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Social activism against the desecularization of non-religious state education in Israel: a social movement lens

Shiran German Ben-Hayun and Izhak Berkovich

Department of Education and Psychology, The Open University of Israel, Raanana, Israel
Corresponding author: Izhak Berkovich; Email: izhakber@gmail.com

Abstract

This qualitative research investigates the growing social activism against the trend of desecularization within non-religious state education in Israel, employing a social movement framework. By conducting in-depth interviews with individuals engaged in this activism, the study examined the ideological frameworks of the actors, their perceived organizational structures for mobilization, and their view of political opportunities used to uphold secular principles in the Israeli educational system. The study contributes to social movement research by highlighting secular motivations, often overlooked in favor of faith-based activism, and addresses the limited literature on desecularization in public education. It also underscores the nonlinear progress of secularization and liberalism in Israel, noting a sense that the tendency toward desecularization has been gaining momentum in certain parts of society. This research enhances understanding of desecularization as a social movement in education and informs broader discussions on the intersections of religion, culture, and governance in democracies.

Keywords: activism; desecularization; public education; social movement; state

Introduction

The nexus of religion and education has garnered significant attention as a powerful force that can both unify and polarize societies (Jackson, 2014). In Israel, a nation historically rooted in Jewish religion and cultural traditions (Berent, 2010), the question of how to balance religious teachings within the non-religious state education framework has been of perennial concern. The non-religious state education system in Israel, initially established on principles of secularism, aimed to provide a common ground for Jewish secular and non-religious traditionalist citizens (Ayalon et al., 2019). But over the years, a growing tension has developed between this secular foundation and the intensifying influence of religious ideologies on the state education system (Hotam, 2017; Sabbagh, 2019; Zehavi, 2017).

The present study explored the discourse of secular actors on the desecularization of education in Israel. We investigated participants' narratives on the emergence and dynamics of social activism against the desecularization of non-religious state education. In this context, desecularization refers to the gradual erosion of secular principles in the education system, resulting from the infusion of religious values and practices (German Ben-Hayun and Berkovich, 2024). The present study adopted a social movement lens (Bracey, 2016; McAdam, 1982, 1999; Snow and Benford, 1988), asking the following research question: *How do social activists employ discourse framing, use mobilization structures (i.e., collective action mechanisms), and capitalize on political opportunities to counteract perceived desecularization effects in the non-religious state education system?* The study sought to examine the broader implications of the desecularization discourse for sociopolitical fabric of the state and to shed light on the delicate interaction between religion, education, and state policies. The present research did not aim to empirically determine whether the degree of exposure to religious content in non-religious state schools is higher today than in the past. Rather, we explored the growing public attention being paid to this issue and its emergence as a contentious topic in Israeli society and politics.

This research makes three main claims, building on our examination of the actions of the Secular Forum, an NGO founded in 2011, which is now the key body coordinating anti-desecularization initiatives in Israeli education. First, we contend that successful framing techniques—particularly those using rights-based, injustice, and oppositional frames—are crucial to the effectiveness of anti-desecularization advocacy. To mobilize public support, the Secular Forum has strategically used these frameworks, particularly when emphasizing parental rights and educational autonomy. Second, we show that although the movement has had great success locally thanks to media involvement and grassroots organization, it confronts unique obstacles in the national political sphere because of poor cooperation with secular political players because of more general governance concerns. Third, we argue that the anti-desecularization movement reflects key issues about the identity of the Israeli State and the harmony between Jewish and democratic ideals, and that it is more than just an educational debate. In addition to advancing our understanding of desecularization processes in non-religious state education systems, the study contributes to challenging the modernist narrative about the rise of secularization in Israel by exposing the vivid discourse on a stronger tendency toward desecularization in Israel. Finally, the study expands the social movement theory by analyzing secular activism, moving beyond the traditional focus on faith-based movements.

Literature review

Politics and desecularization in government organizations

Government organizations are bodies established and operated by the state to perform specific functions and tasks related to the public good (e.g., security, education, healthcare, etc.). The relationship between religion and government organizations has garnered increasing scholarly attention worldwide. Some researchers have noted how religious values and practices increasingly influence state policy processes, including decision-making and institutional practices (Berger, 1999; Ramet, 1998). This

influence manifests through various mechanisms: expanded political engagement by religious organizations, increasing participation of religious actors in policy formulation, and the integration of religious perspectives into institutional frameworks. Berger (1999) noted that this trend has affected several domains of state governance. Some scholars have used terms like "religionization" (Peled and Peled, 2018; Zehavi, 2017) and "theocratization" (Levy, 2014) to describe the revival of religious ideals and practices in public life and state organizations but we favor the term "desecularization" because it relates to previous arguments suggesting that the political legitimacy of modern Western states is rooted in secularism and related to separating religious influence from state governance (Ram, 2008, Zala, 2019).

Desecularization may take many forms in state policy processes, including the involvement of religious activists in influencing policy discussions, decision-making, and outcomes to make them more consistent with religious values (Berger, 1999; Ramet 1998; Zehavi, 2017). Berger (1999) noted that desecularization has important political dynamics because religious organizations are becoming politically more organized and engaged, which affects state policy decisions, especially those involving moral and ethical concerns. Similarly, Ramet (1998) pointed out that desecularization is connected to the political mobilization of religious parties to shape state policy through increased participation in politics. As religious views and values increasingly influence institutional ethos, policies, and practices, this may change how state institutions work.

Research on desecularization in government organizations has examined mostly changes in norms and practices related to religion in military organizations. The military provides a compelling example of these processes. Desecularization in the military triggered disputes between secular and religious groups given the growing influence of religion in military matters, and its prominence in cultivating collective identity (Levy, 2014, 2020). According to Levy (2020), several factors caused the military to become less secular: the increasing role of religion in society, the rise of religious activists, dependence on faith-based and spiritual services, and the use of religion to inspire sacrifice in the military. As a result of this process, hierarchy in organizations may change, disputes may arise, and desecularization may eventually emerge (Levy, 2014, 2020).

