

No Politics Under God: Modelling Kahanist Infrastructure in Relation to Israeli Institutions

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Abstract: The rise of Israel's far-right Otzma Yehudit party has attracted significant media attention, but thus far has largely escaped the purview of political scholars. Representing the extremist "Kahanist" faction, Otzma has gone from a fringe party rejected by right-wing elites to an integral part of their coalition. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to examine not just Kahanism, but its interactions with Israeli institutions. I argue that, rather than strictly an ideology, "Kahanism" describes an infrastructure of individuals and civil society organization contiguous with its founder, Meir Kahane, himself. This infrastructure, consisting of embedded and overlapping networks, has challenged Israeli institutions in three ways: internally, by vying for control of elite-led parties; externally, by rejecting conventional political participation; and oppositionally, running as candidates in small protest parties. Each of these approaches, however, was unsuccessful. Instead, Kahanists gained legitimacy through a multi-stage mediation process using candidates separated from both Kahanists and right-wing elites by limited degrees. Such developments are, in turn, a product of institutional configurations.

In March of 2021, Israel's fourth election in two years resulted in the Otzma Yehudit party entering the Knesset with a single seat, under a joint list known as the Religious Zionist Party. Representing the extremist "Kahanist" faction, Otzma leveraged its position into media attention and political gains. After early polls for the 2022 elections indicated that a solo run would make the party the fourth largest in the Knesset, Otzma agreed to another joint run not to protect its own seats, but the RZP's. (Times of Israel 2022). As a result, the RZP's technical bloc emerged as the third-largest party in the Knesset, with Otzma head Itamar Ben-Gvir receiving a cabinet portfolio as Minister of National Security.

This development is surprising because the Kahanist faction had previously been rejected and, indeed, suppressed by right-wing elites. Kahanism is considered an anti-democratic ideology. Rabbi Meir Kahane, for whom the movement is named, was banned from running for office in 1988; his political party, Kach, was banned from the political arena in 1994 (Pedazhur 2012, 65-76). What, then, can explain elites' newfound willingness to embrace the Kahanist faction?

This study examines the methods by which Kahanists preserved pathways to legitimacy during periods of resistance and repression by the State. I argue that both the structure of Kahanism on the one hand as well as the structure of Israeli institutions on the other enabled the Kahanist movement to build legitimacy over time. Based on Magid's (2021) observation of "neo-Kahanism" in modern Israel, I conceptualize "Kahanism" as an infrastructure of individuals and civil society organizations contiguous with Kahane himself.

Previous scholarship has observed network characteristics among the Kahanist movement, the Settler movement, the religious Zionist sector, and State-based agencies (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde 2020; Katsman 2020; Pedazhur 2012). Here, I suggest that an overarching

infrastructure allowed Kahanists to maintain pathways to legitimacy through overlapping networks and tangential connections to Israeli institutions.

I argue, then, that Kahanist infrastructure challenged Israeli institutions in four ways, the first three of which were unsuccessful: internally, by vying for control of elite-led parties; externally, by rejecting conventional political participation in favor of vigilantism; and in opposition as candidates in small protest parties. In the fourth approach, however Kahanists gained legitimacy through a multi-stage mediation process made possible by candidates who were separated from both Kahanists *and* elites by limited degrees. This method ultimately proved the most successful over time.

In mirror image of Kahanist infrastructure, I further argue for a four-stage process by which Israeli institutions became more accommodating to Kahanists over time: fractionalization, referring to the splintering of the party system (cf. Yishai 2001); personalization, the process by which politics becomes centered on individuals rather than parties (Rahat and Shaefer 2007); negotiation, in which ambitious politicians bypass party apparatuses to boost their respective profiles (cf. Rosenthal 2016); and finally, legitimization, in which fringe parties bolster their legitimacy through electoral success (cf. Bischof and Wagner 2019).

This study offers a conceptual and theoretical framework for exploring the relationship between Kahanism and Israeli institutions. Using this framework, it explores how Kahanists maintained pathways to legitimacy during periods of elite repression. In doing so, this study bridges historical perspectives such as Magid (2021) and Kaye (2020) with social perspectives such as Peled and Herman Peled (2018) and Don-Yehiya (1994; 2014), as well as institutional perspectives including Rosenthal (2016), Rahat, Hazan, and Bloom (2016), and Shamir and Rahat (2022). Although previous studies have touched on Kahanist infrastructure, this is, to my

knowledge, the first to systematize this infrastructure and place it within the context of Israeli institutions. As such, it lays important groundwork for further analysis.

This study proceeds as follows: first, I will offer a definition of Kahanism as an infrastructure. Next, I will discuss Kahanism as it operated under the Knesset's two-party cartel of the 1980s. I will then detail the four approaches Kahanists have used to interact with Israeli institutions – external, internal, oppositional, and mediated. Finally, I will discuss the shifts in Israeli institutions which made such developments possible.

II. Defining Kahanism

In order to examine Kahanist infrastructure, it is first necessary to establish a definition of “Kahanism” that both encompasses the phenomenon as a whole but is also unique to the phenomenon itself. This is no easy task given that Kahanists have identified themselves with a variety of religious Zionist subcultures, while religious Zionist subcultures with similar policy views do not always identify with Kahanism.

Religious Zionism is distinct from other religious interests in Israel in that it maintains some hallmarks of institutionalization, but it is relatively integrated in Israeli society. It can be observed in a wide variety of subcultures, each with a different approach to religion-state relations (Peled and Herman Peled 2018; Soper and Fetzer 2018). These subcultures are often divided between “mamlachti,” or “statist,” and post-mamlachti, based on their acceptance of state legitimacy (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde (2020). Katsman (2020) goes as far as to suggest that religious Zionism is defined not by ideology, but by social connections.

