on the observation of the commandments, Kook conceived of holiness as a quality inherent to the land because of God's presence. He therefore concluded that "the real and organic holiness of Jewry can become manifest only by the return of the people to its land, the only path that can lead to its renaissance" (quoted in Hertzberg 1997: 429). Only in the Land of Israel could the Jewish people be a vessel for God's eternal light. Combining mystical and kabbalistic thought with European dialectical philosophy, Kook argued that the secular Zionists were in fact fulfilling God's plan without being aware of it. But he believed that the secular rebellion against traditional religion was just a temporary phenomenon which would gradually be transcended into a religious reawakening of the secularists upon the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

Despite its originality, Kook's theology remained largely marginal during the following decades that saw the establishment of the State of Israel in 1949 and the subsequent process of state- and nation-building as well as the absorption of mass immigration under the leadership of the secular-socialist elite. The religious Zionist movement, embodied in the Mizrahi party (later National Religious Party - NRP), maintained a moderate outlook and supportive relationship with the state, but did not engage in a mystical-theological interpretation of history. The ultraorthodox parties rejected the secular state and its policies, but nevertheless opted for pragmatic coexistence in a consociational setting (Cohen/Susser 2000). It was only after the 1967 war that Kook's theology re-emerged. By that time, Kook's son Zvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook was head of the yeshiva which his father had founded in Jerusalem, Merkaz haRav. His few disciples considered him to be the authoritative interpreter of the late Kook's works. When the Israeli army captured a sweeping victory and got hold of former Arab territories in the 1967 war, it took most Israelis by surprise. The governing Labour party

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<sup>11</sup> On Kook's theology, compare amongst others Ravitzky 1996; Aran 1997; Gruenwald 1996.

favoured giving back parts of the land in exchange for peace while keeping others for security reasons. But there was more to the 1967 victory than questions of security and territorial adjustment: “The war reconnected the State with the Land [...] The return to cherished landmarks and longed-for vistas, pregnant with rich cultural associations, reawakened a long dormant impulse associated with the mystique of the land.” (Aran 1991: 273; Sandler 1993) Suddenly, the heartland of biblical history was in the possession of the modern Jewish state. Kook and his students not only offered a theological-messianic reading of the political events which acquired a sacred, transcendental quality, but began to invest all their energy and missionary zeal into the ‘liberation’ and settlement of the territories (Ravitzky 1996: 81ff). Presenting themselves as the new avantgarde of Zionist pioneering, albeit in a religious version, the Jewish radicals founded the first settlements in the occupied territories. The leadership of the National Religious Party was taken over by a new generation of young politicians who came from the settler community. In the crisis after the Yom Kippur war which had cast serious doubts on the invincibility of the Israeli army, the radicalised religious Zionist camp offered an alternative *raison d’être* for the State of Israel: to be a Jewish state in the holy Jewish land, not only a state of the Jews on any given territory. In 1974, Gush Emunim was founded, the settler organisation that became the most important non-parliamentarian political movement in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s. In its top ranks were many graduates from Merkaz HaRav. Though Israeli society as a whole did not endorse the radicalness of the settlers, the general mood was in favour of a reformulation of Israeli politics that would enhance the Jewish character of the state, strengthen the bond with the land, and adopt more hawkish policies towards the Arabs and the Palestinians. Gush Emunim was the tip of the iceberg, radical, innovative, daring, messianic - but beneath floated the broader iceberg of the religious Zionist, traditionally Jewish camp in Israeli society (Sprinzak 1985). Consequently, in the 1977 elections, the Likud came into power under the leadership of Menachem Begin. The new government supported the settlement drive in the occupied territories on a grand scale, cooperating with the religiously motivated settlers of Gush Emunim as well as establishing large settlements for non-ideological Israelis who were offered comfortable, state-subsidised housing across the Green Line.