Politics and desecularization in state schools

According to Kretzmer-Raziel (2019), the term "desecularization" in non-religious schools refers to both a situation and a process. Students are exposed to religious materials that encourage the adoption of religious behavior and beliefs. In this case, the state educational system subtly and overtly reinforces children's religious connection through curricula and school activities, downplaying the importance of a secular perspective (Glaeser and Sacerdote, 2008). The term "desecularization process" describes a historical transformation of a school system that formerly had been overtly secular by means of religious materials gradually penetrating it and interfering with the development of the students' secular identities (Kretzmer-Raziel, 2019).

Desecularization in education has been the subject of only a few studies, most of them based on historical perspectives. According to academic reports (Lisovskaya

and Karpov, 2010, 2020), the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP) are working together to desecularize the country. Known as "desecularization from above," these initiatives seek to advance a "neo-imperial" type of ethnoreligious pluralism. Some consider these initiatives successful, with rising support for religious instruction in state schools (Lisovskaya and Karpov, 2010), but others contend that the ROC MP is not the primary force behind desecularization in Russian education, as it is largely a bottom-up process (Paert, 2020). Turkey serves as another example of desecularization in state education. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) has made it easier to establish religious schools, lifted restrictions on networks of faith-based schools, and introduced mandatory religious instruction in non-religious schools (Shlykov, 2019). Although religious influences existed in secular schools before the AKP, the party expanded the availability of religious electives in these schools, reduced the variety of other electives, and altered the curriculum and textbooks to include more religious content (Aliyeva, 2020). To promote orthodox Islamic beliefs, a parallel school system, the State Wakf of Education (MAVAK), has been established (Shlykov, 2019). In recent years, there has been a notable trend toward desecularization in US public education, documented in the press. For example, Louisiana enacted a law requiring public schools to display the Ten Commandments in classrooms (CNN, 2024). There are also non-legislative developments in this direction. LifeWise Academy, a Christian organization, offers off-site biblical education to public school students during school hours. Their programs have expanded in states like Indiana, where new laws require school districts to cooperate with such initiatives (AP News, 2024).

The implications of desecularization in state schools have been subject to various interpretations. Lisovskaya and Karpov (2010), identified several institutional tensions. First, it becomes challenging to sustain secular standards and democratic objectives when accepting the views and principles of the religious population. Second, it becomes more difficult for students to retain compassion and tolerance toward religious minorities, which might prompt disputes between different religions. Third, incorporating religious ideas and beliefs into the curriculum may pose challenges due to potential conflicts with secular principles. Thus, desecularization raises formidable obstacles before non-religious state schools as they attempt to balance the need to respect religious views with upholding secular norms and democratic ideals.

Why processes of secularization in non-religious public institutions have been reversing in many countries in recent decades is a complex and multifaceted question. These processes appear to have been driven by a range of factors that manifest differently in various places. Prominent contributors to this trend include democratic backsliding, the rise of illiberalism, the growing political influence of religious minorities, and the interplay of nationalistic backlash with economic crises (Banfi et al., 2018; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Waldner and Lust, 2018). Together, these forces have disrupted the delicate equilibrium that underpins the non-religious, liberal, social-democratic state model.

Israeli society and politics

The constitutional definition of Israel as a "Jewish and democratic" state creates inherent tensions within liberal democratic ethos, particularly concerning the rights of non-Jewish citizens (Karayanni, 2012). Israeli ethnic democracy is considered the only one of its kind in the world, although some claim parallels with Northern Ireland, Estonia, Latvia, and Slovakia (Berent, 2010). In Israel, where religious Orthodoxy plays a key role in the state (for example, in marital and immigration laws), Jewish religion and statehood are interrelated, in contrast to other Western democracies where religion and the nation-state are separated. However, Israel is not a religious state, as ultimate authority lies with secular state bodies, and there is freedom of religion and religious pluralism (Goldstein, 1991). Jews in Israel belong to several groups based on the level of religious observance and cultural identity (Arian and Keissar-Sugarmen, 2013): secular (*hiloni*), traditional (*masorti*), modern Orthodox (*dati*), and ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*). Secular Jews (*hilonim*) identify culturally with Judaism but do not follow religious practices, often self-identifying primarily as Israelis and maintaining some cultural Jewish connections. Traditionalist Jews (*masortim*) represent a blend of religious observance and secular lifestyle, reflecting a commitment to Jewish customs without strict adherence to religious laws (Yadgar, 2010). Modern Orthodox Jews (*datiim* often referred to as national religious Jews) observe religious laws and engage with modern society. Ultra-Orthodox Jews (*haredim*) adhere strictly to religious laws and often segregate themselves from mainstream society. Another key aspect of the Israeli Jewish social hierarchy is ethnicity. Two of the largest Jewish ethnic groups in the country is that of the Ashkenazim, originating from Central and Eastern European Jewish communities, and Mizrachim, whose origins trace back to Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities. Before the founding of the state and in its early decades, Ashkenazim occupied elite positions in politics and society while Mizrachim, who immigrated during this period, were placed at the lower levels of the social hierarchy and assigned roles associated with these positions (Levy, 2011). Ashkenazim make up the majority of secular Jews (54%) and ultra-Orthodox Jews (58%) (Even Tzur, 2023). The Mizrachim account for most of the traditionalist Jews (62%) (Even Tzur, 2023), and are the largest social group that has shifted to an ultra-Orthodox lifestyle (Regev and Gordon, 2021). Throughout most of Israeli history, there has been intersectionality between ethnicity (Mizrachi vs. Ashkenazi), class (poor and working class vs. middle and upper class), and religiosity (religious vs. secular). In the 21st century, however, some of these associations have weakened as we see more Mizrachi middle class (Kaplan and Werczberger, 2017).

The secular Jewish group was the hegemonic group in the first decades of the existence of the state. Throughout most of the 20th century, Israel was predominantly governed by two large non-religious parties representing mostly secular and traditionalist non-religious Jews, Likud and HaAvoda (formerly known as Mapai) (Kenig and Tuttnauer 2017). The Israeli political system makes coalition governments necessary and nearly all coalitions include one or more small or medium religious parties that in practice have kingmaker power and can make or break coalitions led by the large parties. Therefore, they have a disproportionate influence on politics and

public policy (Sandler and Kampinsky, 2018). They also enforce the monopoly of Orthodoxy over state-run religious institutions (Cohen-Almagor, 2017). For many years, it was argued that Israel was undergoing an accelerated process of secularization since the 1990s (Ben-Porat, 2013). According to this argument, the Israeli public considered liberalism and religious freedom to be gaining momentum under the influence of the emerging market economy, consumerism, and the largely non-religious immigration from the former Soviet Union (Ben-Porat, 2013).[1] The present work challenges this modernistic portrayal of the rise of secularization in Israel.

