

Beyond Culture and Economy: Israel's Security-Driven Populism

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Despite being largely overlooked in the literature, Israel provides a rare example of what a full decade of 21st century populism in power looks like. Based on an examination of rhetoric and policymaking between 2009 and 2019, this article brings the writing on the subject up to date and highlights the unique traits of Israeli populism. In so doing it establishes that Israeli populism has been mainstreamed to a remarkable extent and currently encompasses almost all right-wing parties in the country's legislature. Moreover, it shows that the Israeli case embodies a variety of populism which has yet to be acknowledged in the literature – neither economic nor cultural in character, but rather based on national security issues. The concept of 'security-driven populism', introduced here, could prove useful to researchers studying other populist regimes that do not fit neatly into the 'culture versus economy' debate, which has dominated the field for years.

1. Introduction

Since 2016, the year that Donald Trump won the American Presidency and Britain voted to leave the European Union, a tremendous amount of academic and public attention has been dedicated to the rise of right-wing populism. The burgeoning literature on the subject typically cites a set of examples that are said to embody the ideas and practices of present-day populism – from Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro to Narendra Modi and Viktor Orbán. Curiously, the case of Israeli populism has been absent from much of the writing on the subject, at least in the past decade (e.g. Müller, 2016; Kaltwasser et al, 2017; Hadiz and Chryssogelos, 2017). Perhaps this is due to a language barrier, perhaps it has to do with the exceptionality ascribed to the Arab-Israeli conflict: either way, this article seeks to address this gap and by doing so to contribute both to the understanding of Israeli politics and to the analysis of 21st century populism.

Why should Israel be of interest to students of populism? First, because of the distinct characteristics of its populist regime. While the academic debate has been mostly focused on

two types of anxieties utilised by populists around the world – economic and cultural – this article suggests that the Israeli case offers a third: a populism based on anxieties related to national security. This observation could deepen our insight into the circumstances that give rise to populist politics and the social needs it satisfies. Second, because Israel plays a central role in the emerging populist axis on the international stage – as evidenced by its tightening relationship with Brazil and India and the invitation it received to join the Visegrád Group, an alliance of Central European countries led by right-wing populists. Third, because of the longevity of its populist regime. The analysis below shows that Israel has been ruled by populist governments for at least ten years, which makes its populist regime one of the longest-lasting in the 21st century so far (Kyle and Gultchin, 2018). It is, therefore, an instructive example of what a full decade of uninterrupted populist rule looks like.

As for its contribution to the study of present-day Israeli politics, this article provides two novel observations. First, that over the past decade the Israeli right as a whole has undergone a populist transformation. Second, that the fundamental social division advanced by Israeli populists in the 2010s was one which excludes the Jewish left from ‘the real people’. Admittedly, Israeli populists also target the Arab citizens of Israel and African asylum seekers. But while these phenomena have already been discussed by scholars, little has been said about the remarkably successful and highly consequential delegitimisation of the Jewish left.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 lays the theoretical foundations for the discussion of populism in general, Israeli populism in particular and the relation between populism and national security. Section 3 introduces ‘the Israeli populist triad’: three right-wing parties that spearheaded the country’s populist turn in the 2010s. Then it discusses the triad’s efforts at delegitimising the Jewish left, and provides an overview of the public campaigns it led against three democratic institutions. Section 4 highlights a fundamental feature of Israeli populism – its security-based political content. Finally, it offers a conclusion.

2. Populism, Israel and National Security: Theoretical Framework

(a) Populism

Although populism is still a contested concept, in recent years a particular theoretical approach to the topic has gained significant popularity – namely, the ideational approach, which is considered especially useful in cross-national comparative contexts (e.g. Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2004, 2007, 2017; Abts and Rummens, 2007; Hakhverdian and Koop, 2007; Kaltwasser Rovira, 2011, 2013; Mudde and Kaltwasser Rovira, 2012, 2013, 2017, 2018; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Pappas, 2019). Broadly speaking, in this view, populism is an ideology which is both anti-elitist and anti-pluralist. Populist anti-elitism is manifested in a clear distinction between ‘the real people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, based not on categories like class, nationality or race but on a moral division between two homogenous and antagonistic groups within society.

Populist anti-pluralism is embodied in populist actors' assertion that they – and they alone – are capable of representing the 'authentic people' (Müller, 2016).

According to the ideational approach, populism is a 'thin-centred ideology' (Freeden, 1996). Hence, it is not programmatic: it does not 'provide answers to all the major socio-political questions' and can be compatible with a wide variety of 'thick' ideologies like nationalism or socialism (Stanley, 2008). This point is particularly pertinent to the Israeli case, where – as will be shown below – three right-wing parties of different ideological inclinations and socio-cultural appeals comply with the ideational definition.

Based on this Manichean view of society, right-wing populists tend to direct public anger towards a typical set of nemeses: the judiciary, the media, civil servants – and, of course, their political rivals. These are the actors which the morally corrupt elite allegedly consists of, and they are the ones populists accuse of obstructing 'the will of the people' (Müller, 2016). In all populist narratives, the elite has taken over democratic institutions in order to exploit them for its own ends and to the detriment of the 'real people'. Once in government, like in the Israeli case, populists are able to not only attack the elite verbally, but to also implement policy measures aimed at its institutional weakening. In so doing they can signal to their supporters that, though in power, they have not been co-opted by the establishment and to keep their electorate perpetually mobilised (Urbinati, 2019: 121).

Apart from the ideational conception of populism, there exist two other prominent approaches to the study of the subject: the discursive approach (Kazin 1995; Laclau, 2005; Hawkins, 2009; Caiani and Della Porta, 2011; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Moffit, 2016; Aslanidis, 2016) and the strategic approach (Weyland 2001, 2017; Barr, 2009; Jansen, 2011). The discursive approach views populism not as an ideology but as a discursive style which contrasts 'the people' and 'the elite'. Kazin (1995), for instance, emphasises the populist use of language based on a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them'. Moffitt (2016) sees populism as a 'political style' which pits 'the people' against 'the elite', makes performative use of 'bad manners' and dramatises a sense of crisis. These characteristics would surely sound familiar to any observer of contemporary Israeli politics.

As Gidron and Bonikowski (2013: 14-15) note, the discursive and ideational approaches are very similar in their definitions of populism. Nevertheless, we think that the nuanced differences between the two make the ideational conception better suited to the case at hand. First, the ideational approach enables us to distinguish between the widespread, non-populist use of the rhetorical trope 'the people' and the specifically anti-pluralistic employment of the term. Second, it allows us to examine not only populist rhetoric but also populist policymaking, where style is less relevant than ideas as an analytical category.