Kahanism is difficult to place in these typologies. Based on the ideology of Rabbi Meir Kahane, it can be characterized as religious due to Kahane's belief in a halakhic state (Magid

2021; Pedahzur 2012); it can also be characterized as nationalist, or nativist, due to his belief in Israeli expansionism and Jewish superiority; (cf. Magid 2021, 75-77); as populist due to his anti-establishment rhetoric (cf. Pedahzur 2012, 67-70); and as anti-statist due to his followers' encouragement of vigilante activity (cf. Magid 2021, 183). Studies such as those by Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde (2020) and Soper and Fetzer (2018) discuss Kahanism as a post-mamlachti ideology within the context of the settlement movement.

Magid (2021) describes modern Israeli Kahanism as a “neo-Kahanism” that has endured due to an extensive “ideational infrastructure” in Israeli civil society (195). Critical to this evolution is the connection between Kahane and the Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook. Many existing studies explore the role of Kook's theology in religious Zionism (e.g. Don-Yehiya 2014; Hellinger 2008); Magid notes that Kook and Kahane's theological values contradicted each other's, and the direct link between the two was tenuous at best (147-150). Kook's ideology largely focused on mysticism and redemption; it viewed the State of Israel as a vehicle of messianic theology. Kahane's ideology, meanwhile, focused on practical action and viewed the legitimacy of the State of Israel as conditional (cf. Sandler 1996). Because of such differences, Kook's followers have historically received greater legitimacy by the State itself. Graduates from Kook's Mercaz HaRav yeshiva, for example, have run state-backed IDF preparatory schools such as Bnei David Eli (cf. Lebel 2015).

At the same time, a civil society linkage remains between the two camps. Kook endorsed Kahane's Kach party, and although it only ever held one seat in the Knesset, his party list included a number of graduates of Mercaz HaRav (cf. Don-Yehiya 1994, 278-280). Kahane's number two in the 1980 elections, for example, was Yisrael Ariel – a graduate of Mercaz HaRav who would go on to start the Machon HaMikdash, a movement for the creation of a “third

temple” on the Temple Mount. Many of the prominent figures labelled “Kahanist” due to their affiliations with Kahane’s civil society organizations also hailed from this yeshiva, such as former MK Michael Ben-Ari.

“Third temple” groups such as Machon HaMikdash have contributed to the alternative ideological structures that foster connections between Kahanist and Kookian circles. These groups advocate Jewish prayer or sovereignty on the Temple Mount. Although Kook himself disavowed this line of thought, many of his supporters saw the redemption of the Temple Mount as a prerequisite for the redemption of the Land of Israel. Because both the Israeli state as well as the traditional rabbinic authorities had rejected these attempts, supporters of a “Third Temple” often gravitated towards Kahane’s post-statist positions (cf. Inbari 2009, 101-105).

In effect, historic points of compatibility between the ideological camps – and the relative size and legitimacy of the Kookian camp – allow Kahanists to join larger umbrella organizations that bridge the gap between legitimacy and illegitimacy. In this regard, a definition of “Kahanism” that is derived from its institutional structure rather than its ideological tenets may be more apt. Viewed in this light, “Kahanism” refers not to a concrete ideology but rather a network of individuals and civil society organizations connected to Kahane himself. Kahanism does demonstrate certain consistent ideological hallmarks. These include the use of political violence, rejection of democracy, and support for the expulsion of non-Jews or segregation between Jews and non-Jews. But the relative flexibility of this ideology enables linkages between Kahanists and other civil society networks. Thus, the ideational infrastructure of “neo-Kahanism” exists largely as a series of *overlapping networks* with high levels of civil society linkage.

The network structure of Kahanism in-and-of-itself has been detailed previously in Pedahzur and Perliger (2009, 77). Other civil society networks including settler networks (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde 2020), organizations affiliated with Rav. Kook (cf. Asal, Nagar, and Rethemeyer 2014), and state-backed organizations such as military preparatory academies (Lebel 2015), have also been observed in some capacity. Here, I suggest that the overlap between network elements outside of the Kahanist sphere preserves civil society linkages in broader Israeli institutions. The phenomenon of “neo-Kahanism” exists in large part because the network structure of Kahanism allows it to exist in tandem with other ideologies and organizations. Thus, I suggest that although Kahane himself became the subject of a long-lasting taboo in Israeli politics, his followers retained pathways to legitimacy by embedding themselves in other ideological networks.

In this regard, the definition of “Kahanist” is flexible and can exist on a relatively large spectrum based on its proximity to Kahane’s original Kach party through contiguous membership or overlapping network structures. Some organizations were directly founded by members of Kach, such as Kahane Chai, Lehava, and Otzma Yehudit. Other groups were founded by both members of Kach as well as members of Kookian circles, such as Machon HaMikdash. Still others, such as No’ar HaGva’ot, are weakly institutionalized groups which often venerate or elevate Kahanists but are not directly engaged with organized Kahanist activity. Along this spectrum, many groups contain Kahanists in their ranks, but are not led by, or do not primarily consist of, Kahane’s followers.

I have illustrated this infrastructure in Fig. 1. In this illustration, groups are plotted along two axes: Kahanist-Kookian on one dimension, and legitimate-illegitimate on the other. Here, “Kahanist” and “Kookian” describe the degree to which groups in this umbrella align with one

rabbi's thought or the other, while "legitimacy" refers to the degree to which both the State of Israel and the group in question view each other as mutually legitimate. Groups' placement along these axes were determined by a short questionnaire, which is available in the appendix. To better examine the period of time during which the Kahanist movement faced frequent state repression, this graph observes the period beginning with Kahane's death in 1990 and ending with the Israeli Electoral Crisis – as I will discuss, a pivotal movement in the Kahanist search for legitimacy – in 2019. Among the groups illustrated in the graph, those with stronger Kahanist ties are largely concentrated at low levels of legitimacy, while those with stronger Kookan ties are more evenly distributed.