Since the start of the 2000s, the proportion of ultra-Orthodox Jews (*haredim*) has grown because of their high birth rate (Blass and Bleikh, 2016). Additionally, national religious Jews, who had been partners of secular Jews in government, began shifting toward *haredi* ideology (Mahla, 2022). These trends have destabilized non-religious Jewish hegemony in Israeli society and politics, and in the 21st century, the Israeli political system has become more fragmented and unstable (Kenig and Tuttnauer, 2017). Recently, Ben-Porat revised his previous argument and suggested that since the mid-2000s, counter-movements in Israeli politics, such as populism, anti-liberalism, anti-elitism, and a cultural backlash centered on traditional values and religion, have transformed even mainstream governing parties like the Likud, which was once non-religious (Ben-Porat et al., 2023). Other scholars also contended that the religious revival in Israel is fueled by the fact that religion is being used to support national identity (Rubin, 2020) in a period of reignited Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It is possible to identify a dual phenomenon in Israel today: both secularization and religious revival have disrupted previous compromises, triggering various conflicts (Ben-Porat, 2022).

A recent representative survey of the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (2023) of 6,501 individuals found that 67% of the secular Jewish respondents and 54% of traditionalist Jews indicated that the influence of religion on various domains of life in the country has grown stronger in recent years. The present work aims to deepen understanding of the contemporary resurrection of secularism and religion in Israeli society and politics, in contrast to earlier modernistic portrayals of the entrenchment of secularization in Israel.

The education system in Israel

Since the establishment of the state, the Israeli educational system has been made of four main sectors: Jewish non-religious state schools, Jewish religious state schools, Jewish ultra-Orthodox (non-state) schools, and Arab state schools. This division was based on the belief that each of these populations needs access to education compatible with its beliefs and lifestyles (Foux et al., 2022; Zehavi, 2017). Jewish non-religious state schools are intended for the general Jewish population that is not religious. These schools are under state supervision, without any political or sectarian affiliation, aiming to provide general education and maintain the principles of the state education system (Israeli Parliament, 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2023). The Jewish religious state schools, intended for the religious Jewish population, combine religious and secular studies, emphasizing a religious lifestyle. They are also under state supervision but include religious content as part of their curriculum (Israeli Parliament, 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2023). The recognized non-state schools, which

include educational institutions owned by private, religious, or community bodies, have received recognition from the Ministry of Education. These schools receive reduced public funding compared to official state schools and have greater freedom in determining their educational content. This track includes mainly ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) institutions, represented primarily by two large networks: the Independent Education Center and Ma'ayan Hachinuch Hatorani (Israeli Parliament, 2015; Perry-Hazan, 2023).

State government and state education are linked with the idea of *mamlakhtiyut* (statism) which is the republican democratic model of government (Bick, 2013). Jewish non-religious state school is viewed locally as representing the secular approach to education (Diskin, 2023) that draws on nationalist secularism philosophy (Ram, 2008). The present study examined the Jewish non-religious state school system that serves secular and traditional non-religious communities belonging to all Jewish ethnic groups (Ayalon, Balas, Feniger, and Shavit, 2019), which is the largest sector in state education. According to a Pew Research Center (2016) survey, for certain Israeli Jewish groups, democratic values take precedence over Jewish religious beliefs (89% of secular individuals, 56% of traditionalist non-religious people), with Jewish identity being primarily culturally oriented (83% of secular individuals, 41% of traditionalist non-religious people). More than 70% of students in the country attend state schools (the remainder are mostly Jewish ultra-Orthodox and Christian Arab children) (Israeli Parliament, 2022); thus, Jewish state non-religious schools in Israel accommodate all socioeconomic categories.

According to the Israeli Ministry of Education (Israeli Parliament, 2022), approximately 54% of Israeli students were studying in Jewish non-religious state schools during the 2022–2023 school year. In these schools, there are on average 24.8 students per class (Israeli Parliament, 2022). The curriculum places a strong emphasis on "secular" topics, including science, math, Hebrew reading and writing, literature, and foreign languages (Sabbagh, 2019). 86.3% of students in non-religious state schools obtained matriculation certificates (Israeli Parliament, 2022). Most of the budget of state education is covered by the Ministry of Education and local governments. A system of affirmative action distributes teaching hours to state schools, taking into consideration their socioeconomic status (Israeli Parliament, 2015).

The educational structure presented here reflects the diverse social fabric of Israel. Our analysis focuses on non-religious Jewish public schools as representing the primary arena where tensions between secular and religious influences are most prominently expressed. Understanding these unique characteristics and challenges is significant for analyzing the emergence and dynamics of secular activism.

Jewish non-religious state education: politics, religion, and desecularization

Jewish non-religious state schools in Israel often teach courses in the Bible and Jewish Oral Law from a secular standpoint (Ayalon and Yogev, 1996). The Bible is a topic for the matriculation test. Non-religious schools employ, among others, religious teachers who may at times express religious ideas leading to indoctrination; by contrast, religious state schools employ exclusively religious teachers (Aloni and Silbert, 2007). Jewish state schools that are not religious also observe Jewish holidays and educate

students about them from a cultural standpoint (Dattel, 2018). According to Maniv and Benziman (2020), the Ministry of Education uses religion to advance a national ideology that ties together the Jewish people, the Land of Israel, and the Jewish State. Education ministers have used their authority to impose their moral standards on non-religious state schools. For example, Education Minister, Zevulun Hammer (periods in office 1977–1984, 1990–1992, 1996–1998), a member of the National Religious Party (NRP), chose religious leaders for the Ministry and created a committee to look for ways of strengthening Jewish identity in the non-religious state education system in the 1990s (Aloni and Silbert, 2007; Sabbagh, 2019).

