

# The Impact of Covid-19 On State-Religion Relations: A Study On Israel And Iran

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**Abstract:** Regulations, measures and restrictions implemented by state authorities on public events and mass gatherings due to fear, anxiety, and panic caused by COVID-19 pandemic have made religious field more open to state intervention since the global pandemic started and religious practices underwent radical changes. Governments' public health measures concerning the places of mass worship and religious gatherings to stop the spread of the pandemic and the reactions of religious groups against their orders and imposed restrictions emerged as a new dimension of the debates on state-religion and state-individual relations. In this regard, the main purpose of the study is to discuss the new global religious trends that emerged with the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, which reshapes state-religion relations through the regulations and measure for containing the virus, in light of the experiences in different regions and religious traditions, and to analyze the relationship between the religion and the state in the Middle East, specifically the cases of Israel and Iran as religious character is dominant and orthodox religious groups play a significant role within the social and political structure in both countries.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Religious Trends, State- Religion Relationship, Israel, Iran.

**Özet:** COVID-19 küresel salgının yol açtığı korku, kaygı ve panik nedeniyle resmi otoritelerin kamuya açık programlara ve kitlesel buluşmalara yönelik uygulamaya koyduğu düzenlemeler, önlemler ve kısıtlamalar dini alanı küresel salgın başladığı andan itibaren devlet müdahalesine daha açık hale getirdi ve bu süreçte dini pratiklere dair radikal değişimler meydana geldi. Hükümetlerin virüsün yayılımının durdurmak için toplu ibadet mekânlarına ve dini buluşmalara dair aldığı sağlık önlemleri ve hayata geçirilen kısıtlamaların yanı sıra kimi dini grupların yetkililerin kararlarına ya da uygulanan kısıtlamalara verdiği tepkiler, devlet-din ve devlet-birey ilişkilerinde yeni bir tartışma boyutunun oluşmasına zemin hazırladı. Bu bağlamda, virüsü bitirmek için alınan önlem ve uygulanan kısıtlamaların din-devlet ilişkilerini yeniden şekillendirdiği savından hareketle çalışmanın temel amacı Covid-19 salgınıyla birlikte oluşan yeni küresel dini trendleri tartışmak ve bunun üzerinden farklı coğrafya ve dini geleneklerde yaşanan tecrübeyi de dikkate alarak Orta Doğu özellikle de dini karakterin baskın olduğu ve aşırı dini grupların siyasal ve toplumsal yapıda önemli rol oynadığı İsrail ve İran örneğinde din-devlet ilişkisinin yeni haldeki bağlamına dair tespitlerde bulunmaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** COVID-19 Salgını, Dini Trendler, Devlet- Din İlişkisi, İsrail, İran.

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## Introduction

A sense of panic was felt all over the world after the WHO declared the rapid spread of the coronavirus as a global pandemic. Severe restrictions on the movement of people were subsequently imposed around the world to contain the virus. These developments led to serious discussions on almost all aspects of the globalizing world and even a division between the pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 eras was proclaimed.

As the initial panic was replaced by a great sense of uncertainty and anxiety, a series of measures were put into effect by many governments to cancel or restrict public events. These strategies to combat the epidemic led to the problem of reshaping social behavior patterns to suit this process. Upon the healthcare officials' identification of the places of worship and mass gatherings as major sources for the spread of the coronavirus, many governments began to issue orders to close these places for group gatherings. For example, at the start of the pandemic, certain places of worship, such as a church in South Korea, a gathering of huge number of people at a mosque in Malaysia, and an Orthodox Jewish congregation in New York (Yee, 2020) were identified as sources of major outbreaks. Consequently, the regulations on places of mass worship were rapidly implemented within the framework of public interest.

Governments' public health measures concerning religion to stop the spread of the coronavirus and the reactions of religious groups against their orders emerged as a new dimension of the debates on state-religion and state-individual relations. How in which religious groups responded to the decisions of political authorities also took on a new form. While the moderate religious groups implemented the decisions calmly and respectfully, ultra-orthodox and conservative religious groups questioned the legitimacy of government measures and did not recognize them, and even opposed the security forces who were trying to enforce the new rules. All these developments show that the religious field has become more open to state intervention since the global pandemic started and religious practices underwent radical changes. The images of masked worshipers aligned according to the social distancing rules almost with a military discipline, and of sermons and prayers performed in empty churches, mosques and synagogues became the most important indicators of the changes in religious forms if not norms since the pandemic started.