The religious settler movement, epitomised by Gush Emunim, meets the criteria of a politicised religion as stipulated above. The Jewish settlers aim for a reconstitution of the Israeli social and political order according to their highly selective reading of Jewish religious tradition. At the top of their religious-normative priorities range the Land of Israel, its appropriation and settlement; then follows their idea of a truly Jewish state which would

function according to Jewish law. In order to realise this utopian vision of Israel, the activists of the settlement movement and religious Zionism engage in political action which takes on the quality of religious ritual: “The activist believers religiously experience and conceptualize primarily that which appears to be extra-religious. In fact, the movement ascribes the highest religious significance to those very notions and actions by which it became celebrated as ultra-political.” (Aran 1991: 296)

The enormous success of the settlement movement in the 1970s and 1980s stems from a double strategy: On the one hand, the settlers formed a very active and well organised non-parliamentarian network that established itself as the ideological mouthpiece of the broader Land of Israel-movement. They were very successful in mobilising their supporters to take part in mostly illegal settlement activities, mass demonstrations and political lobbying. On the other hand, the settlement movement early on went into a close relationship with the state, especially after the Likud came into power. They were part and parcel of the party system through the National Religious Party and other small ultra-nationalist and religious parties like Tzomet or Tehiya and thereby even filled ministerial posts in coalitional governments. Moreover, they successfully played the card of communal politics and administration, getting on the state’s payroll as teachers, rabbis or mayors in the Westbank villages and cities and acquiring jobs in the governmental agencies responsible for the administration of the settlement enterprise (Newman 2005).

But in the late 1980s, the first Intifada in the Palestinian territories initiated an intensive soul searching in Israeli society concerning the moral and political justification of the continued occupation. The critical voices against the settlement project and its proponents grew louder, from within Israel as well as from the international community. In combination with this domestic change, the international events were conducive to a fundamental change in Israel’s foreign policy as well. The end of the cold war released the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the superpower rivalry; the Iraq war in 1990 implicated a restructuring of the regional power balance in the Middle East and, pushed by the United States, resulted in the multilateral Madrid peace conference. In 1992, a leftist government led by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin took office and embarked on a fundamentally different course of politics regarding the future of the occupied territories which then resulted in the Oslo agreements in 1993 - much to the dislike of the politicised religious actors in Israel.

#### IV. Research Design and Methodology

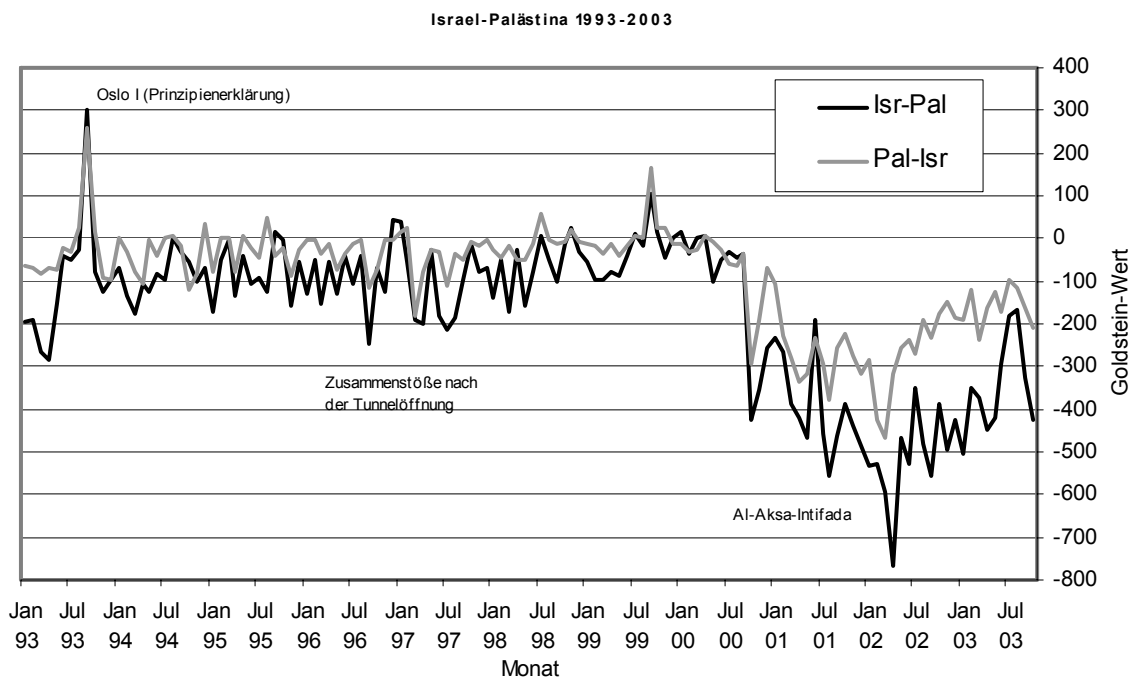
Whether and how the politicised religious actors actually contributed to the failure of the Oslo process in the 1990s will be explored by looking at two periods of heightened escalation in the 1990s. Despite the stable international conditions in the 1990s that were very conducive to peace, the Oslo process was soon interrupted by violent clashes and increased friction between the parties. These periods of renewed escalation are identified with the help of a conflict-cooperation scale which is provided by the Kansas Event Data System (KEDS). KEDS uses machine coding of English language news reports (from Reuters and AFP) to generate political event data which are then converted to an ordinal scale which allows to display them as a graph.<sup>12</sup> The event types on the conflict-cooperation scale range from “military attack” to “extend military assistance”.