[Figure 1 here]

Fig. 1: Kahanist Ideational Infrastructure

As I will discuss, the legitimacy gap between those groups with strong Kahanist ties and those groups with strong Kookan ties in fact provided a means by which Kahanists could gain legitimacy over time. Because many groups across these networks – and broader settler and state-based networks – overlap in membership, there exist large civil society linkages between high-legitimacy groups and low-legitimacy groups. I have illustrated some civil society connections in Fig. 2, below. In this diagram, Kahanist organizations' interactions with Kookan groups, settler groups, and state-based groups are demonstrated. Groups were categorized by labels according to previous findings by Pedazhur and Perlinger (2009, 77), Pedazhur (2012, 216), and Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde (2020).

[Fig. 2 here]

Fig. 2: Kahanist Civil Society organizations and their connections to other networks

An exhaustive list of these groups and individuals is outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is important to first establish this conceptual framework in order to examine Kahanists' relationship with Israeli institutions. In effect, the ideational infrastructure of Kahanism has allowed the Kahanists to prime the public for a gradual rapprochement between their camp and Likud elites. This rapprochement occurred in stages, over the course of successive election cycles, through connections between several intermediaries. As I will discuss, each of these developments can be viewed in relation to developments in Israel's political institutions. Thus, Kahanists were able to preserve pathways to power even during periods of state resistance or even repression.

In the section that follows, I will discuss elite reactions to Kahane and his organizations at a time of concentrated power by elite parties. I will then detail Kahanist civil society organizations and how they have sought influence in Israeli society. I argue that these organizations and individuals can be characterized by external, internal, and oppositional challenges to elite hegemony. The groups that rejected state legitimacy under conditions of cartelization operate external to the political system, and in turn do not seek legitimacy from the state; such groups are typified by the No'ar HaGva'ot and Kahane Chai. Under conditions of fractionalization and personalization, however, some groups sought to commandeer elite parties themselves, acting as internal agents within elite parties; this is typified by Manhigut Yehudit, which was staffed largely by members of Kach despite its unaffiliated leader. Others attempted

to re-enter the political arena by running with small parties and joint lists, acting in opposition to the elite parties within the Knesset. This is typified by Otzma Yehudit.

None of these approaches, however, succeeded in securing political legitimacy. Rather, a fourth approach, a mediated approach, has proven the most successful. In this model, Kahanists have used middle-men through a shared institutional infrastructure to mediate between themselves and elite parties. Critical to this juncture was MK Bezalel Smotrich, a member of the Bayit Yehudi party and eventual leader of the Religious Zionist Party, or RZP. Although not directly affiliated with the Kahanist infrastructure himself, Smotrich's place in overlapping networks connected him with Kahanist infrastructure by limited degrees.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1: Kahanist approaches in relation to cartelization

III. Kahanism Under Cartelization

Kahane immigrated to Israel in the early 1970s, having established his militant activist aesthetic in the Vietnam-era United States (Magid 2021). His political positions captured public attention for their extremity, namely a proposal to strip all non-Jews of political rights and representation. Such proposals spoke to Kahane's strict interpretation of Halakha, Jewish religious law. Kahane defended these extreme stances as accurate reflections of Jewish values:

“The pity is – the tragedy is – that most Jews do not believe that Judaism is Divine and therefore do not accept it as the foundation of the state... But let two things be clearly known. One, western democracy is not Judaism and not the form of government that Judaism postulates... Secondly, should I through the democratic system gain power, it is totally acceptable for me, within that democratic system, to pass laws that would make people conform to Judaism.” (Kahane 1987, p. 265-266).

Thus, Kahane sought legitimacy within Israeli government despite refusing to recognize the legitimacy of that government. As such, his political ambitions proved difficult to materialize. During his first decade in Israel, Kahane failed to enter the Knesset at all. When he finally did, in 1984, he won only a single seat. Kahane contended with Israel's political system at the height of party cartelization. The one-party dominant state of the 1950s and 60s had given way to a two-party dominant system, in which small parties remained dependent on the left-wing Labor – or “Alignment” – and right-wing Likud to fold them into governing coalitions. These two parties, together, held 69 percent of seats in the Knesset in 1984; the remainder were split amongst some 13 other parties (e.g. Yishai 2001, 678-679). Together, Alignment and Likud formed a unity government with 7 of those parties.

In a letter addressed to his constituents Kahane proclaimed that “the leftists and moderates” in “this disgusting government of the Alignment and Likud... strive for a second Holocaust – a spiritual Holocaust – that will murder the souls of your precious children” and proposed a “holy war” of vigilante action (Kahane 1987, 78-79). Kahane's rhetoric caught the attention of the state's elite institutions; President Chaim Herzog's staff gathered extensive research on Kahane and wrote to the president that he “repudiates your name and sullies the honor of the nation” (Herzog, 1). As a result, the dominant parties frequently sought to limit Kahane's Knesset activities.

Despite the obstacles, Kahane engaged in “hyperactivism”, combining legislative activity with provocative publicity stunts (Pedahzur 2012, 70-75). By 1985, the 11th Knesset began the process of banning Kahane's participation entirely. The right-wing Likud party proved just as eager to excise Kahane as their left-wing counterparts; Minister of Justice Moshe Nisim, a

member of Likud, stressed both the importance of the move for Israeli democracy as well as the non-partisan nature of the bill:

“We are a democratic country, and anyone who comes to gnaw at our democracy from within will have no share and no possession in this house. This will be the law: that anyone who incites racism – which sullies the legacy of this country, as I have said – will have no share and no possession of this house... I wish to say to members of the Knesset that there is no basis for the fear that this will be used arbitrarily or for the purpose of partisanship or politics on the part of the elections committee” (Knesset Minutes 1985, 3361).

Kahane was banned from office in the following election. Two years later, he was assassinated. In 1994, when Baruch Goldstein, a member of the Jewish Defense League, carried out a retaliatory massacre of Palestinian worshippers at the Cave of the Patriarchs, Kach was labeled a terrorist organization and banned from the political arena entirely (Pedahzur 2012).