In contrast to the ideational and discursive approaches, proponents of the strategic conception of populism urge scholars to pay close attention to the deeds of political actors rather than to 'mere words' (Weyland, 2017). In their view, 'populism is best defined as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on

direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers' (Weyland, 2001: 14). Particularly popular in the study of Latin American populism (e.g. Ellner, 2003; Roberts, 2003), the strategic approach successfully captures some forms of organisation and mobilisation typical of Israeli populists – e.g. the centrality of Benjamin Netanyahu's persona in the country's politics. At the same time, it seems to miss the mark on other important characteristics, like the fact that Netanyahu relies on a well-oiled political organisation which existed long before his ascent to power. Above all, the strategic approach proves limited in its capacity to shed light on Israel's political transformation in the 2010s, a process which involved a wide variety of actors – from personalistic political vehicles to traditional mass parties, from charismatic leaders to dull backbenchers. In this respect, too, the ideational approach appears to be more useful, due to its ability to bring out ideological attributes shared by a diverse set of actors.

(b) Israeli Populism

The dominance of populism in Israeli politics over the past decade, and the role Israel has played internationally as a populist actor, have been frequently noted by journalists (e.g. Bennett 2019). Scholars, on the other hand, have written relatively little on the subject. Prior to the 2010s, research on Israeli populism was restricted to a limited number of actors – a handful of enterprising politicians who experimented with populist rhetoric (e.g. Pedahzur, 2001; Filc and Lebel, 2005; Filc, 2010).¹ Throughout the 2010s – Benjamin Netanyahu's decade of uninterrupted rule and populist transformation – much of the scholarship on the subject was written as part of the literature dedicated to the Israeli radical right (Mustafa and Ghanem, 2010; Pedahzur, 2012; Perliger and Pedahzur, 2018). Consequently, it tended to analyse the populist aspects of Israeli politics through the conceptual prism of nativism, defined as 'a combination of xenophobia and nationalism... which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous state' (Mudde, 2007: 17). Thus, researchers of the Israeli right dedicated most of their attention to populist incitement against the Arab citizens of Israel and African migrants – two groups that right-wing politicians contrast with the Jewish citizens of the state, regarded as its rightful native group (e.g. Filc, 2010, 2018a, 2018b; Perliger and Pedahzur, 2018). These are, in Mudde's (2007: 69-73) terms, two constructed enemy groups that fall under the category of 'within the state, outside the nation'.

To give a typical example, this is how Filc (2018b: 398), the most prominent scholar of Israeli populism, defines the phenomenon as it pertains to the country's largest right-wing party: 'Politically, the Likud underwent a transition from allowing for the inclusion of Mizrahim [Jews of Middle Eastern and North African heritage] to build most of its political discourse on the

¹ Farther back, the Israeli politician most commonly described by scholars as a populist is Menachem Begin (Sprinzak 1989; Keren 1995; Filc 1996). This timeframe, however, is beyond the scope of the article. Moreover, we would argue that Begin – whose populism was defined chiefly by its anti-elitism and communication style – would not be considered one by contemporary theoretical standards.

exclusion of Israeli Arabs'. Indeed, the hostility towards the Arab citizens of Israel has accelerated during the 2010s, with most taboos underlying public debate repeatedly violated by media-savvy right-wing politicians. Nevertheless, the animosity towards them has always existed among political actors in Israel, especially on the right. Thus, following an argument made by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018: 1673) in the European context, we contend that the worldview expressed by these politicians – which divides society along ethno-national lines (i.e. Jews versus non-Jews) – is rooted in the Israeli right's longstanding nativism, not its populism. While exclusionary and even racist attitudes towards non-Jews undoubtedly characterise the Israeli right today, this has been the case for much longer than a decade (Pedahzur, 2012). These attitudes, therefore, should not be regarded as the defining attribute of Israel's current populist moment.

By concentrating mostly on nativist rhetoric and only a handful of actors, the existing literature has overlooked two trends that shaped Israeli politics over the 2010s: (a) the populist transformation of the right-wing political camp as a whole; and (b) the successful delegitimisation campaign against the mainstream Jewish left, which was underpinned not by nativist logic but by a quintessentially populist distinction – within the Jewish population itself – between 'real' or 'pure' Jewish Israelis (supporters of the right) and 'morally corrupt' or 'treacherous' Jewish Israelis (supporters of the left and centre-left, which make up roughly 35 percent of the electorate). This is an enemy group that falls under the category of 'within the state, within the nation' (Mudde, 2007: 65-69). It is important to note that, contrary to most countries, the colloquial distinction in Israel between 'left' and 'right' is not based on one's approach to social or economic questions but to the national security debate. This is another testament to the centrality of national security issues in the country's politics.

Over the years, scholars have also pointed out a few factors which render Israeli politics particularly vulnerable to populist and far-right influence (Pedahzur, 2012; Filc and Lebel, 2005; Mustafa and Ghanem, 2010). Most importantly, Filc (2018a) points to Israeli society's heterogeneous, multi-cultural character, which gives rise to tensions between different groups. Moreover, Israeli society includes a large minority group – Israeli Arabs – who belong to a national collective with which the majoritarian ethnic group is in conflict. But while these accounts seek to explain why Israel is susceptible to populism, they do little in the way of describing the distinct traits of Israeli populism. Furthermore, more recent analyses of Israeli populism tend to focus on only one of its manifestations – e.g. the role of religion (Rogenhofer and Panievsky, 2020) or the attacks on civil society (Lamarque, 2019) and the judiciary (Harel and Kolt, 2020) – but do not offer a comprehensive account of the phenomenon.

To sum up, the existing literature on Israeli populism is lacking in four respects: it focuses on the right's anti-Arab rhetoric, thereby neglecting one of the defining phenomena of Israeli politics in the 2010s – the delegitimisation of the Jewish left; it zeros in on specific actors, thereby disregarding the ubiquity of the phenomenon; it fails to highlight the idiosyncratic

characteristics of Israeli populism; and it analyses recent delegitimisation efforts separately from one another, without providing a comprehensive account of this overarching trend.