The KEDS data set of the Levant shows two main periods of increased conflict intensity for the Israeli-Palestinian dyad in 1996 and in 2000. Israeli actions that have Palestine as a target are shown as a black line, Palestinian actions as a grey line. The first amplitude coincides with the opening of an antique tunnel by the Netanyahu government in the Old City of Jerusalem, leading from the Muslim quarter to the Temple Mount, which in September 1996 sparked a wave of violent clashes between Palestinian security personnel and Israeli police and army. There had been archaeological works in the tunnel since the late 1980s, but only the official opening of the entrance in the Muslim quarter for tourists enraged the Muslim community. They feared that the tunnel would cause damage to the Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque on the top - and they rightly understood the opening as a gesture of the Netanyahu government to demonstrate Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem. Arafat called to stop the ‘Judaization’ of Jerusalem. In the following days, the violence spread to the Westbank and the Gaza Strip, focusing on the surroundings of Jewish settlements. The clashes only ceased when US-President Clinton summoned a meeting of Arafat and Netanyahu in Washington in order to arrange the quarrel. But to no avail in the long run: The subsequent low points of the graph in 1997 designate the frictions following the building of the Har Homa settlement in East Jerusalem, the delay of the redeployment of Israeli troops in Hebron, and the further deterioration of Israeli-Palestinian relations in the Netanyahu era.

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<sup>12</sup> KEDS uses the Word Events Interaction Survey (WEIS) coding scheme which comprises 61 categories. The events are then converted to an interval level measurement by assigning a numerical scaled value to each category. See Goldstein 1992; Schrodt/Gerner 1994. The data sets can be downloaded from the KEDS website, see <http://web.ku.edu/keds/index.html>.

The second period of escalation marks the beginning of the Al Aqsa Intifada in September and October 2000, in the wake of Ariel Sharons infamous visit of the Temple Mount, guarded by hundreds of Israeli police officers. Israel decided to crack down on the Palestinian protesters quite heavily. In the days and weeks after the Temple Mount visit, the tense situation escalated to an unprecedented level. And for the first time, Israeli Arabs sided with the Palestinians which led to deadly confrontations between them and the Israeli police. What began as a rather spontaneous outbreak of violence in September 2000 became the most violent phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which lasted for more than four years.



In order to trace the possible influence of politicised religious actors' soft power on these periods of escalation, the study proceeds in two steps. First, a process analysis seeks to identify events and political developments that led to intensified conflict level during the period in question. This analysis will look briefly at the domestic and international levels, but concentrate mainly on the role of politicised religious actors in Israel.