This era would prove a critical juncture for both Israeli institutions as well as the Kahanist movement. The unity government between Alignment and Likud collapsed in 1990; in the post-Oslo landscape, large parties shrank as small- and medium-sized parties grew. Although Israeli elites sought to counter fractionalization through various measures such as switching to direct elections or raising the electoral threshold, such attempts proved unsuccessful (cf. Rosenthal 2016). Left-wing parties suffered the most from this shift; spurred in large part by widespread disillusionment with the peace process, Israeli voters showed increasingly consistent support for right-wing coalitions. Demographic changes, including high birthrates among religious sectors as well as the Mizrahi community’s gradual eclipse of Israel’s Ashkenazi majority, also lent themselves to an increasingly formidable right-wing bloc. Religious and secular-nationalist interests began to converge as a stable and electable bloc relative to the increasingly unpopular secular-dove camp (Rahat, Hazan, and Ben-Nun Bloom 2016).

As the political landscape shifted, Kahanist infrastructure splintered in regard to the question of how best to approach Israeli institutions. In this regard, the first approach worth discussing is the “external” approach, which formed directly in response to the trend toward cartelization.

IV. External Approaches

The “external” approach is best typified by the anti-statist vigilantes in the West Bank such as the No’ar HaGva’ot, the “Hilltop Youth.” Featuring a loose institutional structure, this group consists of activists who eschew civil participation in favor of claiming unsettled land in the West Bank; these activists have clashed with both the IDF as well as the Palestinian population. Rather than Kahane’s original thought, these activists largely follow a Kookean worldview that incorporates Kahane’s penchant for violent action. During Kahane’s lifetime, Kahane himself expressed reticence towards overtly illegal activities in the State of Israel; but Kahane’s failure to climb the ranks of Israel’s formal institutions led many of his followers to follow a different path. As such, the loose band of the No’ar HaGva’ot are compatible with, and have absorbed, members of Kach and its affiliates that have grown disillusioned with the Israeli state (cf. +972 Magazine 2020). Among prominent figures in this group is Meir Ettinger, Kahane’s grandson (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde 2020, 80-82).

For this contingent, the conditionality of support for the state is such that it is not worth interacting with secular, democratic institutions at all. Ettinger, for example, has been repeatedly arrested for his suspected role in terrorist attacks on both Jewish and Palestinian targets; during one such arrest, he partook in a hunger strike as a symbol of resistance (Times of Israel 2016).

Following his release, Ettinger wrote an essay entitled “In Those Days There Was No King in the Land of Israel,” alluding to the ancient Judean monarchy:

“...the worldview that dominates the country today is the democratic view; as long as we do not dare to challenge these values and illustrate the contradiction between them and Judaism – we cannot defend the sanctity of Jerusalem and safeguard the livelihood of the People of Israel. This is our opportunity to say that we must live in a Jewish state, a state whose laws are Jewish, that will allow us – those of us who seek to control our instincts and refine their crude nature – to live a Jewish life” (Ettinger 2016).

The mystic aspects of Ettinger’s thought are reflected in his personal network; Ettinger studied at Od Yosef Chai Yeshiva, under the controversial Rav Yitzhak Ginsburg. Ginsburg’s thought considers certain religious laws – such as the prohibition against murder – abrogated when motivated by religious zeal (Inbari 2009, 133-145). His support for anarchic activity plays a crucial role in bridging the anti-statist No’ar HaGva’ot with both the conditional statism of Kahane and the unconditional statism of Kook. Both Kahane and Kook have featured heavily in Ginsburgh’s messianic prophecies:

“The three rectified representatives of each of these worldviews [religious, religious-Zionist, and secular Zionist] in the last generation are the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the great motivator for Mashiach; Rabbi Tzvi Yehudah Kook, who focused on the redemption and Rabbi Meir Kahane, who clarified and represented the Torah-based nationalist-realistic urgency of feeling the bitterness of the exile... these three personas must be included in one persona: the King Mashiach.” (Ginsburgh 2018).

Drawing on Kahane’s encouragement of violent action, as well as Kook’s style of mysticism, Ginsburg and his followers argue for activity outside the umbrella of state legitimacy. As a result, Ginsburg and his affiliated organizations can easily accommodate members of the Kahanist infrastructure. Ginsburg’s infamous *Baruch HaGever* pamphlet, defending Baruch Goldstein’s mass murder of Palestinians, was published in a volume edited by Michael Ben

Horin – both a member of Kach as well as Ariel’s Machon HaMikdash (Arutz Sheva 2021). They also overlap heavily with “Third Temple” circles. Od Yosef Chai, for example, organized activists on behalf of expanding Jewish sovereignty on the Temple Mount; these groups operated in the same ideological space as groups such as Ariel’s Temple Institute or the Establishment of the Temple (Inbari 2009, 156-159).

Groups such as No’ar HaGva’ot owe more to Kook’s mysticism than to Kahane’s ideology in many respects, but the connection to Kahane endures. When No’ar HaGva’ot were implicated in a series of anti-Arab vandalisms, the phrase “Kahane was right!” frequently appeared as a slogan (Ferber 2016). The blend of the two ideologies allows for a movement steeped in mysticism and anti-statism on the one hand, but practical – and potentially violent – action on the other (cf. Satherly 2014).

The groups under this umbrella operate differently from other groups within the Kahanist network. While connected to the broader Kahanist network, as well as its neo-Kahanist offshoots in Kookian yeshivot, No’ar HaGva’ot and other loosely-institutionalized vigilante groups can be seen as “external” in their approach to Israeli politics – operating on the outside both physically, in terms of their location, and politically, in terms of their involvement in the conventional political process. As such, it has made limited headway in the Israeli mainstream even as both Kookian institutions and settler movements have proliferated.