(c) Populism and National Security

Security – or, rather, the lack thereof – is a recurring theme in populist politics. According to Mudde, populists ‘are obsessed with “security”, but they interpret the concept much more broadly than just the physical security of individuals. Security refers both to individuals and collectives, most notably nation and race, and has a cultural, economic, and physical component’ (Mudde, 2019: 33). For example, immigrants are commonly depicted by populists as a danger to the purity of national culture, the economic well-being of the native population or the personal safety of citizens. Indeed, critical security scholars have long maintained that security is not necessarily an objective condition but also a discursive construct (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde, 1998; Balzacq, 2011). Securitisation, therefore, is ‘the process by which an issue becomes defined as a “security issue”, that is understood as an existential threat... requiring in response the adoption of exceptional emergency measures’ (Rushton, 2018). As shown by Wojczewski (2020), populists customarily use securitisation ‘to mobilise “the people” against a “dangerous” elite and normalise this antagonistic divide of society’. Put differently, populist securitisation is a discursive technique that frames the elite as an existential threat to the people (Magcamit, 2017).

Consider this statement by Italian far-right populist Matteo Salvini. ‘An effort at ethnic replacement is underway’, declared Salvini in 2016. ‘Well-financed organisations are importing thousands of new farm slaves, paid three euros an hour, to erase Italians living here. This is a lucrative attempt at genocide’ (Poggioli, 2019). Salvini builds on insecurities related to the disruption of ethno-cultural cohesion in Italian society and fears of wage depression – but reframes them as physical existential threats of the gravest kind, in order to construct the contrasting ‘people’ and ‘elite’. He does so by using common securitisation techniques like dramatisation, simplification and scapegoating (Wojczewski, 2020).

As argued below, in the Israeli case security plays an even more fundamental role, since it provides the *content* of the anxieties populists build on. In places like the United States and Europe, the populist imagination draws on a broad gallery of villains and catastrophes: financial meltdowns, corrupt bankers, inflows of immigrants, closed factories, and turrets of mosques towering over Western cities. For this reason, one of the most enduring debates in the literature is whether populism thrives on cultural or economic tensions (Mudde, 2007; Oesch, 2008; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2017; Gidron and Hall, 2017; Rodrik, 2018; Margalit, 2019; Hopkin and Blyth, 2019; Hopkin, 2020). Thus, some maintain that the populist surge of recent years is rooted in the anxieties caused by economic inequality, neoliberal globalisation and the 2007-2008 financial crisis (e.g. Rodrik, 2018). Conversely, others claim that cultural tensions – the result of multiculturalism, changing societal values and mass

immigration – lie at the heart of contemporary populism (e.g. Margalit, 2019). Finally, there are those who argue for a combined approach (e.g. Gidron and Hall, 2017).

Whatever the case may be, our argument is that the ghosts which populate the Israeli political imagination – exploding buses, young soldiers heading to war, and the chimneys of Auschwitz – fall under a different category of political content: neither economic nor cultural but rather national security-related. In section 5 we use the Israeli variant of populism to introduce a new concept which describes this distinct relationship between national security and populism, i.e. ‘security-driven populism’.

3. The Populist Triad and its Enemies

In the following section we seek to establish that for the past decade Israeli politics has been transformed by populism and can serve as a textbook example of what populism in power looks like. We do so by examining the social division propagated by Israeli populists – the exclusion of the Jewish left from the ‘real people’ – as well as their decade-long campaign against democratic institutions. These two characteristics are, of course, essential features of populism. Our examination also underlines how remarkably sweeping this political sea-change was, encompassing almost all right-wing parties represented in Israel’s legislature, the Knesset.

Undoubtedly, the most dominant figure in Israeli politics throughout the 2010s was Benjamin Netanyahu. Scholars have already identified Netanyahu’s populist inclinations during his first tenure in office (1996-1999), citing his belligerent anti-elitist rhetoric and American-style communication skills (e.g. Filc, 1996; Peri, 2004). The 2010s saw both the intensification of his populist tendencies and their spread across the Israeli right. All three coalition governments headed by Netanyahu during the decade (2009-2013; 2013-2015; 2015-2020) were based on what we term ‘the populist triad’, which consisted of the following parties: (1) Likud (Israel’s largest right-wing party, whose Chairman is Netanyahu); (2) Israel Our Home (a hawkish secular party, predominately supported by Jewish immigrants from the former USSR); and (3) The Jewish Home (a far-right Zionist religious party, mainly representing the settler movement).²

In our analysis of the social division propagated by the triad and its campaign against democratic institutions, we show that all three parties contributed to Israel’s populism turn – albeit with differences in thematic emphasis and rhetorical style. This demonstrates just how ubiquitous the logic of populism has become among right-wing actors in Israel over the 2010s. Importantly, during this decade populist politics was not limited to a few representatives of the three parties, but to the vast majority of their members of Knesset. Since these three parties make

² For most of the decade this was the name of the party closely affiliated with the settler movement. In 2019 the party split and eventually reunited. In that year’s two election cycles, its members ran as part of The Union of Right-Wing Parties, The New Right, and Yamina.

up the core of Israel's parliamentary right, the meaning of this process was the complete transformation of a whole political camp.³

3.1 The Fundamental Social Division: The Exclusion of the Jewish Left

As mentioned above, while the nativist hostility towards Arab citizens has characterised Israeli politics for decades, the widespread delegitimisation of the mainstream Jewish left has only come to the fore in the 2010s.⁴ Within less than a decade, a remarkably successful public campaign carried out by politicians, journalists and extra-parliamentary organisations affiliated with the triad managed to cast serious doubts on the Jewish left's loyalty to the ethno-cultural group it belongs to (Jews), the national movement it is an heir to (Zionism) and the country in which it operates (Israel). Accordingly, the populist argument against the Jewish left is threefold and negatively formulated: that it is anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist, and anti-Israeli. Jewishness, Zionism and Israeliness are the constitutive components of Israeli Jews' political identities – left and right alike (Yadgar, 2017). For this reason, the meaning of the populist argument is that Israeli lefties should not be considered part of the 'real people'.