At the time of its founding, the state education system in Israel had a socialist orientation, combined with bureaucratic administrative centralization (Berkovich and Avigur-Eshel, 2019). In recent decades, the nature of state elementary education has evolved as a result of top-down initiatives and bottom-up pressures fueled by neoliberal ideas. The introduction of autonomous schools, parental choice, and self-based management in the 1990s, together with national standardized examinations in the first decade of the 21st century, encouraged commodification and accountability (Berkovich and Avigur-Eshel, 2019). In a broader sense, we can observe parallels between the "desocialization" of the education system and "desecularization" efforts. Desocialization weakened public education and created a functional dependence on external resources. Reduced budgets and neoliberal ideology in the early 2000s prompted non-religious state school principals to seek assistance from NGOs to extend the number of teaching hours (Berkovich and Avigur-Eshel, 2019). As a result, 10% of the curriculum has been taught by these NGOs, many of which have a Jewish religious orientation (Dattel, 2017a). The Ministry increased principals' curricular freedom and started to regulate the NGOs that were permitted to deliver the school curriculum in state schools. These groups also receive direct support from the Ministry. In 2002, a new budget item was established by the Ministry for "Jewish culture," which grew from NIS 3 million in 2003 to NIS 210 million in 2017, and did so extensively under Education Minister, Naftali Bennett (period in office 2015–2019), from the NRP. Many of these organizations operate also in non-religious state schools (Dattel, 2017b). In other examples, Orthodox religious organizations have organized Jewish culture and holiday events at non-religious state schools (Dattel, 2018). In 2018, the Ministry created the "Centers for Deepening Jewish Identity," offering funding to assist Orthodox religious groups functioning within non-religious state schools (Ilan, 2019). The Ministry also authorized textbooks with clear theological content (Dattel, 2017b) and has developed programs for reinforcing Jewish identity, particularly in non-religious schools (Hotam, 2017). Expanding Jewish religious identity throughout all state sectors has been a priority for the present right-wing and religious Israeli government, which was elected in 2022. To promote this agenda, significant expenditures have been allocated and administrative adjustments made (David Hacohen, 2022). Some of the religious NGOs and organizations operating in non-religious public education include (German Ben-Hayun and Berkovich, 2024): *Bishvilenu* (a non-profit organization that promotes Jewish culture, education, and identity in Israel through educational programs and hiking), *Chabad* (a Hasidic ultra-Orthodox movement that seeks to spread Jewish awareness and observance among secular Jews through education and outreach), and the religious girls' *National Service,*

a program that exempts individuals aged 18 to 21 from mandatory military service because of their religious beliefs or health reasons. The program is intended mostly for religious girls who volunteer in various fields, including education, as teachers' aids in non-religious schools. Other religious NGOs and organizations operating in non-religious public education are local (German Ben-Hayun and Berkovich, 2024). Many of these organizations receive state funds and present their work in non-religious schools as connected to Jewish culture, the land, nationalism, tolerance, and dialogue between social groups, promoting Jewish values, good deeds, and charity work (German Ben-Hayun and Berkovich, 2024). In light of these trends, non-religious individuals have criticized and protested against these measures, referring to them as *hadata*, which means 'imposing religion' in Hebrew (Dattel, 2018). Furthermore, since the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, an ideological movement has emerged to counteract these measures and advocate for a secular way of life, with particular emphasis on education (Fruman, 2019).

One could also argue that desocialization and the neoliberal agenda have facilitated and legitimized claims asserting that parents have the right to make decisions about their children's schooling (Sabbagh, 2019). The present study examined the social response to desecularization initiatives by groups that perceive them as unjust and how this reaction aligns with political efforts to increase the state's religiosity. The emergence of the Secular Forum signaled a pivotal phase in the course of this social activism. The Secular Forum is an NGO established in 2011 by Ram Furman to support anti-desecularization efforts in Israel. On its website, it reports supporting anti-desecularization efforts in 60 localities. In 2015, the NGO refocused if efforts from supporting anti-desecularization efforts in general to efforts in state non-religious education. The website describes tens of thousands of individuals involved in its activities over the years. Although the research did not aim to establish the national scope of the secular movement against the inclusion of religious content in education but rather to document the widespread nature of the phenomenon, a search for news reports in Israeli media (online papers and TV) between 2016 and 2023 found reports on activists across the country from a variety of socioeconomic classes. The movement included localities in the socioeconomic clusters 4–6 (lower-middle class) such as Eilat, Ashdod, Holon, Rosh HaAyin, Petah-Tikva, Netanya, Harish, and Pardes Hanna; localities in the socioeconomic clusters 7–8 (upper-middle class) such as Ramat Gan, Givatayim, Herzliya, Kfar Saba, and Rishon LeZion; and localities in the socioeconomic cluster 9 (upper class) such as Kiryat Tivon, Kiryat Ono, and Ramat HaSharon. This nationwide distribution suggested a broad social movement.

Social movement lens

Social movements have been a significant subject of interest in sociology. Diani (1992) defined a social movement as "a network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, based on shared collective identity" (p. 8). The scholarship examining how social movements and education intersect has grown in recent years (e.g., Chua Reyes, 2023; Kane, 2023; Mariano and Tarlau, 2019; Platzky Miller, 2023), but research specifically applying social movement theoretical frameworks to analyzing activism in education

remains relatively limited. The present study contributes to the social movement scholarship, which traditionally focuses on the role and centrality of faith in activism (Smith, 2014) but often ignores secular movements. Hancock (2023) analyzed articles published in the journals *Social Movement Studies* and *Mobilization* between 2010 and 2020 focusing on religious, spiritual, and "religious-like" or "secular sacred" aspects and concluded that secular aspects were much less explored in social movement scholarship. The present research helped expand the social movement literature in two domains: its intersection with education and secularism, building on the traditional sociological framework used in social movement exploration.

Traditional sociological theories, such as political process theory (PPT), have provided a foundational understanding of social movements by focusing on the political opportunities, organizational strength, and collective action frames that influence the formation and trajectory of these movements (McAdam, 1982). Simultaneously, frame analysis theory has been instrumental in elucidating how the framing of social movements is used to interpret, represent, and engage with societal issues, shaping public discourse and consciousness (Snow and Benford, 1988).