It seems likely that different trends will emerge in the religious field and practices and religion-state-individual relations will be reshaped as a result of the new regulations introduced in response to fear, anxiety, and panic caused by

COVID-19. It is vital to examine how in this context, the state-society bonds will be re-shaped especially in countries where the orthodox groups play important role in society and politics. Thus, the main purpose of this article is to discuss the new global religious trends that emerged with the COVID-19 outbreak and in light of the experiences in different regions and religious traditions, to analyze the relationship between the religion, and the state in the Middle East, specifically the cases of Israel and Iran where ultra-orthodox and conservative groups have significant role in the political life and their rejectionist responses to the pandemic restrictions implemented by state authorities. Though it has not been long enough since the pandemic started to make accurate predictions about the direction of religion-state relations all over the world, we believe it is still possible to make some inferences based on observations of countries where the religious character and orthodox religious groups are predominant. It is precisely for this reason that Iran and Israel are chosen for analysis in this article. We believe that the responses to bans and restrictions in both countries provide an important roadmap in explaining and understanding the impact of COVID-19 on religion.

### **Different Religious Traditions: Extreme and Rational Responses**

The reactions of religious authorities, leaders, and communities to state directives can be classified as either extreme or rational. First, examples of the extreme type of response include the Catholic Church's resistance to halt public masses in Italy, the Greek Orthodox Church's insistence to continue the Holy Communion ritual where the congregants share the same spoon, thousands of Hindus' attending, some wearing masks, the Holi Festival in India despite Prime Minister Modi's warnings to avoid public gatherings (*Holi 2020 Celebrated with Face Masks*, 2020). Shia Muslims' protests at the closed religious shrines in Iran, the ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities' resistance against the government measures by clashing with the police in Israel. The live broadcast of a coronavirus expelling ritual performed by a televangelist in the United States or an Iranian cleric claiming to treat coronavirus patients with religious methods (who was subsequently taken into custody) constituted another aspect of these extreme responses. Ayatollahs in Iran resisted the quarantine of the holy city of Qom, but the death of religious leaders close to the Supreme Leader led to increased measures by the state. In India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, members of the Tablighi Jamaat who continued to attend mass worship were blamed for the spread of the virus (Riexinger, 2021).

The second type of response which we call rational came from many religious leaders who not only pioneered the implementation of coronavirus measures in places of worship but also who made efforts to mobilize their members in the fight. The attitude of religious groups and leaders has undoubtedly been effective in preventing as well as in spreading the pandemic.

In general, the Islamic world has performed well in fighting COVID-19. The necessary lockdown measures for mass worship could be taken without encountering great resistance. The importance given to cleanliness and hygiene in Islam was frequently emphasized as effective measures to stop the spread of the virus since the beginning of the pandemic. Quranic verses and hadiths of the Prophet Muhammed were written on billboards. Young people went to the homes of the elderly and provided support services on behalf of Muslim organizations. Turkey sent medical supplies to countries such as Italy, Spain, the UK, and the United States. A discussion about Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) under quarantine conditions started (Hıdır, 2020b).

The statement of Iraqi Shiite leader Sistani proclaiming healthcare workers to be as important to the country as border guards (Robinson, 2020), Pope Francis' request of Catholic priests to visit patients and to support healthcare workers, and the aid campaigns of many religious organizations, including a donation of medical equipment (Diseko, 2020) constitute other examples of the second approach. Also, the calls made by religious authorities to see this process as an opportunity for believers to return to their inner world and to repent, to learn from the crisis, to overcome spiritual problems with faith rather than fear, and to consider it as an opportunity for reconciliation and peace between members of different religions can be considered as moderate-rational types of response.

During the Ebola epidemic between 2014 and 2016 that killed 11,000 people in West Africa, religious leaders had played a positive role in combating the epidemic that was presumed to spread almost 60% by burial and funeral rituals (Marshall, 2020). In 2014, healthcare professionals and religious leaders signed a protocol with the WHO, more than two thousand Muslim and Christian leaders in Liberia and Sierra Leone were trained about burials and ensured the protection of thousands of people. Especially in West Africa, groups such as World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, and Tony Blair Faith Foundation had provided support to institutions fighting Ebola (Marshall, 2020). As in the Ebola epidemic, the importance of engaging religious groups and leaders in the fight against the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has been acknowledged as religious responses contributed both to the spread and prevention of the coronavirus.