The post-statist approach can be seen as a direct response to the push toward cartelization in the pre-Oslo era. Despite the changing political landscape, these groups were disillusioned with the Israeli political establishment, and thus rejected its approval. The decision by some Kahanists to join these loose bands represents both an acceptance of institutional circumstances as well as a rejection of statist approaches to religious Zionism.

This post-statist ideology views state institutions as obdurate, but temporary. Beyond the No'ar HaGva'ot, this approach was also utilized by groups such as Kahane Chai, a splinter group of Kach, as well as Zu Artzeinu, an activist organization created in the wake of the Oslo Accords. Each of these groups proved willing to challenge the authority of the law and, initially, reject formal political participation as infeasible. With regard to No'ar HaGva'ot and Zu Artzeinu, these groups were able to easily accommodate Kahanists due to a convergence of their respective outlooks on the formal political arena. Over the following decades, however, these paths diverged. As the traditional elite monopoly on the Knesset fractured, members of Zu Artzeinu began to chart a new course toward political relevance.

V. Internal Approaches

The “internal” approach to Kahanism is best typified by Manhigut Yehudit. As with No'ar HaGva'ot, it is not a direct descendent of Kach, but rather a part of the broader settler network that attracted members of Kach due both to its ideological compatibility as well as its strategies in evading state repression. In the aftermath of the Gaza withdrawal, Manhigut Yehudit directly challenged Netanyahu for leadership of Likud (Pedahzur 2012). Ultimately, however, this move failed precisely because it was a direct challenge to an elite-led political party.

Manhigut Yehudit had its origins in Zu Artzeinu, a protest group created by settlers Moshe Feiglin and Shmuel Sackett. Zu Artzeinu initially followed the “external” approach; it included members of Kach and employed many of Kach's activist tactics in an attempt to prevent the Israeli government from returning any Israeli settlements to Palestinian hands.

Members of Zu Artzeinu repeatedly clashed with police and were often jailed for their efforts.¹ By the mid-1990s, however, a feeling developed amongst the leadership that they would have more success if they sought political legitimacy (Haklai 2007). Feiglin's subsequent political partners included both graduates of Mercaz HaRav as well as former members of Kach (Inbari 2012, 92-99; Magid 2021, 236 n115). Although Feiglin was personally unaffiliated with the movement, his involvement in the settler network had brought him into contact with Kach; the upper echelons of the group's leadership included Shmuel Sackett and Motti Karpel, Kach and Kahane Chai affiliates.

Initially, this contingent ran alongside small, hardline parties such as Moledet. Feiglin, however, joined Likud. He and his supporters branded themselves as Manhigut Yehudit, a faction within Likud seeking to promote religious Judaism alongside the secular-nationalist principles of right-wing elites (Haklai 2007). Following Israel's withdrawal from Gaza, Feiglin faced opposition and defections from some supporters due to his insistence on running for office as part of Likud. Feiglin also faced criticism from his supporters after refusing to run alongside Kahane disciple Baruch Marzel on a separate ticket (The Jerusalem Post 2006).

Ultimately, Feiglin's efforts fell short; he came in third in his first contest for Likud leadership, and second in his second. But by directly challenging Netanyahu, Feiglin invited organized elite response. Initially, Netanyahu used legal maneuvers to prevent Feiglin from entering the Knesset (Pedahzur 2012, 198-199). Although Feiglin's efforts would land him a spot as deputy speaker, Netanyahu's ability to block him from the upper echelons of party leadership led him to start his own party (Haaretz 2015). Feiglin's subsequent political runs have failed to pass the electoral threshold.

¹ One early supporter of Feiglin, Shmuel Sackett, has written extensively about his membership in Kahane's organizations. See "An Answer to Plaut from Feiglin's Kahanist."

For Kahanists that sought legitimacy in the political arena, the failure of cartelization in the party system offered new opportunities for representation; these avenues pushed many Kahanists away from the “external” model that had grown increasingly estranged from the Israeli mainstream. The “internal” model, however, proved too direct. Although the larger parties no longer exercised the same level of cartel power as they had previously, party elites still remained united in terms of protecting their leadership apparatus. Thus, for many Kahanists, a third approach – and “oppositional” approach – offered more autonomy.

VI. Oppositional Approaches

At the same time that the Kahanist network splintered into internal and external factions, other followers of Kahane sought a middle ground between the two approaches. These actors ran as outsider candidates for Knesset membership, creating or joining small parties that struggled to pass the electoral threshold, failed to receive membership in governing coalitions, and ultimately faced legal reprisal. Although members of this faction were unsuccessful as individuals, the infrastructure they created would ultimately serve as the foundation for the eventual legitimization of Otzma Yehudit.

Some actors affiliated with the Kahanist network initially joined Moledet, a far-right party whose candidates frequently espoused similar views to Kahane. A secular, political insider party with radical right views, Moledet struggled to obtain legitimacy either from Kahane’s followers or the mainstream political elite (cf. Pedahzur 2012, 76-77). Its leader, Rehavam Ze’evi, was assassinated in 2001(161). After the electoral threshold was raised, Moledet struggled to win seats in the Knesset and sought other parties with which to merge.²

² I specifically mention *Moledet* due to its subsequent mergers with other parties; Pedahzur includes an extensive overview of other radical right parties from the era.

Another party from the era was the Jewish National Front, helmed by Kahane's former disciple Baruch Marzel. In his initial attempts at running for office, Marzel failed to pass the electoral threshold; he also failed to convince other right-wing factions, such as Manhigut Yehudit, to join with the National Front (The Jerusalem Post, 2006).

In 2009, Michael Ben-Ari, a former Kach member and graduate of Mercaz HaRav, ran under the National Front banner as part of the Union of Right-Wing parties. Ben-Ari would be the first former member of Kach to successfully win a seat in the Knesset (Pedahzur 2012, 200). Given his low stature in the Knesset, he too failed to enter into the governing coalition and functioned as an opponent to both the right-wing government and the left-wing opposition. Ben-Ari also made a name for himself with frequent parliamentary activities. According to data collected from the Knesset archives, Ben-Ari's 146 motions for agenda registered 94th percentile among all MKs during the Eighteenth Knesset.³

Breaking with the union of right-wing parties, Ben-Ari and Marzel formed Otzma Le'Yisrael, later renamed Otzma Yehudit (Times of Israel 2012). After a single term in the Knesset, Ben-Ari, too, was banned by the Central Elections Committee. Otzma sought allies but given its status and continued opposition from Likud elites, it remained dormant in the public sphere.