PPT, initially proposed by McAdam (1982), offers a robust framework for understanding social movements and describes the dynamics of social movements. Scholars have argued that expanding social movements not only lowers the cost of activism but also enhances the probability of achieving success (McAdam, 1999). PPT includes three critical elements: political opportunities, mobilization structures, and cognitive framing (Bracey, 2016). Political opportunities refer to "constraints, possibilities, and threats that originate outside the mobilizing group, but affect its chances of mobilizing and/or realizing its collective interests" (Koopmans, 1999). They can include a range of circumstances, such as instability in the political system, shifts in power relations, or the presence of influential allies within the system (Tarrow, 1996). These opportunities often determine whether a movement can emerge and what forms it may take. For example, the American civil rights movement was facilitated by a political opportunity structure that included an alignment of federal and judicial support (McAdam, 1982). The second element, mobilization structures, refers to the internal informal and formal resources available to social movements, including infrastructure, leadership, membership, and social networks within society (Morris, 1984). Mobilization structures affect the capacity of a movement to mobilize supporters, resist opposition, and endure over time (Snow et al., 1986). The third element, cognitive framing, contains the interpretive tools used by movement members to make sense of the world, communicate their grievances, and mobilize action (Benford, 1993). For instance, Taylor's (1989) study used PPT to examine the women's movement in the US and argued that the availability of political opportunities, the existence of women's organizations for mobilization, and the framing of women's rights as human rights were integral to the success of the movement.

Frame analysis theory expands PPT by focusing on how movements construct and use frames to make sense of complex social issues, generate collective identities, and mobilize supporters (Snow and Benford, 1988). Social actors use these constructs not simply to make sense of reality but also to shape it in a particular way. Frame analysis is concerned with the negotiation and (re)construction of reality by social or political

actors through the use of symbolic tools (Triandafyllidou and Fotiou, 1998). Frame analysis also has the power to mobilize because it launches a call for action and offers a rationale for it, beyond the diagnosis and prognosis of a problem (Snow and Benford, 1988). The theory recognizes three types of framing: *diagnostic,* which refers to identifying the problem, attributing blame, and the conviction that social change is desirable; *prognostic,* which offers solutions and strategies; and *motivational,* which includes a call to action and a conviction that participation is required to create the desired change (Snow and Benford, 1988; Wilson, 1973).

Several empirical studies have used frame analysis theory. For example, Triandafyllidou and Fotiou (1998) used it in their qualitative study of environmental policy to analyze the role of the policy actors in defining the problem in particular ways and proposing suitable measures for solving it. Their study showed how social actors redefine policy options and promote solutions that are favorable to their interests and views by framing sustainability and sustainable mobility in different ways. Some studies have used frame analysis theory to examine the issue of abortion, illustrating the power of framing in driving changes, identifying and attributing blame for events, and presenting alternative solutions (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1990; Dudová, 2010). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) provided a new perspective on the framing processes in the digital era. They focused on the role of personalized frames, created and shared by participants across networks in movements like Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. Their work shows how digital platforms can enable rapid dynamic framing and reframing processes.

Method

This study used a qualitative methodology. Data were collected between November 2022 and March 2023. The study was approved by the institutional review board (no. 3453). We conducted semi-structured interviews with Israeli social activists who opposed the desecularization phenomenon. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. We recruited the social activists through snowball sampling and continued recruiting participants until we reached data saturation, around a sample size of 17. We interviewed local social activists from various municipalities as well as social activists from Secular Forum, an NGO founded in 2011 to promote anti-desecularization in Israeli municipalities and neighborhoods and since 2015 focusing mainly on resisting desecularization in state non-religious education, at the local and national levels. Although the Israeli de-secularization movement is national and relatively diverse in terms of social strata and ethnicity, our sample was drawn mostly from the central, more affluent regions of the country because these areas play a pivotal role in shaping national trends and are more accessible for data collection. Table 1 presents the anonymized list of the 20 social activists who participated in the study and their basic demographic characteristics.

The semi-structured interview protocol we created for the study "disassembled" the research question into smaller questions formulated in a language close to the experience of the participants and in a way that would arouse their interest (the interview protocol can be obtained by reaching out to the authors). The interviews were conducted in person and lasted 40–90 minutes. Before the beginning of the interviews, the participants signed detailed consent forms.

Table 1. Participants and their demographic characteristics

Participant	Age	Gender	Description	Area
A1	55	Female	Leader in the "Secular Forum"	National
A2	53	Female	Leader in the "Free Ramat Hasharon" movement	Ramat HaSharon
A3	50	Female	Leader in the "Secular Forum"	National
A4	36	Male	City council member	Ramat Gan
A5	50	Female	Leader in the "Free Herzliya" movement	Herzliya
A6	36	Female	Teacher and social activist	Kiryat Yam
A7	42	Female	Teacher and social activist	Haifa
A8	39	Female	Parent and social activist	Sde Yoav
A9	47	Female	Leader in the "Secular Forum"	National
A10	48	Male	City council member	Kfar Saba
A11	42	Male	Parent and social activist	Kfar Saba
A12	46	Female	Parent and social activist	Kiryat Ono
A13	54	Male	Parent and social activist	Moshav Ein Vered
A14	39	Male	Teacher and social activist	Rehovot
A15	49	Male	Parent and social activist	Netanya
A16	58	Female	Parent and social activist	Ness Ziona
A17	40	Male	Parent and social activist	Ness Ziona

We used Dedoose software to analyze the data. We reviewed and divided the data into meaning-based units to identify sections of text that represented basic thematic categories. We created codes to describe thematic unit content and identify repeating themes raised by the participants. Coding and thematization were based on initial inductive analysis, which was followed by a deductive stage in which theme classification and labels were refined using the social movement literature. To ensure consistency, each author reviewed the transcripts independently, identified codes, and proposed themes. Next, in a joint session, we discussed the research themes until an agreement was reached. Our conclusions were similar, with minor disagreements resolved by discussion to reach a consensus. The researchers, holding secular values and residing in the central regions of the country, acknowledged their personal perspectives and potential biases. Having recognized that their personal positions may influence the selection of the research topic and its framing, the analysis, and the interpretation of findings, they made efforts to critically reflect on their personal biases and approach the topic with openness, in a methodical way.

Findings

Participants described the frames of the anti-desecularization social movement, including the two core frames from the literature: diagnostic and prognostic framing.