A prominent line of attack used by the triad to demarcate the Jewish left from 'the real people' is the claim that it has turned its back on Jewish tradition, religion and culture. This argument is most closely associated with Netanyahu, who in 1997 famously asserted that 'The left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish' (Kan, 2018). Back then, during his first term as prime minister, this unprecedented statement instigated a huge political scandal. In the 2010s, however, similar accusations have become part and parcel of the triad's discourse. In 2017, Secretary of Education Naftali Bennett (*The Jewish Home*) accused Haaretz, Israel's leading left-wing newspaper, of pathological self-hatred. 'Auto-antisemitism', explained Bennett, 'is a socio-psychological phenomenon in which a Jew develops obsessive hostility and disdain for the Jewish tradition' (Bennett, 2017). The article that provoked Bennett's fury argued that, under his leadership, the Ministry of Education had been indoctrinating young secular Israelis with ultra-nationalistic ideology. Bennett's response exemplifies a typical populist tactic whereby a

³ We have excluded the two Ultra-Orthodox parties – Shas and United Torah (UT) – from the populist triad, even though they are members of the right-wing bloc. The UT, a sectorial religious-fundamentalist party, is not considered populist under any understanding of the term. As for Shas, some scholars argue that it promotes moral-religious conservatism rather than populism (Hirsch-Hoefler et al, 2010). Others, who do think it populist, disagree about the type of populism it promotes – with some defining it as inclusionary populism, related to the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi tension (Filc, 2010: 93), and others defining it as exclusionary populism, focused on attacking minorities like refugees and the LGBTQ community (Pedahzur, 2012: 193-194). Either way, Shas's politics lacks the main attribute shared by all triad members: a security-driven populism, mobilised against the Jewish left. In sum, if one thinks Shas is not populist, our claim about the pervasiveness of populism still stands, since the majority of Israel's right-wing actors are populist nevertheless. If one thinks Shas is indeed populist, our claim is strengthened, but we would argue that its populism is different in character – and less influential – than the rest of the triad, and therefore less relevant for defining the general characteristics of Israel's current populist turn.

⁴ The 2010s should be regarded as a new phase in a long process of delegitimisation which started in the early 1970s, following the emergence of the public debate about the territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 War (Sprinzak, 1973, 1999; Pedahzur, Hasisi and Brichta, 2000). A major turning point in this process was the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 by a national-religious Jewish radical.

particular conception of Judaism – in this case, his party’s far-right religiopolitical stance – is tacitly equated with ‘Jewish tradition’ as a whole.

The self-hatred and self-alienation arguments are particularly useful, for they enable populists to resolve an ontological paradox – namely, how to exclude from the Jewish people a group that is considered Jewish by any accepted standard. The solution: to politicise and moralise the very definition of Jewishness. In fact, Netanyahu’s late-nineties claim that lefties have ‘forgotten’ what it means to be Jewish was accompanied by a little-remembered explanation: ‘They [the left] think they can put our security in the hands of the Arabs. We’ll give them [the Arabs] a piece of our homeland, and they’ll take care of our well-being’ (Kan, 2018). The left’s allegedly flawed Jewishness is defined therefore by its *political* position, i.e. its willingness to reach a territorial compromise with the Palestinians.

The triad also applied the argument that ties leftism with anti-Judaism to democratic institutions (see 3.2 for a full account of the triad’s campaign against democratic institutions). To illustrate, in 2011 MK (Member of Knesset) Yariv Levin (Likud) claimed that the Supreme Court is advancing a ‘left-wing agenda’ which ‘threatens our [the Jewish people’s] ability to secure our existence’, adding: ‘The Supreme Court has been taken over by a small group of radical lefties who are trying to impose their values on the whole of society’. According to Levin, Israelis have lost faith in the Court because ‘its positions on religion and state are far apart from the traditional views held by the majority of the public’ (Lis, 2011).

In addition to the anti-Judaism argument, triad members have portrayed the Jewish left as anti-Israeli and anti-Zionist. In the run-up to the 2015 election, Netanyahu referred to the centre-left alliance ‘The Zionist Union’ as ‘The Anti-Zionist Union’ and said of the Israeli Labour Party that it had ‘picked a list of radical left, anti-Zionist candidates’ (Lis, 2015a). Thus, even the party which founded the State of Israel has been condemned as somehow antithetical to Israeli patriotism. Earlier that year, MK Sharon Gal (Israel Our Home) called Jewish left-wing members of Knesset ‘terrorist collaborators’, while MK Oren Hazan (Likud) said that when he hears them speak, he feels like he is ‘in the Palestinian Parliament’ (Azulay, 2015). In 2019 the Likud’s Spokesperson, Erez Tadmor, characterised left-wing Israelis as ‘pampered, thankless spoilt kids who were born to the right families in the right neighbourhoods’. Lefties, he added, ‘don’t have “infiltrators” [migrants] in their neighbourhoods, no one throws stones or Molotov cocktails at them. Their children don’t serve in Golani or Givati [IDF military brigades]... They milk the state in every way possible and appoint one another to all key positions’ (Fox, 2019). In a country where military service is mandatory and plays an integral part in the national identity, Tadmor’s accusations should be read as particularly damning.

The responses of Jewish left-wing politicians to these attacks reflect how pervasive they had become in the country’s political discourse. Throughout the 2010s, virtually every new leader of the Israeli centre-left endeavoured to disassociate themselves from the label ‘left’. The actions taken by three leaders of the Labour Party illustrate this. The process began in 2012, when party leader MK Shelly Yachimovich gave an interview to a pro-settler media outlet in

which she stated that ‘The Labour Party is not a left-wing party and has never been one’ (Lis, 2012). To further emphasise her point, Yachimovich visited Jewish religious sites in the West Bank city of Hebron and denounced the left’s attitude towards the settler movement. A few years later, her successor, MK Issac Herzog, formed a new centre-left political alliance under the title of ‘The Zionist Union’ – a name that was meant to function as a defensive measure against the triad’s accusations of anti-Zionism. Herzog also told party activists that Labour representatives ‘must stop being perceived as Arab lovers’ (Ben-Zikri, 2016). The process culminated in a 2017 public appearance by the new party leader, Avi Gabbay. Twenty years since they had been originally uttered, Gabbay reiterated Netanyahu’s famous words and called on his political camp to reconnect with its Jewish identity. ‘In 1997, Bibi [Netanyahu] said that “the left has forgotten what it means to be Jewish”’, Gabbay told a crowd of students. ‘Do you know what the left did in response? Forgot how to be Jewish’ (Curiel, 2017). Thus, the exclusionary argument against the Jewish left has come full circle, with the excluded group practically accepting – and further reinforcing – the social fault lines drawn by the populists.

The process that Israeli populists have been engaged in during the 2010s is an extreme instance of what Bar-Tal (1997) called ‘the monopolisation of patriotism’. Historically speaking, the monopolisation of patriotism usually functions as a mechanism for the exclusion of in-group members. Its potential systemic consequences – the delegitimisation of opposition and the scapegoating of in-groups – tend to become especially pronounced when, like Israel in the 2010s, the monopolising subgroup governs the country and ‘has the power to oblige the definition of patriotism, to legalise and even enforce it’ (Bar-Tal, 1997: 250).

