

Instrumentalization of Judaism in the Zionist Political Discourse

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Abstract

Judaism, an ancient faith rooted in monotheism, contrasts sharply with Zionism, a political movement that emerged in late 19th century. While Zionism began as a response to anti-Semitism, it evolved into a nationalist movement with significant political and socio-economic implications. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948, influenced by the Zionist agenda, provoked regional tensions and disturbed global peace in the form of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The main purpose of this article is to analyse the manipulation of Judaism by Zionism for its own political and social discourse. Data will be interpreted through the critical lens of Rational Choice Theory (RCT), which is a useful methodological approach for understanding the intersection of politics, religion and geopolitical strategy. The results of the investigation show the intricate relationship between religion and politics and demonstrate that religious narratives can be manipulated to serve broader political agendas, thereby impacting regional and global peace. In short, the analysis emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between religious beliefs and political movements in order to understand contemporary conflicts and to reduce anti-religious sentiment.

Keywords: Zionism, Israel, Palestine, Islamophobia, Religious politicization, Conflict

Introduction

Religion is a powerful tool of politics (Cristi, 2006). In contemporary geopolitics, the convergence of religion and politics has become the center of attention worldwide in the way it influences conflicts, drives national policies and impacts international relations. As a belief system, religion has a divine dimension but has been co-opted by several political movements to justify their actions, to build national identities and to mobilize support for violent clashes (Wood, 1999). The primary role of this convergence is to legitimize the political power and authority by politicizing religious narratives and fueling religious sentiments. Political leaders use the religious sentiments of the common people to advance their

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influence and this usually happens in regions where religion plays a dominant cultural role. Such politicization of religion can be found in various on-going conflicts around the globe especially in the Israel-Palestine conflict where the political ideology of Zionism has manipulated Jewish religious sentiments to advance their interests (Yadgar & Hadad, 2021).

Religious narratives are also manipulated to achieve specific goals. This was done by ISIS during the rise of radical Islamism in the Middle East and it exemplifies how different Islamic principles can be manipulated to justify political power and governance (Hove, 2018). Such manipulation leads to the building of a global perception of the link between conflict and religion as is evident in rise of Islamophobia in the West. Furthermore, political figures can politicize religious figures who are seen to have the potential to inflame nationalistic feelings and religious sentiments in order to provoke peoples' emotions and justify violent and inhumane actions. For example, an Indian right-wing organization (RSS), which is known to be a paramilitary organization in India has promoted Hindu nationalism and Hindutva ideology and has promoted national policies by excluding other minorities and even by forcing the conversion of minorities to become Hindus (Saleem, 2021).

Furthermore, individuals or interest groups sometimes have a religious agenda with which they can influence foreign policies on the global stage. For example, the religious and notably Jewish lobby has influenced the US foreign policies towards the Middle East, supporting and justifying Israel's genocide of Palestinians (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2008). Another example is the terrorist organization ISIS, which manipulates the content of Islamic teachings and bases its operations on an extreme interpretation of Islam for political gains (Mahasneh, 2021).

Judaism is one of the oldest monotheistic religions, dating back more than 3,000 years to the covenant that God made with the Abraham, the Prophet who is revered as the Jewish people's patriarch (Berlin & Brettler, 2014). Judaism, with its roots in the ancient Near East, introduced the ground-breaking idea of a monotheistic religion, which promoted belief in a single, all-powerful God. This new belief was a major break from the polytheistic customs that were common in the surrounding areas. The Torah (or *Taurat*) served as a guide for Jewish law, ethics, and rituals and was essential to Judaism (Levenson, 1993).

Jewish identity has been shaped over the centuries by cultural customs, religious beliefs, and a common understanding of history. Important individuals include Prophet Moses and Prophet David who set up Jewish law and government. Important occasions such as the Exodus and the Babylonian Exile resulted in painful memories of humiliation and disgrace. Due to several conquests and exiles, the Jewish diaspora added to the richness of its cultural traditions by absorbing various

external influences while retaining a strong sense of identity. Because of its focus on community, law, and ethical monotheism, Judaism developed a rich cultural heritage that was able to move beyond its theological teaching and have a significant impact on ethical and philosophical ideas throughout the world (Eisen, 2011).