The diagnosis of the problem included an injustice frame portraying desecularization as manipulative and unethical, and an antagonist frame that emphasizes actors responsible for desecularization. The interviewees also described wider social trends that sharpened their view of the phenomenon. The prognosis focused on rights-based frames emphasizing individual and communal rights, as well as educational secular alternatives within the community. To the best of our understanding, all narratives of secular actors (parents, local politicians, and NGOs) reflected the same framing of the issue. In addition, the accounts reflected the ambiguity in framing that served to enlist and motivate divergent supporters. Moreover, we noted that the mobilizing structures of the movement relied on media and grassroots organizing to advance the objectives of the movement. Last, political opportunities (access points, allies, strategic alliances, and engagement with political institutions) were centered mainly on engagement within the realm of local politics. The timing suggested that the movement was in the early cycle dynamics, marking its formative stages.

Frames

Social activists' narrative structures (problems and villains)

The "diagnostic framing" identifies the problem and ascribes blame or causality. Within this category, we observed two distinct ways in which blame was assigned: (1) injustice frames, which emphasize the manipulative or unethical nature of desecularization, and (2) antagonist frames, which focus on identifying specific actors as responsible for desecularization. Many interviewees described an injustice frame (a subset of the diagnostic frame), highlighting the devious and escalating nature of desecularization in schooling ($n = 13$). These narratives illustrated the severity of the problem and served to gain the attention of a middle-class audience.

> A9: More and more parents are uploading pictures of textbooks for language, math, and science to social media, both Facebook and Instagram. In environmental studies, the environment should be preserved because God created the earth [. . .] The Temple finds its way into math problems, everything out of context [. . .] And little by little there are fewer secular figures and certainly secular women in the textbooks.

> A5: I noticed that in the school texts, in all sorts, even when they return from school [the children], suddenly they learn songs that are more about faith, emphasizing miracles. And it always comes as some kind of fact, not as a description of a Jewish tradition, but simply a fact . . . Then my kids started telling me about a program where girls from the [religious] National Service come to teach them various things. I started getting interested in what was going on, and it turned out that the National Service girls had started working.

Therefore, activists often voiced concerns about their children's exposure to religious influences in schools, citing a desire for a secular learning environment, free of faith-based influences that do not suit their ideology and values ($n = 12$).

Four activists noted that religious organizations were successful in getting their programs approved by the Ministry of Education, making it more difficult for parents to trust the school management to block such programs. As a result, the Ministry of Education was seen as enabling this injustice.

A3: There is no protection in the law for the public who send their children to state education. And basically all of education, all the programs, everything is in the hands of the minister, who can actually decide on various whims from one day to the next all kinds of things regarding state education. The minister indeed transferred his powers to the Pedagogical Secretariat, but the Pedagogical Secretariat actually does what the Minister says.

We also found instances of antagonist framing (a subtype of diagnostic framing), which specifically highlights individuals and institutions perceived as actively driving desecularization. These narratives portrayed a series of "villains," actors responsible for desecularization and sources of collective frustration, such as political figures, political parties, religious institutions, and religious political movements. Interviewees (n = 12) mentioned the growing presence of religious teachers and National Service girls in the non-religious education system, which in their opinion was liable to promote a worldview that conflicts with the values and principles of non-religious education. It often resulted in children coming home with statements about the importance of prayer, keeping Shabbat, and fasting on Yom Kippur, which secular parents found inappropriate. For example:

A2: There are [religious] National Service girls here in the education system in general, who teach topics, such as the memorial day for Rabin's murder [The murder of the prime minister by a right-wing religious extremist], so they [the school staff] choose them [the girls] to teach everything [about the political murder and its political and social meanings]. Of course, they talk about it from a very specific point of view and frame it, a very, very specific framing that suits them.

Antagonist framing was even more extreme when the focus shifted from actors in schools to actors outside of schools. Activists (n = 16) identified certain actors, such as political parties, and religious organizations, as being responsible for promoting desecularization.

A5: Today in Herzliya there's a coalition based on three religious parties plus Likud, in any case leaning to the right. And we didn't really manage to prevent it completely [the presence of NGOs in the schools].

A10: Another issue is their [Chabad's] enormous political influence. They are afraid to touch them. They are powerful, have money, and have political influence, both locally and nationally.

In the set of antagonistic frames, we observed that activists (n = 15) constructed the political movement of religious nationalism as a key hostile or threatening force to

secular ideals in general and secular education in particular. In Israel, religious nationalism represents the fusion of Jewish religious identity with the political ideology of nationalism (i.e., Zionist belief in the Jewish people's right to their historic homeland), advocating for the state to align with Jewish religious values. Activists mentioned key elements in the intensification of targeting of non-religious education since the middle of the second decade of the 21st century: certain elements in national politics driving the reform and the rise of religious right-wing government.

> A13: I think Bennett was, for me, at the time, a kind of fault line when he came in as Minister of Education. There is a real desire to make a change in values and bring people closer to religion, and in the end, there are also political aspects here because it also seeks to bring them closer to a certain national concept, etc., etc.

> A3: Citizenship studies have been taken over by the right. What's happening today is that the new citizenship curriculum deals solely with illiberal democracy, a purely formalistic democracy.

Interviewees described both ideological and political drives that propelled the efforts of the nationalist religious community to increase their prominence in secular spheres. For example, several interviewees (n = 7) mentioned "Kookism" (nationalist-religious ideology based on Rabbi Kook's ideas), according to which the People of Israel is inherently holy, driving the nationalist religious community to increase the "holiness" of secular people and intensifying the push for religious content in non-religious education.

Some of the interviewees (n = 5) noted that the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, in 2005, and the dismantling of Israeli settlements there led to an awakening in the nationalist religious community, which felt the need to expand its influence within Israel. According to them, it is necessary to "settle in the hearts" of the secular public.

> A1: The conclusion of national-religious Zionism, since they did not mobilize the secular public for their struggle [against disengagement from the Gaza Strip] was "we didn't settle in the hearts" [gained legitimacy in the eyes of the secular public]. This was the main thing in their opinion that prevented the [secular] public from supporting them, and their mission today is to settle in the hearts [and these are] their motives to expand and operate within the state non-religious education system.