3.2 The Battle Against Democratic Institutions

Having introduced the main social division advanced by the populist triad, we now proceed to discuss the democratic institutions it frequently targets through the use of rhetoric and policymaking: the media, civil society and the judiciary. Thus, we demonstrate the prevalence of populist logic among the Israeli right as well as the ways in which this logic is manifested in the country’s day-to-day politics. As shown below, all three parties which the triad consists of participated in the decade-long campaign. Their motives, however, were not identical. For some right-wing politicians, especially those allied with the settler movement, the campaign served long-term ideological objectives. For others, mainly Likud politicians seeking to discredit the corruption allegations levelled against Netanyahu, the campaign served more immediate political goals. Either way, while the Israeli right’s sway towards populism certainly predated Netanyahu’s corruption scandals, it is clear that their eruption greatly intensified the existing trend.

(a) The Media

Journalism as a democratic institution has been the target of attacks by members of the triad for at least two decades. In his first term as prime minister in the 1990s Netanyahu frequently criticised the media for ‘misrepresenting reality’ and having a bias against him and his voters (Peri, 2004). The settler movement has accused journalists for being disconnected from ‘the Israeli people’ and ‘Jewish values’ since the 1980s (Sprinzak, 1989: 182-183). And Avigdor Lieberman, the leader of Israel Our Home, has occasionally attacked journalists as part of his years-long campaign against ‘the elite’, aimed at portraying himself as the no-nonsense strongman of Israeli politics (Filc and Lebel, 2005: 91-93).

That said, populist anti-media rhetoric has escalated in Israel over the past decade – both as a means to mobilise voters and, in the Likud’s case, to protect Netanyahu from negative coverage related to corruption scandals he has been involved in. To give a typical example, at a political rally in 2017 Netanyahu (2017a) told a crowd of supporters: ‘Both the left and the media – it’s the same thing, you know – are enlisting now in an obsessive, unprecedented witch hunt against me and my family, with the goal of carrying out a government coup... The thought police in the media are working full time’. At another political gathering a few months later, Netanyahu (2017b) addressed his supporters, saying: ‘Look at how they [the media] report about us [Likud]... They practically look down on the people’s choice – they look down on the democracy in whose name they claim to speak’.

These two statements epitomise the logic of populism. They are anti-elitist in their conspiratorial depiction of the media as morally corrupt and politically motivated; and they are anti-pluralist in their implicit assertion that Netanyahu’s party – and, more crucially, he himself – are the pure and sole representatives of ‘the people’. The same populist message was reiterated by a Likud-funded billboard put up in Tel-Aviv in 2019, which displayed portraits of four leading Israeli journalists who regularly report on the prime minister’s corruption cases. The slogan beside them read: ‘They won’t decide’, referring to the upcoming election (Times of Israel, 2019).

A similar logic underpins many public statements made by members of The Jewish Home party. In 2017 Channel 10 revealed that The Jewish Home’s chairman, Naftali Bennett – Israel’s Minister of Education – funnelled public funds to educational NGOs affiliated with his party. Responding to these allegations, Bennett wrote on Facebook: ‘Channel 10 leads an all-out war against every Jewish and Zionist characteristic in the country... We, the public, are stronger than they are’. Bennett also falsely claimed that the exposé was partly funded by ‘the German government’ (Arutz Sheva, 2017) – a historically charged accusation whose sinister subtext is clear to Israeli ears. This statement, too, embodies the ideology of populism. Bennett – whose party got less than 7 percent of the vote in the 2015 election – speaks here as the representative of a homogenous Jewish people, under attack from an unpatriotic media which secretly collaborates with malignant foreign powers.

Alongside the triad’s rhetorical attacks on the credibility of journalists, the 2010s also saw a systematic effort on its part to remould the media market through legislation and regulatory

changes (Rogenhofer and Panievsky, 2020). In 2016 the government shut down the nation's public broadcasting company, creating a new public corporation in its place which was meant to be more prone to political influence (Ravid, 2016). A year later, the government severely weakened the financial standing of the country's most popular television channel by forcing it to split in two and brought another major news channel to the brink of financial ruin by exerting pressure on its foreign investors. In 2018 the government relieved an obscure 'Jewish heritage' television channel of its regulatory duties and turned it into a partisan media outlet, which regularly echoes Netanyahu's messaging and pours scorn on his critics (Perliger and Pedahzur, 2018; Tucker, 2018). Netanyahu also filled the public broadcasting service with his loyalists, called for a public boycott of a critical news channel (Stern, 2019), and founded a Facebook-based alternative 'news platform' called Likud TV under the slogan 'Get rid of the fake from the news' (Netanyahu, 2019). Importantly, the corruption charges against Netanyahu are closely related to these efforts. According to the indictment against him, Netanyahu offered and gave lucrative official favours to media magnates in exchange for favourable news coverage (Halbfinger, 2019).

(b) Civil Society

Another hallmark of Israeli politics in the 2010s was a public and legislative campaign aimed at limiting the freedoms and undermining the legitimacy of civil society actors affiliated with the left. The process began in 2010, amidst growing international criticism of Israel's policies in the occupied Palestinian territories (Lamarche, 2019). A coalition of right-wing groups launched a public campaign against human rights organisations, accusing them of 'collaborating with Israel's enemies' and 'hating the IDF [Israel Defence Force]'. Demonstrations, espionage operations and newspaper ads were soon complemented by a barrage of legislation. In 2011 Israel Our Home tried to set up an official parliamentary committee to investigate the 'anti-Israeli' activities of these NGOs. Lieberman, the party's chairman and Israel's Foreign Secretary at the time, denounced human rights NGOs as 'nothing but terrorist collaborators' whose goal is 'to weaken the Israel Defence Forces and its resolve to protect Israel's citizens' (Somfalvi, 2011). The triad consistently portrayed these organisations as instruments in the hands of foreign governments, owing to the fact that some of them receive financial support from such bodies as the European Union and the United Nations. The underlying message was clear: actors critical of government policy should be regarded as alien forces plotting to subvert the will of the people.

In 2011, Lieberman's proposal to establish the aforementioned investigatory committee was voted down, publicly opposed by Prime Minister Netanyahu. Tellingly, towards the end of the decade it was Netanyahu himself who suggested to revive the initiative (Ravid, Levinson and Lis, 2017). In the intervening years, the Likud has changed its stance, adopting a markedly populist position vis-à-vis civil society. The following example illustrates this transition. Shortly before the 2015 elections, the Likud held a dramatic press conference. 'We are here to

expose... how the left is trying to steal the elections’, announced the party’s spokesperson on live television. ‘Millions of dollars from the United States and Europe are funding a political campaign whose sole purpose is to topple Netanyahu and the Likud’. A few days earlier the party filed a petition to the District Court, claiming that a number of Israeli left-wing organisations have been conducting ‘indirect elections propaganda’ against Netanyahu in breach of campaign laws. Two weeks later the Likud withdrew its petition, conceding it had no ‘smoking gun’ to prove the accusations (Magnezi and Azulay, 2015).