Zionism is a political movement that began in late 19th-century as a reaction to growing anti-Semitism in Europe where Jews were excluded from society, politics and the economy. Theodor Herzl was the father of modern Zionism and in his seminal work *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State), proposed that the creation of a national home was the only way for Jews to experience safety and self-determination (Herzl, 1896). Zionism was essentially a secular nationalist movement that sought a practical solution to the "Jewish question" in Europe in contrast to previous religious desires to return to the ancient land of Quds.

In the First Zionist Congress, Theodor Herzl and other Zionist leaders in 1897 stated that their aim was to establish a Jewish state. After that event, organized efforts to assist Jewish immigration to Palestine and garner support from other countries were launched. From its inception, Zionism was multifaceted, with some groups highlighting socialist principles and others concentrating on the religious or cultural aspects of Jewish identity (Laqueur, 2003). Throughout the 20th century, however, Zionism's political momentum grew and ultimately resulted in the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, which profoundly influenced Jewish identity and changed the geopolitical environment of the Middle East.

The aim of this research is to investigate how Zionism and active Zionist lobbies used Judaism as a political tool to further their interests, turning a religious tradition into a political instrument. It discusses the similarities between this kind of politicization and the emergence of Islamophobia, arguing that both involve the manipulation of Islam to incite fear and to achieve political objectives. Through an analysis of these realities, this article seeks to show that political parties and interest groups use religious language and identity to legitimize conflict and sustain narratives of fear. The ultimate purpose is to demonstrate how Judaism and Islam are misused by claiming that these religions are tied to terrorism.

It is important to distinguish between political movements on the one hand and religious convictions to promote religious tolerance and world peace on the other. In other words, religious beliefs offer moral and spiritual guidance with an emphasis on the welfare of the individual and the community. They provide a framework for strengthening community values, moral behavior, and personal faith. In contrast, however, political groups use religious rhetoric, symbols, and sentiments to further their own political, economic or territorial goals that are not always consistent with the original religious inspiration.

Political movements that use religion to further their own agendas run the risk of distorting traditional understanding of the religion, thereby inciting fear or

antagonism. For example, linking Judaism with Zionism or Islam with terrorism is a distortion of both these religions and exacerbates animosity between religious groups. Religious intolerance usually develops because individuals link specific religious organizations to particular political parties. On the contrary, religious tolerance increases by distinguishing a particular religion's spiritual teachings and certain political agendas that take advantage of those teachings. This distinction highlights the fact that political objectives rather than religious teachings are frequently the driving force behind war.

Zionism

As an eclectic movement, Zionism is made up of secular, religious, and socialist strands. While secular Zionists concentrated on giving Jews a contemporary national identity, religious Zionists saw spiritual value in highlighting Biblical promises as a foundation for the creation of a Jewish state (Laqueur, 2003). Zionism became popular in the early 20th century resulting in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which the British government endorsed the creation of a "national homeland for the Jewish people" in Palestine (Shlaim, 2000). The Holocaust's atrocities intensified international support for a Jewish state following World War II, leading to the establishment of Israel in 1948 (Gelvin, 2014).

After the formation of Israel in 1948, Zionism continued to play a role in shaping national policies. Jewish self-determination was the core of Zionism, and this inspired Jews in Israel to acquire more land and to increase Jewish immigration. Zionism's emphasis on territorial expansion and security resulted in policies that gave priority to military might and territorial claims, frequently at the expense of Palestinian Arabs, and shaped the ongoing conflict in the region. This conflict is one of the most complex and violent in contemporary times and is deeply rooted in historical grievances, territorial issues, and the interplay of religion and politics. The creation of the State of Israel heightened the tensions between both stakeholders and resulted in the displacement of Palestinians from their lands leaving the Middle Eastern region insecure. The displacement of Palestinians is also known as 'Nakba' or 'the Catastrophe' has led to a series of wars including the Arab-Israel War of 1948, the Six-Day war of 1967 and ongoing clashes (Morris, 2008).