Several participants noted that, alongside the religious nationalist community, the ultra-Orthodox sector also influenced the desecularization of the state and education due to its political influence and rapid demographic growth. A16 said: "They are getting stronger, the ultra-Orthodox, the ultra-Orthodox parties. Demographically they are multiplying and getting stronger. They have such a sense of mission, which is terribly true, to desecularize everyone." A few participants noted amplified factors that boost the power of religious actors in secular schooling, such as neoliberal cutbacks in education funding (n = 6). The secular education system faces financial and operational challenges, increasing its dependence on the free services provided by external religious organizations for support.

A16: All these activities are always free and schools really like free things.

A10: The managers also considered it a good arrangement, because they always have free hours available.

A2: It's very nice for them [the schools] that someone comes for free, it doesn't come out of their budget.

Social activists' solutions

In the prognosis framing, two main frames emerged: (1) rights-based frames emphasizing individual and communal rights, and (2) the framing of educational secular alternatives as a necessary response. The activists argued that state support or indifference to desecularization in non-religious education eroded their rights, and sought to make these claims resonate with broader social values of equality and diversity. The interviewees expressed several rights-based frames, which fit within the category of prognostic framing, as they articulate grievances in terms of rights violations and propose solutions that offer a vision of how the problem should be addressed. One key rights-based frame was the right to participate in decisions that align with their secular way of life: "In this context of informal programs offered by external bodies [and] activities that are outside the formal curriculum, parents definitely have a right and even an obligation to decide whether they send their children to this activity or not" (A3). Another central frame was that of equality and discrimination because of the freedom and voice that religious state education and religious educators gained: "Of course, religious teachers can enter non-religious state schools, but not the other way around. Religious schools have autonomy and the right not to admit secular teachers" (A13); "We think that the secular public deserves exactly what other publics deserve, and there is no reason for it to privately set up an educational system for itself" (A3). This reflects the rights of the secular group, rooted in multicultural ideology, which grants each social group the autonomy to live according to its values and lifestyle, as other cultural groups do. Yet another significant rights frame articulated in the narratives was the individual right to personal choice: "In my opinion, it is the right of every person to be sovereign and decide what is good for him and his children" (A6). The rights emphasized here were predominantly those of liberal individuals and some elements that could be interpreted through a neoliberal lens, particularly choice. The rights-based framing was further strengthened by the publication of a guide containing references to formal rights based on law or ministry directives, which parents cited as a source of legitimacy.

The interviewees also discussed the need for educational secular alternatives in their community, reflecting the "prognostic framing" of the movement. They noted a range of solutions, including municipal autonomy, strict examination of the study materials, a promise that education for democracy is a compulsory subject, higher involvement of non-Orthodox Jewish NGOs in non-religious education, and establishing a strong independent non-religious education stream protected from religious politics and influences that educates to secular and democratic values and lifestyle (n = 11).

A9: Non-religious state education. I think this is the only solution to this matter. Like the religious state education, we'll have a council where we can control our content. This is the most correct solution to the situation in Israel. Only we, only the seculars don't have their own stream of education. We want to promote this as one of the solutions. And it's not politically feasible at the moment, but we would be happy for it to happen.

A10: I think that Israel, Israeli society must achieve greater autonomy for the communities. This thought that there is some kind of one thing that connects, that everyone can be part of one big thing simply doesn't exist and cannot exist. Therefore, in my opinion, the solution is more autonomy at the local level, and at the municipal level, simply because there is an elected body there.

These findings collectively affirm the interviewees' shared aspiration for educational reforms that embrace secularism, democracy, and pluralism, and their willingness to engage in transformative change despite the political complexities involved. The effectiveness of framing is reflected in various public opinion polls. For example, in 2017, a poll of 800 Jewish adults indicated that 69% of parents with children and youths in the non-religious Jewish state system agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "in recent years there has been a 'desecularization' process taking place in the non-religious Jewish state education system, which is manifested in the strengthening of religious foundations in secular education" (Smith Research Institute, 2017).

Social activists' framing: ambiguity and strategic issue framing

Our analysis of the framing revealed a degree of ambiguity in the activists' accounts. Although their overarching goal was to resist desecularization, participants occasionally differed in their interpretation of what constituted religious influence or secular principles. This ambiguity enabled individuals with different views of the problem and its solutions to converge together and maximize the appeal to enlist new supporters. Moreover, the activists sought to frame the problem in a strategic way, trying to "eat their cake and have it too." They portrayed their campaign as being against certain religious individuals, values, practices, and processes, not against religion as such. Interviewees pointed out that they were secular and did not apologize for their secularism, but still loved the tradition, yet were interested in preserving a secular character of the city and the education system (n = 8).

A12: I'm not afraid to say that I'm Jewish and I'm not afraid to say that religion is important to me and I'm not afraid to say that I want it in my life. I want it in the way I decide, as part of my universe of values . . . I'm in favor of pluralism and I'm in favor of my children being exposed to everything, including religion.

A8: I have a heritage, I have a culture, I have a history, both Bialik and A.D. Gordon and also Ahad Ha'am [secular canonical writers], they all relied on things from our tradition and Judaism and the Bible. Why do we have to throw it

away? Because we're not willing to observe the commandments? I mean, who decided that this relationship must go together?

The ambiguity in the framing of the movement and the strategic framing of the issue reflects the desire to be in the mainstream and not associated with radicalism. This ambiguity may be intentional, as a significant portion of the population in non-religious schools consists of traditionalists with a strong emotional connection to Jewish culture. Furthermore, many secular activists are Zionists deeply attached to the national ideology of Israel, which is rooted in Jewish tradition. Consequently, activists must navigate these complexities carefully to establish "framing resonance" and secure widespread support.

Mobilizing structures

Social activists' use of the media

Media emerged as a pivotal mobilizing structure in the Israeli anti-desecularization movement (n = 5). Activists effectively used traditional and digital platforms to disseminate narratives, raise awareness, garner support, and create pressure on decision-makers at the local and national level.

A11: They called me and said: "Now, right now there's a performance at the Culture Hall, boys and girls are sitting separately." I arrived at the Culture Hall, I entered the hall, I'm a member of the council, I could enter the hall, I took a picture of it and it reached the TV, so there was Channel 11. Yes, it reached Channel 11 and they broadcast it, these are pictures I took. This created a very big scandal.