## **Global Religious Trends and the COVID-19**

To anticipate the transformations regarding world religions after the coronavirus and the responses that religions will produce in the new period, it is useful to recall and reflect on the general trends discussed before the onset of the pandemic. While in the short term, religions may be expected to develop similar responses against the worst global crisis in world history, we believe it is crucial to take into account the recent trends discussed in this section when considering the long-term effects of the pandemic on a highly religiously diverse world. According to Pew Research Center's 2010 data (Pew Research Center, 2012), 33 percent of the world population is Christian, 23 percent are Muslim, 15 percent are Hindu, 7 percent are Buddhist, 0.2 percent are Jewish and 1 percent identify with other religions. It is worth noting that 16 percent of the world's population do not have any religious affiliation which constitutes the third largest group after Christians and Muslims.

Aside from the statistics on the global religious landscape, it is important to note that as Peter Berger pointed out that Evangelical Christianity and Islam have shown the most striking growth trend since the second period of the Cold War - which is also a period when Western sociologists seriously criticized classical modernist secularization theories (Berger, 1969; Davie, 2000; Luckmann, 1970; Martin, 1969, 1978, 2017). Although Evangelism and Islam, which Berger describes as two real global movements, have very different dynamics, they have been in the interest of social scientists as two rising religious movements. Religious nationalist movements that emerged against secular nationalist governments in many non-Western countries and Evangelical Christianity were the most widespread and striking examples of the anti-modernist religious movements (Berger, 1983). Evangelical Christianity continues its growth trend with an increasing influence on American domestic and foreign policy. Evangelism will no doubt be a subject of discussion in the years to come due to its fast-growing rate and global spread.

Without doubt, Catholicism went through one of the most extensive transformations of the twentieth century (Casanova, 2011). The Roman Catholic Church embarked on a comprehensive reform movement in the twentieth century with the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965. The Council was carried out to regain its central position in the West, to soften the tension between modernity and the Church, and to increase the influence of the Church in the lives of the masses (Davutoğlu, 2000, p. 47). Contrary to the gathering of previous councils in church history to reveal some dogmas and to eliminate false doctrines, Vatican II was also concerned with the question of how to carry the Bible into the modern world

(Mayer, 2000, p. 86). The softening that emerged in the Catholic dogma influenced the popular movements in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, and the Pope John Paul II paved the way for ecumenical activities to bring together the Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions. Vatican II also laid the groundwork for Catholicism to establish an interfaith dialogue with religions other than Christianity (Casanova, 2004; Özcan, 2012).

Huntington and Casanova's characterization of the third wave democratization (Huntington, 1991) as the "Catholic wave" (Casanova, 1996, pp. 356–363) because of the effect of Catholicism on pro-democracy movements in this period, and the Catholic *aggiornamento*-reform summarize the transformation of Catholicism in the twentieth century. While Casanova agreed with the Catholic wave characterization, he opposed Huntington's assumption that religions have some unchangeable essences, and third wave of democratization may have reached its civilizational limit. Casanova argued there was no reason why Islam should not play the similar role Catholicism played in facilitating the emergence of democratization movements in the twentieth century against authoritarian regimes (Casanova, 2001). The experiences of democratic Islamic movements in power and opposition, including the Arab Spring, continue to be one of the most discussed issues in the field of religion and politics in the world. Both Islam and Catholicism emphasize the relationship between religion and civil society and specifically focus on charity works that might bring dynamism to these religions during the coronavirus pandemic.

Orthodox Christianity has also experienced an important revival after the dissolution of the communist regimes. Especially after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church has become increasingly defined as the most reliable institution in the eyes of the Orthodox believers, although regular church attendance remained low (Knox, 2004; Özcan, 2012; Petro, 1998). There has been a rapprochement between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church since the 1990s, reminiscent of the Tsarist period. The rise in the Church's reputation led the leadership to express its public demands more. Today, the Russian Orthodox Church, which is spiritually ruling over 200 million Orthodox Christians, says that it is the largest church in the world with an Orthodox community and acts with self-confidence. However, the friction between Moscow and Istanbul Greek Orthodox Patriarchate (Özcan, 2020) over the recent developments in Ukraine shows that especially the fragmentation within Eastern Orthodoxy will continue with the effect of Russia's increasing interventionist attitude since the 2000s. Also, it is necessary to note there has been a sensitive attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church towards

the Catholic Church and the increasing Protestant missionary activities since the 1990s. Another trend in Eurasia is the Islamic revival in the region in addition to the increasing population growth rate of the Muslim population concentrated in Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus (Eickelman, 1993; Khalid, 2007).