The opposition party successors to Kach struggled to gain seats or allies in the Knesset and faced substantial legal opposition to their political ambitions. Like Kahane, these politicians

³ Motions for agenda allow any MK 15 minutes at the plenum and are coordinated among parties due to limitations placed on the number allowed for each individual faction (Akirav 2012). Unlike introducing private bills, the process is simple and allows a single MK to take credit. Motions are a low-cost move that can serve to garner publicity, claim credit for legislative activity, and raise a person's stature both within their party and constituents. Information on data collection can be found in Appendix 3.

sought to leverage their time in parliament into popular attention and, potentially, public legitimacy, but in each case the staunch opposition of elites and the inability to make inroads in the mainstream limited their ability to do so.

In this regard, Ben-Gvir's success is not due to a change in the movement's strategy but, as I will discuss, a change in the institutional environment. The electoral crisis allowed the Kahanist faction inroads to legitimization not because of a change in its tactics, but because of a change in the tactics of larger parties. This "mediated" approach begins not with the Kahanists themselves, but with an intermediary.

VII. Mediated Approaches

In 2013, the Bayit Yehudi party – a new party that had folded in several religious Zionist parties – became pivotal partners in Netanyahu's coalition. Two years later, the Haredi Shas party also took on this status. Under such conditions, commentators noted a *hadata*, or "religionization," process being driven by religious policy agendas (Peled and Herman Peled 2018). Among the most public-facing in the 2015 coalition was Bezalel Smotrich. Smotrich ranked eighth on the Bayit Yehudi list, the last to receive a seat in the Knesset; he subsequently acquired notoriety for his public persona and explicit views advocating for religious law and segregation between Jews and non-Jews (cf. Kaye 2020, p. 160).

Smotrich is often described as representing the Hardali subculture, the Haredi-nationalist camp primarily concentrated in West Bank settlements (e.g. Yediot Aharonot 2018). Although not a Kahanist himself, Smotrich overlapped with a number of Kahanists in terms of civil society participation; as a graduate of Mercaz HaRav, he participated in events alongside fellow alumni Ben-Ari and Yisrael Ariel, including "Third Temple" activist gatherings (The New Arab 2016).

As a settler activist, and former head of the Regavim organization, he maintained connections with a variety of settler groups (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde 2020, 79).

Like the Kahanists, Smotrich also used an activist-style approach to his position in the Knesset, offering frequent private member bills and motions for agenda. Smotrich's 103 motions in the 20th Knesset would rank him 88th percentile overall. This activism further garnered a reputation for commandeering policy direction. At the time, then-Labor Party Chairman Avi Gabbay quipped "Smotrich... is the real Prime Minister. He initiates, steers [the agenda] and decides. All of the extremist decisions start with him, and Bennett echoes them, and they eventually drag Netanyahu along because he's afraid of [losing their] base" (Gabbay 2018).

As Netanyahu's coalition became increasingly precarious, Smotrich also positioned himself in crucial policy discussions. Although a "Nation-State Law" strengthening the connection between Judaism and citizenship had long been discussed by both right and left-wing parties, Netanyahu began to lead new efforts to pass the law in order to shore up support. Smotrich participated in a Special Joint Committee drafting the first reading of the bill, which stated that "the State may allow a community, including followers of a single religion or members of a single nationality, to establish a separate communal settlement" (Knesset 2018). The Supreme Court struck this passage down, and Smotrich did not vote on subsequent revisions of the bill. Nevertheless, his involvement in the process attracted substantial criticism from the left, as summarized by former Meretz leader Tamar Zandberg:

"What we have here is a law agreed upon by some rotten pact between [Netanyahu] and Bennet, with Smotrich's seal of approval... In the 70s, I would expect a Basic Law to be accepted under a broad national consensus, for the public to come and have their say, with different factions representing different interests here in the Knesset to sign it... this evening we will vote on a Basic Law... conceived between the most nationalist, conservative, and extremist factions of the Knesset (Knesset Minutes 2018, 1123-1124).

Smotrich himself would complain that the law was “completely castrated” and had “no practical application” due to the stricken passages (Arutz Sheva 2018). Still, his attempts succeeded in boosting his profile. When Naftali Bennett departed Bayit Yehudi at the start of Israel’s Electoral Crisis, Smotrich jumped from the eighth spot on his party’s list to second. The development sparked a power struggle between himself and party leader Rafi Peretz (Times of Israel 2019a). Netanyahu subsequently offered Smotrich a position in his security cabinet; while Peretz also received an offer, he only served as a non-voting member (Jerusalem Post 2019b).

With Peretz’s profile diminishing, Smotrich became the head of the consolidated Religious Zionist Party. The RZP took on a number of parties that were not expected to pass the electoral threshold, including Otzma Yehudit (Times of Israel 2019b). As three previous leaders of Otzma had all been blocked from running, the effort to continue its political ambitions fell on the shoulders of their long-time lawyer, Itamar Ben-Gvir.

Ben-Gvir’s record included former membership in Kach youth groups, a prior conviction for racial incitement, and work as attorney for settlers facing terrorism charges. He also served as the official attorney for Lehava, an NGO under the leadership of Kahane disciple Bentzi Gopstein, which faced threats of criminalization along the lines of Kach. Despite Ben-Gvir’s history, Netanyahu personally approved the merger between Otzma and the RZP. As such, the Kahanist faction became an indispensable part of his efforts to remain in office (New York Times 2019). Ben-Gvir ultimately entered the Knesset seventh on the RZP list in 2021.