The second step will be a content analysis of statements and speeches by Israeli government officials which directly address the specific conflict situation and explain Israeli policy. The objective of the content analyses is to find out whether Israeli politicians employed the liberal arguments and preferences proposed by liberal theory or if they resorted to the typical rhetoric of radicalised religious Zionism in order to justify Israeli policies which

contributed to the escalation. The content analysis<sup>13</sup> is based on a category system which was deduced from democratic peace theory on the one hand and comparative fundamentalism research on the other hand. It lists the specific arguments proposed by democratic theory on peace and war for the use of force as well as typical preferences of fundamentalist or politicised religious actors. While the liberal, democratic arguments are thought to be universally valid across cultures and regions, the fundamentalist preferences are *per se* particularistic. Therefore, the theoretical categories which were mainly taken from the results of the *Fundamentalism Project* (see esp. Almond/Appleby/Sivan 2003: 92-104) had to be specified according to the context of politicised Jewish religion in Israel.<sup>14</sup>

As noted above, the liberal democratic justification for the politics of escalation rests on the perception of the opponent who is designated either as a rogue state/terrorist state (category 1) or as a state which is fundamentally opposed to peace and cooperation (category 2). Such an assessment of the enemy legitimises the use of force from the perspective of the democracy. Politicised Jewish religion brings forward four arguments which might be used to justify escalating policy. Following from a typical fundamentalist dualism of in- and outgroup, of light and darkness, the settlers tend to portray the Arabs as the ultimate enemies of Israel and the Jews (category 3). In contrast, they view themselves and the Jewish people as God's chosen people who reside on the holy land which God himself assigned to them - and to nobody else (category 4). Radical religious Zionism adheres to a specific eschatological messianism that ascribes a sacred quality to the state of Israel and the ensuing historical events as a manifestation of the beginning of redemption (category 5). But the progress of the redemptive process is conditioned on the active observation of Jewish law by the Jewish people, especially the precepts of liberating and settling the Land of Israel (category 6).

## V. 1996: Israeli identity and the Peace Process

In the mid-1990s, the international and regional conditions for the peace process to accomplish its goals were still very good. The United States as well as many of the Arab neighbours supported or at least tolerated Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But from within both societies the peace-opponents voiced harsh criticism; and not only that, they engaged in violent protest against what seemed to them as a sell-out of their respective national ethos. On the Palestinian side, the opposition accused Arafat and his entourage of treachery and collaboration with the enemy. The Palestinian Authority was a direct product of the Oslo

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<sup>13</sup> For the methodology, see Mayring 1997; Bauer 2000.

<sup>14</sup> To this end, interviews were conducted with leading proponents of the settler movement and radicalised religious Zionism who described the central features of their belief system.

process and therefore the natural partner of Israel and the United States, but in the eyes of the critics not the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Arafat was torn between the demands of his constituency, the oppositional movements and the obligations of the Oslo agreements. The terrorist organisations such as Hamas and Jihad al-Islami tried to disrupt the peace process by launching series of terrorist attacks in Israel, the most terrible one in March 1996 (Parsons 2005).

The settlers began what has been called a ‘Jewish Intifada’ shortly after the signing of the Oslo accords, attacking Palestinians in the occupied territories and demolishing their property. In 1994, Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish extremist from Kiryat Arba, murdered 29 Muslim worshippers in Hebron. The tragic climax of Jewish violence against the Oslo process was the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. He was killed by a Jewish extremist from the radical religious Zionist camp. The months up to the assassination were characterised by a growing polarisation of Israeli society concerning two overlapping issues: first, the future of the occupied territories and the peace process; and second, the identity of the Jewish state. Apart from the ‘hard power’ of the violent extremists, the politicised religious actors engaged in an intensive struggle over the identity and destiny of the Jewish state. Rabin and his foreign minister Shimon Peres had based their position in the peace process on a reformulation of Israeli identity which drew on the liberal, civil and secular heritage of Zionism. If Israel was to be a liberal democracy instead of an isolated, ethno-nationalist warrior state, they argued, then it had to abandon its undemocratic rule over the Palestinians in the occupied territories (Barnett 2002). The nationalist and religious Zionist camp argued that the territories formed an integral part of the Land of Israel, if not given to the Jews by God himself, and therefore were constitutive for the Jewish identity of the state. Security issues and religion “virtually merged into one new dimension, or continuum, which might be labeled as ‘Jewishness’, that is, viewing defense issues and policies through a Jewish perspective” (Goldberg 1998: 57; see also Elazar/Sandler 1998). The settlers, led by politicised religious rabbis from the occupied territories, declared the Oslo accords to be against Jewish law and initiated a massive wave of protest against the government, including mass demonstrations, incitement, and calls by settler rabbis to soldiers to refuse evacuation orders of settlements.