One possible trend predicted regarding the post-coronavirus religious sphere is that it will pose a threat to Western Christianity in particular. The rising trend of atheism and agnosticism in Europe and the United States over the past decades and the declining trends in the number of people identifying as Catholic and Protestant, in church attendance rates as well as trust in the church which further increases concerns for the post COVID-19 era. There is a fear that the decrease in church attendance rates, church memberships and donations will expose church schools, hospitals and other social structures to the struggle for survival. The death of elderly clergy in Europe and America, the decrease in the flow of migration to some churches whose congregants are mostly immigrants and the interruption of regular church attendance since the start of the pandemic increase these fears.

These observations support the view that there is a retreat from religion in the Western world. Undoubtedly, it is likely that the interest in secular spiritual movements, cult groups and messianic movements will increase as a continuing trend of the postmodern age. Furthermore, the interest in cultural values will likely decrease among the youth, the most impacted group not only in the West, but globally by the digitalization of the world. These young people might turn their attention increasingly towards involvement with radical terrorist groups and new religious movements for a sense of community. COVID-19 has also increased racism, especially Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, as reflected in the news that held Muslims in the UK and Jews in the US as responsible for the spread of the coronavirus. There has been a rise in anti-Semitic social media posts in the USA, France and Germany since the beginning of the pandemic (*COVID-19, 2020'yi Çevrimiçi Antisemitizm İçin Verimli Hale Getirdi*, 2021). In addition, since China is viewed as the original source of the coronavirus and the main culprit for its global spread, there has been a rise in Sinophobia as well.

Although religious structures faced similar restrictions and problems during the COVID-19 pandemic and showed similar reactions, it is necessary to consider that in the long term, each religious structure will develop unique reactions and transform in line with its own dynamics. It does not seem very realistic to expect the deceleration of civil Islam, missionary and conservative Evangelism, Protestant missionary churches, corporate/ hierarchical and civic Catholicism, nationalist Hinduism, and

Judaism. It is not possible to say that the trends emerging in the West with the pandemic will be repeated in the rest of the world. Otherwise, we would fall into the trap of modernist secularization theory, which is criticized even in the West. The increasing tendency towards individual religiosity and increased interaction with nationalist and racist currents may be common among many religious traditions, but it is crucial to keep in mind that even within each religious tradition, responses to the pandemic at the individual and institutional levels will vary.

### Religion-State Relations and COVID-19 in the Middle East

The rapid spread of the coronavirus forced the governments in the Middle East to make some decisions regarding the places and procedures of communal worship. The most striking examples were the suspension of daily congregational prayers, and weekly Friday prayers and the temporary closure of mosques. However, the restrictions of the Saudi Arabian administration on the Masjid al-Haram (the Grand Mosque in Mecca) was the most important turning point for the Muslim world.

First, the restriction of entry into both Masjid al-Haram and Masjid al-Nabawi (the Prophet's Mosque in Medina) (*Fayrus Korona...*, 2020) expect during the prayer times, followed by complete suspension of all daily and Friday prayers indicated that political authorities would not refrain from taking drastic measures regarding the religious field to protect public health. As a matter of fact, the Saudi Arabia's ban on Muslims to perform Umrah and Hajj pilgrimages was the most important measure regarding the religious sphere concerning the Muslim world since the start of the pandemic.

In consideration of protecting public health, the measures on suspension of collective worship were supported by the Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) authorities, thereby providing legitimacy to ensure public compliance with state's restrictive measures. Internationally recognized religious authorities such as the World Association of Muslim Scholars, al-Azhar University in Egypt, as well as the national religious authorities of Muslim majority countries issued *fatwas* (religious ruling) stating that it is permissible to suspend the pilgrimage, Umrah, Friday prayers and congregational prayers for a period of time (*'Ulama' al-Muslimin' Yajuz Maneya al-Haji Wa'l Umrah Maaqatan Bi Sebeb Korona*, 2020). Similarly, al-Azhar issued a fatwa stating that it is religiously appropriate to perform the Eid al-Fitr prayer at home due to the risks posed by the virus, and tried to prevent mass gatherings on the occasion of the Eid prayer that would represent a high risk for spreading the pandemic (*Al-Azhar Yujiz Salat al-Eid fi al-Buyut fi Zili Tafasel Waba' Korona*, 2020). These state measures

taken upon the recommendations of health authorities were being implemented with great care, especially in the Sunni world, and also were accepted by citizens as reasonable. In this respect, contrary to the scenes encountered in countries with a high concentration of orthodox religious groups such as Israel and Iran in the Middle East, the Sunni Muslims held a rational attitude towards the restrictive pandemic measures and obeyed the guidance of the authorities.