In effect, the mediated approach to obtaining legitimacy succeeded where the external, internal, and oppositional approaches each failed. Although an anti-Netanyahu coalition formed in 2021, Ben-Gvir was now positioned to build a public profile in the same vein as Smotrich.

The 24th Knesset only lasted from March 2021 to June 2022; during that time, Ben-Gvir submitted 30 motions for agenda – 94th percentile amongst MKs.

When the 2022 election cycle began, polls indicated that a solo run by Otzma Yehudit would rank as the second-highest right-wing party (HaHadashot¹² 2022; Reshet¹³ 2022). Fears that a Smotrich-led Religious Zionist Party would fail to cross the threshold without Ben-Gvir led to a Netanyahu-brokered agreement between the two (Times of Israel 2022). In November 2022, the Israeli Voice Index inquired whether RZP voters favored Smotrich or Ben-Gvir as party leader. Nearly 74 percent of respondents answered in favor of Ben-Gvir. Over a third of these respondents identified as either “secular” or “traditional non-religious.”⁴ In comparison, the Israel Democracy Index survey the previous year found no secular respondents among RZP voters, and only 15 percent identifying as traditional non-religious. The larger share of secular voters relative to previous RZP outings indicates that Otzma may have absorbed a segment of the Yamina party’s voters who were disillusioned by Naftali Bennett’s governance.

Like Smotrich, Ben-Gvir’s ability to rise through the Knesset ranks is significant: whereas Smotrich rose from the eighth-ranked member of his party list to the second in the next iteration, Ben-Gvir rose from the seventh to the second in just one year. With the recent elections, the Smotrich-Ben-Gvir-led RZP now occupies the third-largest spot in the Knesset and the second-largest in Netanyahu’s bloc – making it indispensable to any potential right-wing coalition.

Ben-Gvir’s newfound success marks a turning point for the Kahanist infrastructure. On the one hand, it has received institutional and social legitimacy. Kahane was unpopular in his lifetime, only ever occupying a single seat in the Knesset, and his followers failed to have a

⁴ Original data analysis by author; data from Hermann and Anabi (2022) and Hermann et al (2021).

substantial impact on Knesset policy. External, internal, and oppositional approaches to obtaining legitimacy each failed. Thus, the mediated approach to gaining legitimacy should have served as a watershed event for the ideational infrastructure that had long languished as a black sheep of Israeli politics.

[Table 2 here]

Table 2: Political trajectories of Smotrich and Ben-Gvir

At the same time, the mediated path to legitimacy has also garnered criticism from stalwart Kahanists. In an attempt to avoid the same fate as his predecessors, Ben-Gvir intentionally tempered rhetoric from both his campaign and his followers; he has repeatedly stated that he would not support transfer of Israeli-Arabs who accept state legitimacy. Such statements have earned him the pejorative moniker “a Kahanist for the whole family” by some commentators (e.g. Persico 2022). His mediated approach to obtaining legitimacy has also divided his allies; reports indicated that Gopstein, Marzal, and Ben-Ari have increasingly begun to criticize his “moderate” approach (Charedi10 2022).

At time of writing, this situation is ongoing. Here, I have endeavored to show the causal pathway both in Kahane’s civil society infrastructure as well as in Israeli institutions that led to this development over time. Below, I will summarize shifts in Israeli institutions that made this possible.

VIII. Israeli Institutions

In this study, I have offered a comprehensive overview of how Kahane's ideational infrastructure has interacted with Israeli institutions. In order for this sequence of events to occur, however, several changes in Israeli institutions were also necessary. Each of these approaches by the Kahanists can be compared to stages in Israeli institutional development, starting with the decline of party cartelization and leading up to the Electoral Crisis starting in 2019.

The Israeli Electoral Crisis had its roots in a long-standing governability crisis (cf. Rosenthal 2016). Israeli institutions are characterized by high fractionalization, frequent government turnover, and outsize influence given to pivotal coalition partners. At the same time, this development has occurred primarily within the last three decades. Until the late 1970s, the predecessors of Israel's modern-day Labor party enjoyed a one-party dominant system in which small parties remained dependent on it. From the late 1970s until the mid-1990s, the Likud and Labor – or Alignment – parties held sufficient public support so as to steer the agenda and act, in some capacity, as cartel parties (cf. Yishai 2001).

In a comparative context, the process of party institutionalization entails larger parties becoming entrenched at the expense of smaller parties. In this regard, elite-run parties must act as cartels to ensure that parties which may challenge the state's legitimacy must be kept weak or non-existent (cf. Ahmed 2014; Yishai 2001). The failure of cartelization in Israel has its roots in a number of social cleavages and policy issues that came to prominence during the First Intifada and subsequent flashpoint events of the 1990s (Lijphart, Bowman, and Hazan 1999).⁵ As a result, the Israeli Knesset is characterized by high fractionalization and personalization (Rahat and Kenig 2018; Rosenthal 2016). Israel's Effective Number of Parties, or ENP, is among the top 10

⁵ These issues primarily include the Oslo Accords, which galvanized civil society elements based on the prospect of land-for-peace negotiations, and the "Constitutional Revolution", which galvanized civil society elements due to anxieties over legal standing.

percent of global democracies. As shown in Fig. 3, attempts to address this situation by raising the electoral threshold have not reduced the ENP to earlier levels.⁶

[Fig. 3 here]

Fig. 3: Effective Number of Parties & Electoral Threshold

Because there are a large number of veto players in prospective coalitions, Israeli governments have relied on lowest common denominator issues to form stable electoral blocs. In the post-cartelization era, these blocs were defined by two major issue dimensions: religion and security. In the years since the start of the Electoral Crisis, however, they have been increasingly defined by support for Netanyahu's continued tenure; colloquially referred to as "Only Bibi" or "Just Not Bibi" lines (Lavi et. al. 2022; Rahat, Hazan, and Ben-Nun Bloom 2016).