The year 2023 marked another turn in the Israel-Palestine conflict with an advanced retaliation to Israel's attacks on Palestine. The world understands the event of October 2023 as a territorial matter between Israel and Hamas but, according to a former Israeli diplomat Elie Barnavi, something new is going on in Israel. The Israeli diplomat, who has also been ambassador to France, expressed concerns over the convergence of religion and politics in Israeli society (Gruyter, 2024). In his view, the aforesaid territorial conflict between Israel and Palestine is now a crystal-clear religious conflict.

Since Jerusalem is considered a holy city by both Muslims and Jews and is home to important religious sites like the Western Wall and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, religion plays a major role in maintaining the conflict. Religious feelings have been used by political movements on both sides to bolster support and provide justification for their positions. Palestinian movements that prioritize Islam and Arab identity in their struggle for self-determination oppose Zionism, which is based on the notion of a Jewish state (Said, 1979). Politics and religion often collide, making peace attempts difficult to achieve because of political aspirations, deeply held historical grievances, and the religious significance of the region.

The Rational Choice Model

The Rational Choice Model is used in this research to understand the convergence of religion and politics specifically in the Israel-Palestine conflict to study the influence of Zionism on Judaism. The theory is based on the idea that people and organizations behave in ways that maximize their gains and minimize their costs and provides a structured way to examine how political actors use religion to further social, political, and economic goals. In studying the manipulation of Judaism by Zionism and the similar phenomenon of Islamophobia, this model of rational choice can help us to understand how religious narratives are not only rooted purely in theological or spiritual motivations but can be strategically employed to achieve secular political goals, at its core, Rational Choice Theory (RCT) contends individuals or interest groups always take decisions based on rational calculation of costs and benefits (Satz & Ferejohn, 1994). Despite criticism for oversimplifying human behavior, the theory can still be useful to explain the strategic moves of political actors in delicate socio-political contexts.

This model can also help to explain Zionism, which emerged in the late 19th century as a political response to the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. Theodor Herzl and other early Zionist leaders made decisions based on a sober assessment of the socio-political environment of Europe. Herzl and others realized that violent anti-Semitism was becoming a great threat to the existence and safety of European Jews and that it was leading to incidents like the Dreyfus Affair and pogroms in Eastern Europe (Laqueur, 2003). Zionist leaders responded by advocating the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, where they hoped Jews may be able to live in security and enjoy the right to self-determination.

Zionist leaders rely on political interpretations of religious narratives while ignoring their spiritual message in order to mobilize a strong religious and cultural support for their political goals. From the perspective of the Rational Choice Model, these were not the primary motivators of the leaders of Zionism but the strategic tools used to legitimize their political gains. During World War 1, Zionism aligned itself with the colonial interests of Britain, which was a clear example of rational decision making by the Zionist leaders who had considered the costs and benefits for

Jews living in Europe (Cohen, 2014). Such rational decision making resulted in the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which became a foundational cause of the Israel-Palestine conflict. In 1948, during the changed global environment, David Ben Gurion along with other founding leaders calculated that the opportunity to establish an internationally recognized Jewish state justified the possible costs of armed struggle (Morris, 2008; Segev, 2019).

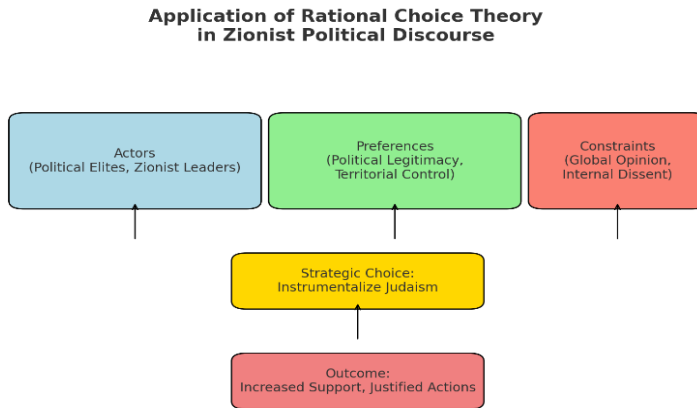
The Rational Choice Model can also be used to explain some of Israel's later policies, like the illegal settlements in the West Bank. From a rational choice perspective, these settlements are strategic moves intended to secure territorial control and create "facts on the ground" that would complicate the possibility of a future Palestinian state (Shlaim, 2000). The settlement policy is frequently justified by religious narratives of returning to Biblical lands. Thus, religious claims are employed to achieve political goals through logical means.