In the regulation of communal worship during the pandemic, rather than the restrictive measures, the most striking development in terms of state-religion-individual relationship was that some prayers were symbolically performed under the supervision of religious authorities with limited participation. Following the nationwide suspension of the congregational Friday prayers, Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate decided to allow limited few to pray at the National Mosque in Ankara on 27<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020. The prayer was led personally by Ali Erbaş, the Head of the Directorate, which generated a discussion on why a select group was given the privilege to perform the Friday prayer when it was banned for the public across the country (*Zorluklar Karşısında Mümin*, 2020).

Similarly, Saudi Arabia announced that only a limited number of Saudi residents who meet the specified criteria would be allowed to perform the Hajj in 2020 under with strict measures (*Hac Sırasında Uygulanacak Önlemler*, 2020). These developments indicate that states could expand their regulatory measures on religion as COVID-19 pandemic persists. An important issue to consider is the possibility that some of these symbolic practices may lead to the emergence of a new privileged group in proportion to the duration of the epidemic. Despite this, it is important to note that since the start of the pandemic, the Sunni communities in the region had a moderate response to government restrictions and avoided tension with state authorities.

### **New Front between State and Haredi Jews in Israel: Coronavirus**

Since the start of the pandemic, Israel has been one of the places where the conflictual relationship between religion and the state was most evident. The images of clashes between the police and ultra-Orthodox Jews (Haredim) over coronavirus measures have prompted us to rethink the relationship between religion and state in Israel.

Since the ultra-Orthodox Jews neighborhood of Mea Shearaim in West Jerusalem and Bnei Brak, a city west of Tel Aviv had the highest rate of infections and the community had insisted on holding communal worship services, many Israelis blamed the Haredim for the rapid spread of the pandemic (Sabih, 2021, p. 200).

Many members of the community have been in defiance of state restrictions and even clashed with the police. Having difficulty in taking precautions, the police used tear gas in the Mea Sheraim neighborhood where residents had set up barricades in the neighborhood to prevent entry to ambulances and security forces. The police were instructed to use force after hundreds of Haredim attended the funeral of a rabbi in Bnei Baraks (*Karantinaya Direnen Topluluk*, 2020). Similarly, some Jewish communities in the US have also resisted the restrictions. A Hasidic Jewish school in New York City that did not comply with the coronavirus bans was shut down. In addition, the mayor ordered the dispersal of a crowded funeral held by the Hasidic Jewish community of Brooklyn where social distance rules were not followed.

Israel constitutes a special combination of religion, secularization and nationalism. Though founded by the secular Zionist movement, religion was not absent as the *raison d'être* of the Israeli state. Although only 20% of the population of Israel identify as religious and the rest 80% as secular, how the state, society and religion are related has been a contested issue. With the creation of the state of Israel, the secular Jewish identity that had arose with the Jewish Enlightenment and the Zionist movement in late 19<sup>th</sup> century gained strength vis-à-vis traditional Judaism. Israel has become the only place where Jews, who do not want to adhere to Jewish law, but also do not give up their Jewish identity, felt safe from all other threats. As Avineri said:

“Zionism was the most fundamental revolution in Jewish life. It substituted a secular self-identity of the Jews as a nation for the traditional and Orthodox self-identity in religious terms. It changed a passive, quietistic, and pious hope of the Return to Zion into an effective social force, moving millions of people to Israel. It transformed a language relegated to mere religious usage into a modern, secular mode of intercourse of a nation-state.” (Avineri, 2017, p. 12)

Stated in a comparative perspective, during modernization process, in Islamic societies secular nationalism served as a disintegrating factor and religious identity as a unifying element, whereas in the emergence of modern Jewish identity, the opposite was the case with secular nationalist Zionism having a unifying impact, and religious identity a fragmentary one. All the dilemmas of Jewish identity that emerged with the Jewish Enlightenment were transferred to the modern state of Israel. In fact, anti-traditionalist sentiment is stronger in Israel than in the diaspora, but still, political movements and parties always seek the support of religiously devout Jews, especially the Haredim. As Y. M. Rabkin stated:

“This hostility to Judaism found diverse expressions among the founders of the state, including the choice of new, Hebraized names: the father of a member of the Knesset gave himself the name *Kofer*, heretic (Klein). The categorical rejection of Judaism can also be explained by the climate of religious coercion that results from the need of secular Zionist parties to ensure support or at least neutrality of the religious non-Zionists. This coercion weighs heavily on all aspects of life: from the prohibition of bus service on the Sabbath to the almost religious monopoly over weddings and burials. The Israeli press regularly reports incidents of anti-religious hostility. In one such case, the pupils of a secular high school, having completed their final—and obligatory—examination on the Torah, stacked up their copies in the schoolyard and set them a fire, to the delight of all present.” (Rabkin, 2006, p. 45)