The result was that the religious Jewish public was identified with hawkish, ultra-nationalist positions on the peace process; and the secular Israelis were reckoned to be leftist doves who were ready to make considerable concessions. Personal religious observance had become the most important socio-demographic factor for the prediction of voting behaviour in

national elections (Shamir/Arian 1999). But the intense polarisation masked that a majority of Israelis still favoured continuing the peace process - yet they did not want to compromise on the Jewish character of the state.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the suicide bombings by Hamas, only a few weeks before the elections in 1996, contributed to the election victory of the Oslo-critic 'Mr. Security' Binyamin Netanyahu who then set up a right-nationalist coalition which included the religious Zionist parties. Though Netanyahu claimed to be faithful to the Oslo accords, his government acted to the contrary and worked to halt the peace process and accelerate the expansion of Jewish settlements in the territories. The opening of the tunnel in Jerusalem's old city was but one of the many provocative gestures of the ruling coalition.

This brief analysis of the political developments which led to the change in Israeli behaviour in the peace process and helped fuelling the escalation shows that the politicised religious actors were rather successful in exerting their soft power within the context of Israeli democracy. They managed to exploit the link between the Jewish identity of the state which appeals to many Israelis regardless of religious observance and the issues of territorial borders, defense and security in a way that promoted their political goals.

The content analysis of three speeches and statements by Binyamin Netanyahu and foreign minister David Levy<sup>16</sup> does not reflect the influence of politicised religious soft power to the same extent as the process analysis. First and foremost, the Prime Minister and his chief diplomat seek to portray Arafat and the Palestinian Authority as notorious peace opponents who cannot be trusted because they do allow and possibly even support terrorism. Both politicians make extensive use of the categories 1 and 2 from the democratic peace/war theory in order to justify the Israeli policy of slowing down the peace process and employing harsh security measures in reaction to Palestinian protest against the tunnel opening. While Netanyahu and Levy claim that Israel wants to proceed with the peace process and prefers non-violent modes conflict resolution, they condition this benevolent policy on the Palestinians' ability to halt terrorist attacks. Simultaneously, they doubt not only the PA's ability but also its serious intention to fight terrorism. Thereby, they indirectly qualify the PA as a terrorist or rogue state. The insistence on Israel's security as the top priority on the

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<sup>15</sup> An ultraorthodox party decided to support Netanyahu in the direct elections for Prime Minister with the slogan "Netanyahu is good for the Jews". The National Religious Party featured the election slogan "Zionism with a Soul".

<sup>16</sup> Netanyahu 1996a; Netanyahu 1996b; Levy 1996. See for the detailed analysis: Claudia Baumgart-Ochse: Demokratie und Gewalt im Heiligen Land. Politisierte Religion in Israel und das Scheitern des Osloer Friedensprozesses, unpublished PhD dissertation, Frankfurt 2007.

national agenda *and* as an obligation of the PA thereby forecloses the progress of negotiations.