The phenomena of Islamophobia can also be explained by the rational choice model, especially with regard to the way political leaders and movements use religious identities to further their own objectives. Islamophobia has been deliberately utilized especially in Western societies as a justification for policies such as restrictive immigration rules that target Muslim communities and justify foreign interventions in countries where Muslims predominate. Within this framework, political actors, both state and non-state, rationally pursue their political objectives by generating and exploiting fear and mistrust of Islam in their communities.

The theoretical framework of Rational Choice Theory provides a clearer understanding of how religious arguments are rational tools frequently used to further political, economic, and societal goals by Zionism and in Islamophobia. Religious myths about the land of Israel were used in the Zionist movement to gain support for the establishment and expansion of the Israeli state even though political and territorial interests were the main driving forces behind these actions. Similarly, in the case of Islamophobia, political leaders often adopt policies such as military intervention, financial gain, or efforts to win the support of the electorate by using fear and negative stereotypes about Islam.

The Rational Choice Model offers a potent framework to examine the political exploitation of religion by Zionism and the politics of fear promoted by Islamophobia. This model is a paradigm that provides a more convincing understanding of the relationship between religion and politics by viewing religious narratives as logical tools that can be used by political actors to accomplish specific agendas. However, this paradigm demonstrates how important it is to differentiate between genuine religious narratives and the strategic use of religion in political movements, especially when it comes to disputes that are presented as religious narratives but are motivated by secular political objectives.

Figure 1: *Application of Rational Choice Theory in Zionist Political Discourse*



The co-option of Judaism

Zionism developed as an ideological movement based on religious feelings and the ancient Jewish desire to return to Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel where their ancestors once lived. This belief was expressed mostly in theoretical terms for many centuries and arose out of the Jewish religious scriptures that predicted Zion's restoration, which as frequently understood in terms of a messianic return. Early Zionist hopes were based on a kind of spiritual bond with the country but a change came about with the advent of political Zionism in the late 19th century. Inspired by contemporary socio-political conditions, especially the growth of anti-Semitism in Europe, Zionism evolved from a theological desire into a secular political movement aimed at establishing a Jewish state (Laqueur, 2003).

The co-option of Judaism by secular and occasionally even by radical groups can be described as the transition from purely religious aspirations to a nationalist political movement. Herzl himself was a secular Jew who saw Zionism as a workable response to rising anti-Semitism in Europe. His idea of a Jewish state was based more on the necessity of Jewish political stability and sovereignty than it was on a desire for religious resurgence. Extremist organizations like Irgun and Lehi, which used violent methods to create and enlarge the Jewish state, are examples of how Zionism has become radicalized. These organizations were

frequently motivated by territorial and nationalist goals rather than religious fervor (Morris, 2008).

Moreover, the British government supported the creation of a Zionist state in the Middle East as a calculated geopolitical move to protect its own interests (Cohen, 2014). In addition, aside from geopolitical agendas, certain groups within the Christian Zionist movement, especially in the US, believed that the creation of Israel would expedite the Second Coming of Christ and hence favoured the establishment of Israel. This is another example of how religious narratives were appropriated for larger political purposes (Mearsheimer, 2008; Spector, 2008). The spiritual longing to return to a Biblical homeland gave way to the secular, political aspirations of creating and sustaining a Jewish state as Zionism developed and was summed up in Theodor Herzl's "Der Judenstaat" (The Jewish State). In other words, Zionism's emphasis shifted from salvation understood as a theological goal to preserving political power and security. From a strategic standpoint, Israeli initiatives, such as the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, are motivated by the state's political and security concerns even if they are still sometimes defended by religious rhetoric (Shlaim, 2000; Pappé, 2006). Zionism's appropriation of Judaism serves as an example of the larger problem of how religious identities may be used for political purposes.