“However, in Israel the gulf that separates the secular from Judaism in all its forms has widened. Israeli newspapers are full of caricatures of Haredi Jews, not unlike the anti-Semitic stereotypes current in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Efron, 1991, pp. 15–22, 88–90 quoted by Rabkin, 2006, p. 46). The Israeli historian Noah Efron writes: “This kind of hostility is not novel. Nowhere are Haredi Jews as feared and hated as in Israel. Israel is a bastion of a classic sort of anti-Semitism, aimed not against all Jews, but against the ultra-Orthodox, the overly *Jewy Jews*” (Efron, 1991, p. 16 quoted by Rabkin, 2006, p. 46).

In recent years, there has been a growing conflict between the state and the Haredi community who has been exempt from mandatory military service, run schools based on religious study refusing to teach secular subjects, live isolated from non-Haredi groups in the country and away from the secular media. Haredi Jews prefer to be subject to rabbinic authority instead of recognizing the secular authority of the state, even refrain from using the expression “State of Israel” and refuse to speak Hebrew and use the Yiddish language. During the pandemic, the tension between the state and the ultra-Orthodox community seemed to increase as the confrontation with the authorities to resist the coronavirus measures was viewed by the Haredim as rebellion against the secular state (Sabih, 2021).

The growing religious-secular polarization in the 2000s in Israel may deepen during the coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, secular tendencies have been increasing in Israeli society, on the other hand, the Knesset passed the “Jewish nation-state” bill into law on 19 July 2018, amid secular opposition. Critics argued the law would increase discrimination against Arab citizens, pave the way for the implementation of Jewish religious laws, and defined it as an important obstacle to democracy. The legislation that in the words of Netanyahu would ensure “our

state's the Jewish character for generations to come" was approved with 62 votes in favor, and 55 opposed. The law defines Israel as the "historic national home of the Jewish people", says the right to national self-determination is "unique to the Jewish people", calls Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and designates Hebrew as the official state language with Arabic having "special status." The law, which can be described as a new apartheid aiming to take away the right of return of Palestinian refugees, as well as the loss of citizenship rights of Palestinians, who make up 20% of the population, is a continuation of President Trump's formal recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the United States embassy's move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have moved the debate triggered by the nation-state law over state-religion relations in new a direction.

The pandemic not only led to clashes between the secular state officials and the Haredim but widened the fissures between the secular-liberal/reformist Jews and the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Unlike the Haredim, liberal Jews complied with the state's lockdown measures and joined virtual religious services. They have adapted their congregational worship to new pandemic restrictions with solutions such as gathering on balconies at the same time during prayer, celebrated Passover at home without any guests. During this period, the topics of discussion between the two poles of Israeli society were whether the virtual way of performing mass worship such as Sabbath and Passover was in accordance with Jewish religious law and how the burials should be done (Hıdır, 2020a).

## Caught between Religious Authority and Secularization: Iran and COVID-19

As stated earlier, COVID-19 restrictions on religion in countries where orthodox communities are widespread have created more tensions in the relationship between the state, religion and society. While in the countries of the Middle East with majority Sunni populations, the restrictions on religious practices were met with a reasoned response, many Iranians resisted the state's preventive measures and clashes broke out between the security forces and those who wanted to continue their religious practices as usual. The conflict between health authorities and Shiite clerics over pandemic response provides an important example to examine the complex nature of religion-state relations in Iran.

On February 27, 2020, the Ministry of Health officials recommended cancelling Friday prayers and imposing severe restrictions on all communal prayers (Vahdat &

Gambrell, 2020). Then on March 4, the Iranian authorities suspended Friday prayers (*Health Ministry Calls to Cancel Friday Prayers*, 2020), which was undoubtedly an important breaking point regarding religion-state relations in the country as Friday prayers have been one of the important tools of the regime's sustainability and society's consolidation since the 1979 revolution. The closure of religious shrines on March 16 in Qom and Mashhad (*Iran's Holiest Sites Closing to Visitors*, 2020) showed on the one hand the increasing effort by the state to halt the rapid spread of the outbreak, but also created a new source of conflict between the state and the individual due to restrictions on religious practices. As a matter of fact, the protests organized by visitors around the holy places upon the closure of the shrines and the clashes with the security forces (Sherwood, 2020) were early indicators of the problems that the pandemic could cause by the restriction of religious practices in the public sphere.