Although categories 1 and 2 are the prevalent arguments in the official statements, the Prime Minister Netanyahu also uses motifs and reasoning that resemble the specific preferences of politicised Jewish religion. He sees Zionism in the tradition of Jewish religion, calls the settlers the real pioneers of our days and Jerusalem the eternal capital of the Jewish people; he speaks about the biblical idea of the 'ingathering of the exiles' and relates that biblical prophesy has been fulfilled in the modern State of Israel; he calls Hebron a Jewish town with a Jewish history and claims that the settlement of the Land of Israel is a basic right of the Jewish people. Although Netanyahu avoids the messianic, mystical rhetoric of Gush Emunim, he nonetheless integrates many of the arguments of categories 3, 4, 5 and 6 into his justification of government policies.

### Coalitional politics and the Al Aqsa Intifada

At the end of the 1990s, the external circumstances were still in favour of peace. Moreover, the United States, the European Union and states in the region and beyond pressed the conflict parties to overcome the stalemate of the peace process stemming from the Netanyahu era. When the Labour politician Ehud Barak took office in 1999, the world again hoped that this would bring a breakthrough in the peace process.

On the Palestinian side, the feeling of deep frustration with the peace process dominated the political mood. Nothing of what the Palestinians had hoped for when they signed the Oslo accords had come true. Instead of a Palestinian state, a thriving economy and a free and democratic society, they had to cope with expanding settlements on their territory, confiscation and fragmentation of the land, high rates of unemployment, poverty and a crippled and corrupt PA (Hammami/Tamari 2001). The pressure on Arafat to bring about a substantial change of the Palestinian situation increased. The years of the Netanyahu government, which by 1999 had effectively stalemated the peace process by way of simple renegotiation of former agreements and simultaneous postponement of the implementation of these agreements, added to the Palestinian impasse (Mahle 2005).

In the 1999 election campaign, a former chief of staff of the IDF, Ehud Barak, succeeded in winning the support of Israel's centre. He was able to credibly deliver the message that he would not compromise on Israel's national security, but at the same time restart the peace process on a regional as well as on a bilateral level. He was successful in the run for the Prime Minister's office, but was then confronted with a highly fragmented Knesset due to the split

vote for Prime Minister and parliament. His party list “One Israel”, a merger of the Labour party, the moderate religious Meimad party and the liberal Gesher, won 26 seats. Together with the other parties on the left, the progressive camp only got about 50 seats (out of 120) and therefore was not able to compose a governing coalition on its own. Barak chose not to invite Likud into the coalition because of its obstructive stance on the peace process. Instead, he opted for a coalition that deliberately included the religious Zionist (NRP) and ultraorthodox parties (Shas) as well as other small nationalist parties (Israel b’Aliya) in order to gather broad support for his planned peace policies and reunite the polarised Israeli society. After a failed attempt to initiate negotiations with the Syrians, Barak turned to the Israeli-Palestinian track – and was soon confronted with opposition from his coalition partners. After violent clashes surrounding the commemoration of the ‘Nakbah’ by the Palestinians, negotiations were again suspended. The United States tried to revive the peace process and accepted Barak’s proposal to summon the conflict parties for end status negotiations in Camp David in July 2000. Given the fact that even smaller transfers of territory had caused major quarrels in Israeli politics, the plan to conclusively negotiate the end status issues seemed rather ambitious. Barak disclosed that he was ready to make painful concessions and offer the Palestinians over 90 percent of the Westbank.<sup>17</sup> But a few days before Barak eventually left Jerusalem for the United States, his coalition partners from the ultra-nationalist and religious Zionist camp left the coalition, leaving the Prime Minister without a majority in parliament. The Camp David negotiations collapsed, as did the negotiations in Taba a few months later which were held in the midst of the Al Aqsa Intifada.