The Israel-Palestine conflict

One major factor contributing to the escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict has been Zionism's politicization of Judaism. Zionist leaders have frequently used religious narratives to defend their territorial aspirations, particularly when it comes to the idea of a "Greater Israel" that includes both the occupied Palestinian lands and the present State of Israel. Zionism has appropriated Jewish theology by presenting these territorial demands in religious terminology, using this theology a political instrument that furthers nationalist goals. Because of this deception, many people have come view the political actions of Zionism, such as the development of settlements and the uprooting of Palestinian communities, as the realization of heavenly promises rather than as contentious political choices. This religious justification for territorial expansion has fueled resentment and resistance among Palestinians, who perceive Zionist actions as both a colonial project and a religious encroachment on their homeland (Bunton, 2013).

The dehumanization of Judaism by Zionists has also played a role in Israeli society, especially among those who back the settlement project. These organizations see the occupation of the West Bank as a religious obligation, which perpetuates the conflict. They are motivated by religious nationalism, which they justify on religious grounds. But the settlement project has severely harmed the chances of a two-state solution by splintering Palestinian land and making it more difficult to form a cohesive Palestinian state. This dynamic has increased tensions on

the ground and resulted in violent cycles and has also undermined mutual confidence between the two sides (Gordon, 2008).

The use of Judaism by Zionist political actors has had a significant impact on geopolitics beyond the boundaries of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The struggle has created division in the Middle East at a regional level with Israel's neighbors, especially with the Arab states who view Zionist territorial expansion as real danger to stability in the whole region. Zionist claims to the territory based on religious considerations have fueled widespread feelings of injustice in Arab and Muslim nations, provoking the larger Arab-Israel conflict that has dominated Middle Eastern geopolitics for most of the 20th and 21st centuries. The idea that the struggle pits Jews against Muslims is not only geographical but also civilizational as a result of the Zionist leaders' employment of religious language and has thereby fueled broader sectarian tensions throughout the region (Khalidi, 2020).

Globally, the Zionist ideological control of Judaism has made diplomacy more difficult, especially in organizations like the United Nations. The conflict is typically framed as a zero-sum struggle between two religiously defined peoples, which has made it more difficult for other players to act as mediators. As a result, both parties now routinely view foreign attempts to resolve the dispute with distrust, especially when religious themes are used to support political points of view. Furthermore, the alignment of Zionism with certain Western powers, notably the United States, has added a layer of geopolitical complexity to the conflict. The American support for Israel, often framed in terms of shared Judaeo-Christian values, has been a cornerstone of the Israel-Palestine conflict, influencing the dynamics of global diplomacy and drawing criticism from many countries in the Global South (Smith, 2010).

A noteworthy geopolitical consequence of Zionism's appropriation of Judaism is the emergence of **Christian Zionism**, especially in the United States. Christian Zionists, who are frequently evangelical Christians, believe that biblical prophecy will be fulfilled by Israel's founding and growth. This religious-political partnership has shaped American foreign policy, resulting in the country's steadfast backing of Israel despite worldwide censure of Israeli practices. This melding of political and religious goals highlights the fact that Zionism has expanded its theological narrative to forge strong international alliances that have an impact on the larger geopolitical scene (Spector, 2008).

In addition to escalating the Israel-Palestine conflict, Zionism's appropriation of Judaism has had a substantial impact on world peace and stability. By fusing religious narratives with political goals, Zionism has developed a powerful tool for political manipulation that has exacerbated differences and stoked animosity both locally and internationally. The issue has become more difficult to resolve because of the employment of religious language to support territorial expansion, which

obstructs attempts at compromise and diplomacy. Furthermore, the wider geopolitical ramifications, which span from Middle Eastern instability to the alliance of superpowers with one side of the dispute, highlight the negative impact of the politicization of religion. In this context, it has become crucial for the international community to distinguish between religious beliefs and political agendas and to address the root causes of the conflict to reach a peaceful and just resolution (Klein, 2008).

Global Implications

Just as Zionism's co-option of Judaism has resulted in the linkage between Jewish identity and political Zionism, the politicization of Islam has resulted in the association of Islamic religious identity with radicalism. These examples both show how religious identities may be used as pawns in larger political games with far-reaching social and political ramifications. Religious narratives are twisted to support political objectives in both situations, misrepresenting the actual principles and teachings of the relevant faiths. This misrepresentation encourages bias and misunderstanding, creating a climate where religious groups are perceived as dangers rather than as essential components of the world's religious and cultural fabric (Said, 1981).