Since the start of the outbreak, Iran's Shite clergy attempted to control regime supporters with their skeptical approach towards the Western world. Iranian state and religious authorities employed the discourse that the imperialist and hegemonic powers carried out a biological attack to prevent Iran and China as a tactical move to prevent losing the public's loyalty to religion and the regime (*How the Coronavirus Has Altered Iranians' View of Faith*, 2020). Similarly, to keep the anti-Western sentiment of the society alive, Khamenei refused to accept US aid to fight the pandemic and called the US leaders "charlatans and liars" (Hafezi, 2020). When we take into account that in the Middle East, the visibility of religion in the public sphere play an important role in designing the political and social spheres, we can speculate that the concerns caused by the pandemic might increase the secular tendencies of these societies. In this context, it is also possible for political dissent in Iran, which has been growing in recent years, to find more support in a secularizing society.

For the first time since the Islamic Revolution, Iranian regime had to make radical decisions and impose restrictions on religious practices since the beginning of the crisis which led to questions about the future role of religion or the authority of the spiritual leader. Political analysts say that although traditional medical remedies have been promoted in the country for many years, the public's turn to modern medicine due to the pandemic has caused fear among clergy who raised concerns that religious authority may be shaken (Zamirad, 2020). They point out that the state's inability to provide satisfactory solutions to problems caused by the pandemic (health, economy, security, etc.) will reveal the vulnerability of the regime and consequently in Iran, COVID-19 might trigger anti-regime sentiments.

As the regime's mishandling of the crisis undermined its respect, especially the educated youth increasingly started questioning the religious leaders, which might invigorate a secularization trend in the country. Pooyan Tamimi Arab claims that activists on social media have become more critical of religion-state relations during this period and states that COVID-19 has served as a catalyst in the secularization of the political behavior and attitudes of Iranians (Arab, 2020). Considering that the distance between the regime and the opposition has widened in recent years, it seems possible that the global pandemic might cause significant changes in the Iranian political system, especially with an increased tendency to question the authority of the clerics.

The endurance of a pro-Western segment in Iranian society, which is the legacy of pre-revolutionary era's political culture and social dynamics, and the increasing discontent among the people caused by the regime's foreign policy decisions in recent years can be listed as factors that will accelerate the secularization of the religious and political spheres (Özkan & Chatterjee, 2019, pp.121-126). The increase in structural discussions about politics, health, religion, and economy since the start of the pandemic indicates how different the world will be after COVID-19. These realities of the crisis will likely have undesirable consequences for the Iranian regime, whose survival depended on the complete control of the public sphere by religious authorities.

One of the dynamics that emerged during the handling of the crisis which can accelerate the trend of secularization in Iran is the political pragmatism adopted by the clergy in a manner that would not undermine their legitimacy and authority in their relation to the public health authorities who wanted to take initiative in handling the coronavirus response. For example, the two people who claimed to protect people from coronavirus with traditional medicine were arrested and senior clerics called on the public to take into account the recommendations of health officials (Zimmt, 2020). However, at the same time the spiritual leader Ali Khamenei have used his absolute authority when necessary and did not leave all the initiative to the administrators in the process. Emphasizing that he does not trust the COVID-19 vaccines produced in the West and thus these vaccines should be banned from entering the country (*Ban on Western Covid-19 Vaccines*, 2021), Khamenei has also seriously limited the Iranian authorities' coronavirus response strategies. Khamenei's move was not only a reminder to everyone about who has real authority in the Iranian political system during this period of uncertainty but also a measure to declining public trust in the regime and religious establishment and growing anti-regime tendencies.

The restrictive measures in the religious sphere and the failure of the regime's handling of the pandemic that shakes the trust in religious authorities might lead individuals to think of alternative system of thought or adopt individual forms of religiosity. Given the role played by public religion and practice in sustaining the regime, the new trends in the religious sphere triggered by the pandemic globally will lead to new tensions in Iran. Contrary to the experience in the Sunni world where the public have given a reasoned response to restrictive measures and revised their religious practices in harmony with them, Iranians have either defied the state's orders and faced repression or moved away from religion.

## Conclusion

The shocking effect of the COVID-19 pandemic which is unprecedented in the modern era brought quite radical changes in the private and public spheres on a global scale. It challenged not only political, social and economic habits and behaviors but also religious beliefs and practices. State authorities' increasing intervention in the public sphere with a discourse based on the rate of spread of the coronavirus and the damage it causes to human health, and the widespread measures restricting public gatherings generated discussions on the practice and future of religions all over the world. On the advice and requests of health authorities, the rapid closure of places of worship in many countries and the suspension of mass worship have been recorded as very strict interventions in the religious sphere all over the world.