Bellicose rhetoric was accompanied by legislative efforts. In 2016 the Knesset passed the so-called ‘NGO Law’. This government-backed bill requires NGOs that receive more than half of their funding from foreign entities to declare so on their advertising, letters and reports. According to the nonpartisan Israel Democracy Institute (2015), the law seeks ‘to delegitimise civil society organisations... to mark them with a scarlet letter, and... to attack them and reduce their freedom to act’. In 2018 the Knesset passed a bill, initiated by The Jewish Home, that empowers the Minister of Education to prevent organisations which are critical of Israel’s policies in the occupied territories from meeting with students (Lis, 2018). That same year, the government also endorsed the ‘Loyalty in Culture’ bill, which would grant the Minister of Culture the authority to withdraw public funding from cultural institutions deemed ‘subversive’ (Azulay, Yanovski and Boker, 2016). While only some of the populist legislation presented by Netanyahu’s governments actually made it into law, the greatest impact it had was probably discursive. Each bill reinforced the image of a threatened Israeli society, divided into two dichotomous parts: one loyal and local, the other seditious and foreign.

(c) The Judiciary

An additional institution frequently targeted by the populist triad is the Supreme Court. In this case, too, the populist critique has its roots in earlier periods, but was mainstreamed only in the 2010s. That is due to a combination of two factors. The first is the anti-liberal stance of the settler movement, which has long viewed the courts – and especially their protection of human rights – as an obstacle to the territorial expansion of Israel in the West Bank. The second factor, less ideological and more opportunistic, is the corruption charges levelled first against Lieberman and then, a few years later, against Netanyahu.

According to the triad’s argument, the Supreme Court is the last surviving bastion of the lefty elite which – having lost its political power at the end of the 1970s – uses judicial means to fulfil ideological goals it can no longer achieve electorally (Harel and Kolt, 2020). This narrative has been articulated by Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked (The New Right) in 2019: ‘Nearly 40 years ago, a coup has taken place in Israel. It was a silent coup... no hostages were taken. Or, to be exact, only one hostage was taken: the Israeli public... Israelis kept voting, but their vote became almost meaningless. The people became irrelevant... They became captives of the Supreme Court and as a result lost faith in it’ (Admaker, 2019). Shaked’s successor as Minister of Justice, Amir Ohana (Likud), expressed a similar hyper-majoritarian conception of

democracy, saying: ‘The public is the sovereign, and the public takes decisions through its elected representatives. This is what democracy means. If the Supreme Court is allowed to intervene in everything, why hold elections at all? Let’s vote for judges instead’ (Haaretz, 2019). A statement by MK Oded Forer, a leading figure in Israel Our Home, echoes the same ideas and sentiments: ‘The Supreme Court’s decision today proves that it is disconnected from the people... The Court rendered Israeli law meaningless and determined that the only thing that matters is the radical worldview of the far-left’ (Arutz Sheva, 2019).

To clarify, the argument propagated by Israeli populists extends beyond the debate, long established in liberal democracies, between judicial activism and judicial restraint. The policies promoted by the triad during the 2010s were aimed not only at putting an end to the judicial review of legislation – an objective in keeping with the theory of judicial restraint – but at the complete constitutional subjection of the judiciary to the executive. Since 2016 members of the triad have been pushing a bill that would eliminate the Supreme Court’s capacity to overturn any administrative action taken by the government. Another triad-backed law, advanced since 2018, seeks to politicise the position of ministerial legal counsels, who in recent years have prevented triad ministers from engaging in abuses of power. These laws, and others in a similar vein, have been framed by their proponents, in a characteristically populist fashion, as part of the government’s ‘democratic revolution’ (Shaked, 2020).

The conflict between the Likud and the judiciary reached a boiling point in 2019, when the Supreme Court heard a number of petitions seeking to disqualify Netanyahu from serving as prime minister, due to the corruption charges against him. A few days before the hearing, Minister of Tourism Yariv Levin (Likud) likened the Court’s judges to an Iranian ‘council of Islamist fanatics’ who ‘decide, instead of the people, who may run in supposedly democratic elections’. Levin added: ‘In a democracy, the people determine who is the leader – not the court... They [the judges] are not superior to us! They are not superior to the people!’ (Levin, 2019).

In sum, as demonstrated in this section, during the 2010s populist rhetoric and policymaking have become prevalent among three major right-wing parties represented in Israel’s legislature. Like other populists around the world, they too were engaged in an ongoing campaign against democratic institutions, even when in power. In the Israeli case, the narrative that undergirded these efforts was one which excludes the Jewish left from the ‘real people’.

4. It’s National Security, Stupid: Israeli Populism’s Political Content

So far, we have underscored the similarities between Israeli populists and their counterparts abroad. This section explains what distinguishes Israeli populism from many of its foreign equivalents – namely, its political content. As mentioned above, we argue that while populism typically feeds on cultural and economic anxieties, its Israeli variant is security-driven, as it mainly exploits fears related to national security.

Essentially, security-driven populism is different than other types of populism not in the securitisation it entails – all populists present their enemies as existential threats – but in the kind of anxieties it utilises. Like other types of populists, security-driven populists conduct securitisation, too – they inflate, dramatise and simplify threats – but they do so in the context of national security. In other words, instead of securitising cultural or economic concerns, they securitise national security itself (see table 1 for definitions).⁵

Table 1: Conceptual Intersections Between Populism and Security

Securitisation	Populist Securitisation	Security-Driven Populism
A discursive technique used for the reframing of a certain subject – economic, cultural or national security-related – as an existential threat	A discursive technique used for the securitisation of the populist division between the “real people” and “the elite” or an enemy group	A content-based category of populism which mostly feeds on anxieties and imagery related to national security

To be sure, the content-based distinction between different variants of populism – cultural, economic or security-driven – is not dichotomous but one of degree. Non-Israeli populists do sometimes refer to anxieties related to national security – e.g. following the September 11 attacks or the emergence of ISIS (Lazaridis and Wadia, 2015). Similarly, Israeli populists occasionally utilise cultural grievances. This mostly happens in relation to the principal cultural conflict in Israeli society: the longstanding tension between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews (Hever, Shenhav and Motzafi-Haller, 2003; Shohat, 1999).