Zionists and certain Islamist groups have framed the conflict in a theological context, which has exacerbated tensions and given rise to an existential fight that goes beyond a simple geographical dispute (Gopin, 2002). The increase in radicalization within Islamist and Jewish Zionist movements is one of the most serious effects of religious politicization. Political movements provide an environment conducive to the growth of religious extremism when they invoke religion as a justification for their conduct. Zionist leaders' politicization of Judaism has led to the radicalization of parts of the settler movement in Israel, who now understand their mission to occupy Palestinian territories as a religious obligation. The conflict has become more entrenched as a result of this radicalization, which has increased violence and hardened Israeli policy against Palestinians (Gordon, 2008).

In a similar vein, the emergence of violent jihadist movements and individual radicalization have been facilitated by the politicization of Islam by extremist groups. These jihadist organizations present their political conflicts as a holy fight against atheists or Western powers, using religious scriptures and symbols to draw recruits and legitimize acts of terrorism. Significant security concerns and the expansion of counter-terrorism measures, which can unjustly target Muslim populations, have been considered necessary as a response to the global surge in jihadist extremism. This development has, in turn, further fueled Islamophobia and the marginalization of Muslims (Moghadam, 2011).

The peace and stability of the world are seriously threatened by this cycle of radicalization and marginalization. Political groups that continue to normalize

extremism and view violence as a justifiable method of achieving their goals foster a climate where extremism is accepted as the norm. Since the emergence of political groups driven by religious beliefs has resulted in heightened division and aggression, the issue of extremism now impacts not only the Middle East but also Europe, North America, and South Asia. International relations, international peace, and stability have all been significantly influenced by the politicization of religion, whether via Zionism or Islamist movements. However, no religion is fundamentally violent or associated with the kind of terrorism produced by the politicization of Islam and Judaism. Rather, the conditions that encourage extremism and war are the result of the political exploitation of these religions. In order to promote world peace, it is essential to distinguish between religious convictions and political movements. It is also crucial to tackle the underlying factors that lead to radicalization, which are frequently political grievances rather than religious doctrines.

Recommendations

- i. The international community should try to separate religious identity from political ambition. By promoting a clear distinction between the spiritual nature of Judaism and its political co-option by Zionism, progress will be made in the de-escalation of religious tensions in the Israel-Palestine conflict. This will foster an environment where religious beliefs are respected while political disputes are addressed through diplomatic channels.
- ii. To address the radicalization resulting from the politicization of religion, both Zionist and Islamist extremism must be confronted. This will include addressing the root causes of radicalization, such as grievances tied to political injustice, marginalization, and territorial disputes. Policies should focus on de-escalation, prevention of extremist violence, and fostering inclusive narratives that emphasize peace and coexistence.
- iii. Renewed international efforts should be made for a fair and lasting solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. The religious justifications for territorial expansion should be challenged diplomatically and international mediation should focus on political solutions rather than religious framing. This includes reinforcing the prospects for a two-state solution that respects the rights of both Israelis and Palestinians.
- iv. The involvement of global powers, especially through religious-political alliances such as Christian Zionism in the U.S., needs critical reassessment. Diplomatic efforts should aim at reducing the geopolitical influence of religious narratives and focus on fair and balanced mediation that seeks to de-escalate the conflict rather than reinforcing religious or ideological divisions.
- v. The politicization of the religions for various purposes is a global phenomenon. International bodies such as the United Nations and interfaith organizations should take initiatives that encourage the de-politicization of religion. This can

be achieved through educational programs, public campaigns, and diplomatic initiatives that promote the true essence of religion as a force of peace while rejecting the manipulation of religious identities for political or territorial gain. Such initiatives can help to build bridges and counteract narratives that describe religious communities as threats to security.

Conclusion

This article has shown how Zionism, initially rooted in spiritual sentiments, evolved into a political movement that appropriated Judaism for its nationalist and territorial objectives. Further research could explore how political actors in different contexts make use of religion to shape conflict narratives and to justify power structures. In conclusion, the promotion of peace and harmony can result only from the readiness to distinguish between religious belief and political agendas. Efforts to disentangle religion from political manipulation will result in more opportunities for dialogue, the reduction of extremism, and a more just and peaceful resolution to conflicts that are fueled by religious narratives motivated by political objectives.

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