Despite the relative lack of visibility and influence of religion in the public sphere in modern times, until the COVID-19 pandemic, there had not been any restrictions encompassing the entire religious and belief systems. Since the pandemic began, restrictions for places of worship and religious gatherings of all belief systems, especially the Abrahamic religions, triggered some negative social reactions. The clashes between the masses reacting to the restrictions and the security forces point the emergence of a new type of relationship.

In this article, through a discussion of the Middle East example in a global comparative framework, we showed that the nature of the religion-state relationship in a particular context is the main factor that has determined the general characteristics of the coronavirus measures and the reactions against them. Furthermore, we argued that given the key role religion plays in Middle Eastern societies, the direct intervention of the state authorities in the religious field and the reactions to the

restrictions in this region seem to be a harbinger for the ways in which religious sphere might be shaped in post COVID-19 era.

The fact that restrictions on religious practices implemented by officials in Sunni majority countries have been met with a moderate response shaped by absolute loyalty to the state authority shows that religious individuals in these countries have a more harmonious relationship with the state. However, in the case of Israel and Iran, where orthodox beliefs and interpretations are widespread, the tensions between the religious individuals and the state authority point to the decisive role of religion in the relationship between the state and the individual. Precisely for this reason, the confrontations between the security forces and the religious groups in both Israel and Iran, and the harsh measures taken against dissenters brought out important questions about who has the right to control the religious arena or whether it is inviolable.

In the early months of 2020 when the first cases of COVID-19 started to emerge, Israel had to hold its third elections in less than a year due to ongoing political crises. One of the most important reasons was the resignation of Avigdor Liberman, the leader of *Yisrael Beitneiu* (Israel Our Home) party and Minister of Defense, in November 2018, on the grounds that the government was weak against Hamas. However, the main issue that led to the political crisis was the debate over the participation of ultra-Orthodox Jewish population in the mandatory military service. Liberman said that they would not back down from a harsher conscription law for Haredim and would not allow Jewish religious law in the state administration (Trew, 2019).

The ultra-Orthodox Jewish community's share of the population is expected to increase from 12% to 25% by 2065 due to the high birth rates. The Haredim live mostly isolated from the rest of Israeli society and men devote their full time to study the Torah instead of participating in the labor force and serving in the military, and many families are below the poverty line and rely on state welfare support. Due to these factors, the community draws heavy criticism from the rest of public.

Liberman wanted to implement the conscription law by passing it from the Knesset. However, the ultra-Orthodox Shash Party and *Yahadut HaTorah* (Union Torah Judaism) coalition, partners of the Netanyahu-led coalition, opposed the bill. Following the elections held in April 2019, a government led by Netanyahu could not be formed because Liberman insisted on the enlistment bill to be passed without any changes. As a result, Israelis went to the polls again in September 2019 and for the third time in March 2020 (Karan, 2020).

Israel's ongoing political crisis due to the debates on the military obligations of ultra-Orthodox Jews has been partly the result of increasing secular-traditionalist polarization discussed in the relevant section of the article. Since the start of pandemic, the ultra-Orthodox have been held responsible for the rapid spread of the virus, which seem to open a new front for confrontation between the secular right and the far right, and may trigger new political crises. Liberman's efforts to split the right by spearheading the opposition to the ultra-Orthodox can further increase the polarization between the secular-right and the far-right. This corresponds to a deeper separation in Israeli politics than the left-right polarization, since the left has declined and almost disappeared and politics has gradually shifted to the far right. On the one hand, the insistence of the far-right parties to stand by Netanyahu despite the corruption investigations, and the increased anti-ultra-Orthodox sentiment in the society during the coronavirus period show that the "Haredi factor" in Israeli politics will be discussed more in the coming period.

Some Shia Muslims displayed reactions towards the closure of the holy shrines in Iran similar to those given by some ultra-Orthodox groups in Israel to coronavirus preventive measures. The concern about the increasing influence of the state on the religious sphere and the frequent emphasis of health authorities that traditional medicine and superstitious practices are not panacea in the fight against the pandemic have the potential to transform the notion of the sacred in society. Furthermore, the long-term effects of the pandemic may directly affect politics in Iran given the regime's theocratic elements. The restrictions on public religious practices present a political opportunity for secular-oriented groups in the country and discussions on the future of religious authority have become more widespread. It seems that the religion-state-individual relationship after the coronavirus pandemic will take place in the shadow of the tension between the current status quo and secularization.

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