Still, overall, this cultural tension cannot be regarded as the defining feature of present-day Israeli populism. First, it has been present in Israeli politics since the 1970s and, if anything, has only subsided with time. Second, it is much less prevalent than security-related rhetoric in the triad’s populist discourse. The fundamental characteristic of contemporary Israeli populism is the security-based exclusion not of Ashkenazi Jews but of the Jewish left.

(a) The Roots of Israel’s Security-Driven Populism

Israeli politics has been dominated by existential security concerns for decades (Del Sarto, 2017). For that reason, even before the recent populist turn, Israel was described by analysts as a ‘deeply securitised’ country (Abulof, 2014). A political system is characterised by ‘deep securitisation’ when ‘threats are explicitly framed as probable and protracted, endangering the very existence of the nation/state, and that discourse is incessantly and widely employed by the society’ (Abulof, 2014: 397). Abulof attributes this state of affairs to the ‘Zionist “culture of threat”’, writing that

⁵ Israel is used here as a paradigmatic case of security-driven populism, but other case studies could benefit from the application of this concept. For example, Turkey, where Recep Tayyip Erdoğan often exploits anxieties arising from the conflict with the Kurdish separatist movement (Aytaç and Elçi, 2018; Rogenhofer, 2018) and India, where Narendra Modi frequently uses anxieties related to the conflict with Pakistan and the tensions between Hindus and Muslims within India (Gudavarthy, 2018; Kinnvall, 2019).

‘Elite and public alike have framed military threats [...] terror, and more recently the Iranian nuclear project as endangering the very existence of Israel’ (Abulof, 2014: 404).

The predisposition of Israeli society to security-related incitement can be explained by the extraordinary circumstances of its establishment. ‘By the time of its inception’, notes Pedahzur (2012: 11), ‘the very foundations of the nation state – such as shared recent memories, common language and culture – were still lacking, even within the dominant Jewish community’. What the Jews who immigrated to Israel did have in common, nevertheless, was that ‘they were all victims of anti-Semitism, discrimination, persecutions and pogroms’ of which ‘the holocaust was [...] the peak’. This traumatic situation engendered ‘a nation constantly on edge, which continues to suffer from a continuous sense of collective anxiety and a highly developed survival instinct’.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that national security is the issue that has the greatest effect over Israelis’ voting preferences (Molad, 2020). Although the reality of living under a perpetual security threat impacts the whole population, research has shown that the corrosive effect it has over ‘democratic values’ is more substantial with regard to Israelis who identify with the right (Peffley et al, 2015). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that supporters of Israeli populist parties are not economically motivated: the strongest predictors for populist support were found to be agreement with populist ideas, followed by one’s perception of the security threats facing the nation (Hirsch-Hoefler et al, 2010). Therefore, when Israeli populists utilise anxieties related to national security, they build on what is essentially the defining conflict in the country’s politics.

(b) The Securitisation of the Triad’s Enemies

To understand what security-driven populism looks like in practice, consider the following statements, each targeting one or more of the triad’s enemies introduced above. Starting with the media, in 2016 the UN Security Council passed a resolution against the settlements, which was considered a severe diplomatic failure on Netanyahu’s part. Shortly after the vote, Netanyahu wrote on Facebook: ‘Lefty politicians and TV pundits rejoiced in the UN’s anti-Israeli resolution, almost as much as the Palestinian Authority and the Hamas. Of all things, some of them focused on attacking... the Israeli government! It is easy to understand why the wise Israeli public refuses to vote for them’ (Netanyahu, 2016). Notice that Netanyahu not only draws the typically populist distinction between a malicious elite and a pure people, but also securitises the issue by building on national security-related anxieties: he equates critical voices within Israel to the country’s external enemies and reframes political dissent as a dangerous aggression.

As for civil society, in 2017 Miri Regev (Likud) said: ‘We [the Jews] have survived physical and cultural extermination attempts by Baalam, Pharaoh, Babel, Greece, Rome and Germany. No European fund, sophisticated as it may be, will succeed in weakening Israeli society’ (Regev, 2017). In this statement, Regev responds to an unflattering report published by an Israeli left-leaning think-tank. Instead of addressing the evidence presented in the document, Regev claims

that the institution is a proxy for some anonymous ‘European fund’, which she seamlessly weaves into the long history of Jewish persecution – from the biblical villain Baalam to the horrors of Nazi Germany. Effectively, Regev depicts a civil society actor as not merely criticising the government’s policies, but as actually posing serious danger to the survival of Israeli society: she securitises political disagreement and draws on historical security-related traumas to do so.

The same discursive technique is often applied to the judiciary. Members of the triad have accused the Supreme Court of undermining Israel’s national security on account of its ‘excessive’ emphasis on human rights. In 2019 Naftali Bennett (The New Right) claimed that Israeli soldiers are forced to ‘think five times before shooting a terrorist, because they’re worried about being put on trial’, adding: ‘We have to free the IDF from the Supreme Court, so it can go back to defeating Hamas’. That year, The New Right’s election slogan read: ‘Shaked [a prominent leader of the party] will rule over the Supreme Court, Bennett will defeat Hamas’, thereby coupling the country’s highest court with an enemy terrorist organisation (Schneider, 2019).

Lastly, security-related anxieties underlie the triad’s framing of its main political rival – the Jewish left. In fact, the delegitimisation of the left was closely associated with the discourse of national security. The conclusion populists asked voters to draw from the depiction of the left as anti-Jewish, anti-Zionist and anti-Israeli was that it simply cannot protect Israelis from the dangers lurking around them. The populist campaign against the left managed to rebrand a whole political camp – which, until recently, had been closely identified with Israel’s security establishment – as a treacherous group that endangers the existence of the state. A case in point is a 2015 Likud campaign ad which warned voters that the left will ‘lead ISIS into Jerusalem’ (Lis, 2015b).

Israeli populists also tend to equate the Jewish left with Israeli Arab parties. They do so to portray the left as anti-Zionist (the Arab parties’ long-held ideological position) and as terrorist supporters (based on the common populist claim whereby all Arabs support anti-Israeli terrorism). A representative example is a 2019 Likud campaign slogan which read: ‘It is either Bibi or Tibi’ – the first being Netanyahu’s nickname, the second a well-known Arab politician. Ahmad Tibi, to be clear, was not the centre-left’s contender for prime minister – that was Benny Gantz, a retired IDF general. The Likud’s framing, however, presented the two as interchangeable, thereby creating an equation between the Jewish centre-left, the Arab parties and terrorist groups. A week prior to the September 2019 election, a message sent out by Netanyahu’s Facebook account revealed the security-related subtext of this technique even more clearly. The message urged Likud voters to come out to the polls, to prevent the formation of ‘a dangerous, weak, secular left-wing government’ whose Jewish leaders would rely on the support of Arab politicians ‘who want to destroy us all – women, children and men – and enable a nuclear Iran that would annihilate us’ (Azulay and Nachshoni, 2019).