The centrality of Netanyahu to the electorate is the most prominent example of Israel's highly personalized party system. Personalization refers to a "process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political group (i.e., political party) declines" (Rahat and Sheaffer 2007, 65). It occurs across state and non-state institutions, controlled and uncontrolled media, and behavior of both politicians and voters (Rahat and Kenig 2018, 118). Israel is considered one of the most personalized democracies in the world; it has been suggested that this is due to fractionalization weakening party discipline (Rosenthal 2016).

Fractionalization implies a large number of issue dimensions which must be navigated to create stable policy (Lijphart, Bowman, and Hazan 1999). The presence of multiple issue

⁶ Data here is derived from Lührmann et. al (2020) and Scartascini, Cruz, and Keefer (2020).

dimensions can lead to logrolling, the practice of providing policy trade-offs between coalition partners (Marchi & Laver 2020); while this practice can protect minorities from majorities, it can also have less predictable and potentially suboptimal effects (Bernhalz 1973). Logrolling can bolster any number of niche interest groups, particularly on issue dimensions of low salience to dominant groups (cf. Heller 2002). If party preferences are intransitive, meaning that actors cannot sort their preferences in a linear manner, this can lead to Condorcet cycling: a situation in which there can be no winner in either an electoral or policy context because there are too many alternative preferences to reach a majority consensus (cf. Arrow 1951; McKelvey 1976; Schofield 1978). This can apply to both coalition-building as well as policymaking.

Under conditions of personalization, logrolling moves from party-level policy proposals to individual interests that may include positional ambitions. As an example: in addition to promoting Smotrich to his security cabinet, Netanyahu's caretaker government also capitulated to a previous demand from former partner Naftali Bennett to make him Minister of Defense (e.g. Reuters 2019).

These personalist negotiations – particularly with regard to Bezalel Smotrich – paved the way for bypassing long-standing taboos in an effort to avoid Condorcet Cycling. In a comparative context, radical parties' entrance into parliaments can legitimize them in the eyes of voters (Bischof and Wagner 2019). Although Smotrich was not directly affiliated with any Kahanist groups, his Religious Zionist Party served as a conduit for Kahanists to enter the Knesset – allowing them to build legitimacy. As Smotrich's RZP has become the second-largest party in the right-wing coalition, Ben-Gvir has, in turn, moved from 7th on the party list to 2nd (Times of Israel 2022).

In summation, the sequential framework of Israeli institutions follows from the failure of party cartelization: fractionalization of the party system, personalization of the coalition-building process, negotiation with personalized actors, and legitimization of political taboos. It is in this context that the Kahanist ideational infrastructure has managed to build legitimacy both in regard to the prospective right-wing bloc as well as the general public. The interaction between Kahanist infrastructure and Israeli institutions, then, stems from a singular nodal point, as shown in Fig. 4:

[Fig. 4 about here]

Fig. 4: Conclusory Model, Infrastructure Versus Institutions

IX. Conclusion

In this study, I sought to highlight the means by which Kahanists preserved pathways to legitimacy during periods of state repression. I argued that Magid's (2021) conception of an "ideational infrastructure" bound together by "neo-Kahanist" actors enabled multiple avenues by which Kahanists could seek legitimacy in Israeli politics. Drawing on archival analysis and descriptive statistics, I further highlighted the degree to which Israeli institutions became more amenable to such approaches over time. I concluded that Kahanists successfully built legitimacy through a mediation process facilitated by sympathetic actors separated from both Kahanists and elites by limited degrees. Although this study stops short of any large-n quantitative analysis, it establishes a framework that can be used to further explore the relationship between Kahanism, Israeli institutions, and broader Israeli civil society. An overview of Kahanist institutional

infrastructure implies that further data collection may be fruitful. Although previous network analysis has been conducted of Kahanism in-and-of-itself, further data collection could potentially identify network clusters not only among Kahanists but also between Kahanists and more mainstream civil society organizations.

Such works can be used not only to analyze the Kahanist movement, but also to place the relationship between the movement and the State in a comparative context. The dual processes outlined above indicate the role of party institutionalization, electoral stability, and the personalization of politics as avenues that weakened state resistance over time. Writ large, party institutionalization is typically a part of the democratization process (cf. Ahmed 2014). Although democracies are often forged through pacts between elite sects, these facades can often collapse and lead to excess competition in their wake.

Israel, however, is something of a unique case. Elite-led consolidation of Israeli institutions has faltered in terms of both party institutionalization and the personalization of politics (Rahat and Shaefer 2007; Yishai 2001). Israeli institutions remain highly unstructured (Rosenthal 2016). As a result, key areas, such as the relationship between religion and state, or the meaning of democracy itself, remain malleable issue dimensions (cf. Talshir 2022)

Kahanism, as a phenomenon, speaks to this unusual aspect. Despite its anti-statist tendencies and resistance among Israel's political leadership, it has endured in Israeli civil society; and despite the taboo it represents, it has built legitimacy among the Israeli public over time. Rather than principally ideological in nature, it is a highly personalized movement that has perpetuated itself largely through interpersonal connections. Religious Zionism as a whole has followed similar patterns in terms of personalization and network structures (Katsman 2020;

Peled and Herman Peled 2019). Yet Kahanism, in part because of the taboo it represents, has gone underexplored in a modern Israeli context.

Ultimately, this study sought to provide conceptual insights into Kahanist civil society infrastructure and its relationship to Israeli institutions. A broader examination of how other religious Zionist groups fit into this paradigm is still necessary. In addition, a comparative examination of how religion, nationalism, and institutionalization shape the quality of democracy would provide key insight as to how the Israeli case compares to other prominent cases. As it concerns Israel itself, the rise of Kahanism forces scholars and commentators alike to address a subculture long dismissed as irrelevant. The case here illustrates that scholars must confront difficult subjects. Because taboos, as we have seen, are made to be broken.

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