The role of the politicised religious actors is rather ambivalent. On the one hand, they had reluctantly come to terms with the fact that the peace process was irreversible. The absolute, maximalist idea of Greater Israel existed “mostly as a theoretical ideology rather than as a potentially implemented policy” (Pedahzur 2001: 40). Not least the assassination of Rabin had yielded a reassessment of ideological positions. Instead of territorial maximalism, the religious Zionists concentrated on protecting and enhancing the Jewish identity of the State of Israel. Despite these subtle changes in religious Zionism’s political ambitions, they had a hand in the failure of Camp David and the renewed escalation of violence in September 2000. First: because of the long-term sedimentation process of the religious Zionist ideology in Israeli society. Through their share in the state education system as well as through the Hesder yeshivas, which combined religious studies with army service, had the politicised religious actors spread their ideological views to the broader public. Moreover, they had always

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<sup>17</sup> The exact proposals are subject of contestation. See Pressman 2003.

effectively linked their religious-political programme with the security concerns of the Israeli public, presenting the settlement project as vital to individual and national security. This sedimentation process augmented the provisos against possible territorial concessions and conclusive end status negotiations. In addition, the radical religious Zionists succeeded in putting themselves in crucial positions in the administrative governmental agencies which dealt with the infrastructure and expansion of the settlements. These people helped channelling the necessary funds into the settlements, sometimes even against the political will of the responsible politicians.<sup>18</sup> By the time of Camp David, the ‘engine’ of the settlement project had produced facts on the ground that had fuelled Palestinian mistrust and were very difficult to reverse.

Second: it came to end status negotiations, the tough ideological politicians outweighed the pragmatic ones: the religious parties opted to leave the coalition and withdraw their support of Prime Minister Barak’s policies. Without the Knesset majority, Barak had to conduct negotiations on very thin ice – and failed in the end. The outbreak of violence was just a question of time, and the Sharon visit on the Temple Mount provided the spark that let the situation explode.

For the second period of escalation, the process analysis has shown that the soft power of politicised religion again contributed to the intensification of the conflict, albeit in different ways than in 1996. The sedimentation process of religious Zionist ideology as well as the tactical manoeuvring at the eve of Camp David reduced the chance for non-violent conflict resolution and added to the tense mood between the parties. The content analysis of speeches by Prime Minister Barak and foreign minister Shlom Ben-Ami, in contrast, did not find any of the preferences of politicised Jewish religion. Instead, Barak and Ben-Ami both heavily rely on the categories 1 and 2 in order to justify Israel’s harsh crack down on the activists of the Al Aqsa Intifada which began in September 2000. They both ascribe the responsibility for the Intifada to Arafat and the PA whom they accuse to have deliberately initiated and supported the outbreak of violence. They argue that the PA and its leadership constitute an eminent threat to the security of the State of Israel and thereby justify the use of force against the insurgents.

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<sup>18</sup> This is also the conclusion of Talya Sason, the attorney who was commissioned by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to research the ways in which illegal outposts are established and funded. See her very interesting and revealing report: Sason o.J.

## The soft power of politicised Jewish religion in Israel

Politicised religion might dispose of soft power, and especially so in the context of modern democracies. But 'soft power' does not necessarily mean 'good power'. In the case of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the 1990s, the politicised religious actors in Israel from the settlement movement and religious Zionism have effectively contributed to the failure of the peace process and the renewed escalation of violence – and they did this not only by way of violent protest, but also by exerting legitimate soft power: They were surprisingly successful in being attractive to many Israelis instead of employing coercive or violent measures. The context of an open, democratic political system which offers an opportunity structure for many different actors to take part in the collective decision making processes made for the ideal conditions for the settlement movement to involve themselves in politics. They did not value democracy as an end in itself since they sought to remodel the Israeli state according to their understanding of Jewish law; but they used democracy in order to advance their political goals. The example of radicalised religious Zionism shows how a traditional religion might be transformed into a politicised religion which actively engages in the restructuring of the political and social order and thereby heightens tensions in the international realm. But politicised religion's soft power is not without limitations. The content analyses of government representatives' statements concerning the periods of heightened escalation in the 1990s have shown that the politicians only cursorily integrate the settlers' typical arguments. Only Netanyahu used religious semantics, but – like Barak, Levy and Ben-Ami – put an emphasis on arguments that fit into the international liberal discourse of designating specific states as 'rogue states' or 'terrorists' who deliberately defy the basic tenets of Western civilisation such as democracy, rule of law, and peace. Obviously, on the level of international politics, the Western liberal discourse outweighs the particularistic religious one.

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