Israeli populism, then, is not only relevant for the study of populist securitisation but also serves as a case study of security-driven populism – a political system in which the anxieties exploited by populists are mainly related to national security, as distinct from cultural or economic tensions.

(c) *Economic Crisis as Privilege, Immigration as Homecoming*

To fully characterise the political content of Israeli populism, one should consider not only those issues Israeli populists draw on, but also those that are curiously missing from their agenda. In that regard, the distinctiveness of Israeli populism is further underscored by the virtual absence of two themes favoured by populists abroad: the economy and immigration.

The impact of the 2007-2008 Financial Crisis on Israel's economy was very limited (Rosenberg, 2010). Nevertheless, in the past 35 years the country has undergone a neoliberal transformation and suffers today from many of the social-economic challenges faced by other OECD countries (Rosenhek and Shalev, 2014). One possible reason for the absence of economic issues from the triad's agenda might be Netanyahu himself. Over the years, Netanyahu branded himself as 'Mr Economy' – Israeli politics' foremost expert on economic issues – and is closely associated with the country's neoliberal transition. In fact, as Minister of Finance between 2003 and 2005 he personally oversaw many of the reforms which reshaped the country's economic order.

Sometimes, though, Netanyahu is forced to address economic grievances. On these occasions, he neutralises the issue by resorting to the discourse of national security. The first tactic he employs is to downplay the importance of economic problems, stressing that his 'real job' as prime minister is to guarantee the physical survival of Israelis. Faced with economic grievances, he reminds citizens that any protest regarding their quality of life is but a privilege. 'People are talking about the housing crisis and the high cost of living – but I don't forget *life itself*', said Netanyahu in 2015, coining one of his most famous catchphrases. 'The biggest challenge facing us as a state is the threat of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons' (Weissman, 2015).

The second tactic used by Netanyahu is the subordination of the economic sphere to the interests of national security. In these cases his message is that, contrary to perceived opinion, the economy is not about individual welfare – it is a collaborative enterprise for the survival of the Jewish people. In 2017 Netanyahu stated: 'For 20 years I've been doing everything in my power to build Israel's economy [...] I do all that so that we'll have the economic strength to develop our defensive and offensive military capacities and defend our country. *Without economic strength, we don't have military strength*' (Israel's State Control Committee, 2017). These two tactics could be defined as some kind of 'reverse securitisation': while populists abroad take economic issues and reframe them as existential threats, Netanyahu takes economic issues and uses the discursive frame of national security to trivialise and minimise them.

The historical particularity of Israel renders it somewhat resistant to the exploitation of another typical right-wing populist issue: immigration. Israel saw a massive wave of immigrants

following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The arrival of 1.6 million immigrants between 1989 and 2006 resulted in a massive population growth. On paper, this is the sort of seismic change that provides fertile ground for populist fomentation. In practice, Israel's idiosyncratic history and culture prevented this demographic transformation from becoming toxic. Under Israeli law, diaspora Jews are entitled to full Israeli citizenship and are constantly encouraged by the Israeli government to 'return' to their 'national home'. Thus, the Israeli conception of 'the people' made these newcomers unthreatening: the arrival of Jews to their historical motherland has been understood not as an intrusion but a homecoming. Furthermore, their arrival in Israel has been perceived as much-needed reinforcement in the Jewish population's battle against the 'Arab demographic threat', i.e. the fear that Arabs would become the majority group in the country (Smootha, 2008). In a sense, Jewish immigration to Israel is indeed securitised; crucially, though, it is not viewed as an existential threat but rather as its remedy.

Non-Jewish migration is a different story. Between 2006 and 2012, approximately 60,000 non-Jewish asylum seekers arrived in Israel from Africa, settling in some of the country's most disadvantaged areas. Members of the triad have exploited the issue by employing the rhetoric of populist securitisation. For example, in 2012 a Likud minister claimed migrants 'have conquered the country', while another Likud Member of Knesset stated they have 'founded an enemy state within Israel'. Netanyahu, on his part, referred to African migrants as 'infiltrators' – a term used in the 1950s to describe Palestinian terrorists who entered Israel, like asylum seekers today, through the Israeli-Egyptian border (Tsurkov, 2012: 5-11). Nevertheless, the migration debate and the number of non-Jewish migrants coming into Israel are much more limited than in Europe.

To sum up, Israel's idiosyncrasies do not only account for the prevalence of security-related issues in its particular variant of populism, but also for the near absence of immigration and the economy from Israeli populists' agenda.

5. Conclusion

Does 21st century right-wing populism thrive on cultural or rather on economic anxieties? This article shows that a third option should be included in the longstanding debate about the nature of the phenomenon: a populism based on tensions related to national security. Analysing Israeli politics between 2009 and 2019 using the ideational approach, this article introduced the concept of 'security-driven populism'. In so doing, it deepened our insight into the circumstances that give rise to populist politics and the social needs it satisfies. This concept could prove useful to scholars working on other national contexts, too – most obviously, to those studying other conflict-ridden countries. Two promising cases of this kind could be Modi's regime in India and Erdogan's regime in Turkey, both of which make frequent political use of security-related anxieties. More generally, the concept of 'security-driven populism' could be valuable to researchers studying populist regimes that – like Israel – do not fit neatly, for one reason or another, into the 'culture versus economy' debate, which has dominated the field for years.

The article also offered two novel observations about Israeli politics over the past decade. First, that Israeli populism has been mainstreamed to a remarkable degree, currently encompassing all three right-wing parties represented in the Knesset. This fact sets the Israeli case apart from many other examples of contemporary populism around the world, where the rise of populism is usually limited to one or two dominant political actors. The Israeli case is a rare instance, then, of a country whose right-wing bloc turned populist almost in its entirety. The second observation regarding Israeli politics is that the fundamental social division propagated by Israeli populists during the 2010s is one which excludes the Jewish left from ‘the real people’. The exclusion of the Jewish left – until recently, a mainstream in-group even in the eyes of its political rivals – has received little scholarly attention, despite being highly consequential for public life in Israel.

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