Grassroots dynamics of the social movement

The phenomenon of grassroots mobilization is evident in the emergence of local pressure groups. The narratives of key participants illustrate the transformative process that drives these local groups to form and focus their efforts (n = 13). A5 further elucidated the local character of the movement, after uncovering the presence of religious National Service girls in all non-religious schools in the city: "It really bothered me, and we initially assembled a group of parents. I talked to parents at the school my children attended. We were just parents, not social activists or anything like that... We published some kind of petition and raised public awareness, and contacted parents in all the city schools. And in fact, we established 'Free Herzliya.' " Some of this local organizing also assumed a more formal character. Founder A2 recounted the pivotal shift: "So we realized that we need to organize, make it more formal. And we opened an NGO, 'Free Ramat Sharon,' with founders, five or six individuals who signed, and we started fieldwork, we opened people's eyes."

The accomplishments of these groups at the local level were noteworthy. A5 described one of the central accomplishments that emerged in several cities: "We met with the head of the Education Department and started promoting awareness of this matter. We issued a municipal procedure that increased the supervision of the

activities of the associations, which demanded that the parents be informed and approve it." A11 expounded on the evolution of the movement, including collaborative agreements with the mayor: "We came to an agreement with the mayor that every new association joining will be under the supervision of the director of the Education Department."

The Secular Forum, founded in 2011 by Ram Furman, marked a key moment in social activism. This NGO initially supported anti-desecularization efforts in 60 Israeli localities. In 2015, it shifted its focus to combating desecularization in state non-religious education. A1 recounted: "The forum started with individual struggles in Ramat Aviv against the penetration of Chabad into the neighborhood, and in fact from there, it continued after other cities asked for assistance and support. Ram [the founder of the forum] decided that it was right to hold the activity at the national level. " A1 offered insights into the catalytic event of the inaugural conference: "In 2016, we really held the first conference, the start-up conference, and from there it started a kind of big bang, meaning it's something that attracted hundreds of people and the media." A3 focused on the current quest to consolidate dispersed efforts: "We need to create the groups, it's enough to have twenty parents from one class, even from one city. We found them not in the same school but in one locality, [parents] who were interested in standing up and taking action. This is already a pressure group . . . To form a pressure group that will really make possible action against the local authority." Over 30 local organizations were formed in 2016, as A1 noted: "In 2016, we guided the establishment of more than 30 local organizations. These were urban organizations, which, in fact, were established not here, we at no point defined it as a branch or an extension of the forum, but as local groups."

The Secular Forum offered guidance to parents in confronting religious associations in their schools (n = 6). The NGO developed an operational strategy that aligns with their limited resources and the widespread nature of local groups: "As a grassroots organization, we lack extensive resources to provide more intensive support directly. Instead, we focus on providing accessible tools that any interested parent can use" (A1). A9 elucidated this advisory role: "We actually guide parents who discover that religious associations are entering their schools. We guide them and advise them what to do." The NGO drew on the rights-based frame and created a "Know Your Rights" booklet that focuses on parents' formal legal rights: "This is one of the most essential tools we created for secular parents. It contains a broad range of guidelines based on educational guidelines and circulars of the Ministry. This booklet empowers parents when they face issues in kindergartens or schools, helping them interpret their options within the bounds of the law. Every year, we update the booklet, which is now in its fifth year" (A1). A3 described another resource compiled for parents: "We prepared an instruction page for parents with comprehensive information on the whole subject of external entities. On the whole issue of what is the [legal] status of the parents. I mean, what's happening is that the [education] system simply works against its own procedures. The page is full of both sources of information and guidance for parents on what to do." A1 described the popularity and usefulness of such resources: "Thousands of parents have benefited from downloading these resources over the years." The forum also invested in enhancing its social media

presence, which has now become a national arena for concerned parents to interact and mobilize each other: "The forum actually created something like this, and little by little, more and more parents are uploading to social media, on Facebook, also on Instagram, pictures of textbooks with religious content" (A9). A hotline emerged as a reliable source of support, as A1 related: "We have been operating a hotline for almost six years now, and it's a consultation line for parents, teachers, and students." These narratives of key participants exemplify the evolution of these groups, their influence on policy and practices at the local level, and their role as a united force for addressing broader concerns. The expansion from localized efforts to a national movement attests to the effectiveness of grassroots mobilization.

The movement exhibited characteristics of the early cycle of mobilization: the formation of grassroots networks, initial framing of grievances, and experimentation with tactics. This stage was marked by a process of trial and error as protesters refined their strategies, built coalitions, and honed their messages to make them resonate with diverse audiences. The interviewees (n = 9) noted that the expansion of their activities became the "big bomb" that gained public attention.

> A15: Suddenly parents felt as if they had been punched in the stomach, that was the feeling. Everyone got organized and said that they were not ready for such a hard desecularization. They were not ready for such religious coercion, and we really managed to lead to a change.

The "big bomb" phase illustrates the growth trajectory of the movement and shows that its first mobilization efforts yielded tangible results. Through heightened awareness, public engagement, and the realization of their collective influence, the activists began to act against the encroachment of religious elements.

Political opportunities

The movement engaged strategically with various access points (i.e., specific channels through which movements can engage with political institutions or decision-making processes). The prevalent view is that "the secular public is a sector that has problems because it lacks political representation [in matters of secular ideology]" (A1). Activists sought alliances with sympathetic policymakers and even attempted to occupy political positions (n = 3).

> A4: In 2017, a process actually began, in which I examined who were the more reliable politicians, the politicians who say the things that in my opinion are more correct, who voice my views. And I chose to trust and help one of them, after which he offered me to join him on his list. And from there I became a council member.

> A2: We decided that if we want to have an impact, we need to be in the place of the decision-makers, where we can actually have an impact, and that is the council, the city council.

These findings illustrate the strategic engagement of the movement with the political process, driven by the recognition of a deficiency in secular representation. Through careful selection of allies, pursuit of political positions, and integration into decision-making bodies, the movement maximized its potential to influence local policy and acquired the know-how to do it.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the discourse of social activists against the desecularization of non-religious state education in Israel. Relying primarily on activist narratives and experiences, our analysis examined how participants interpreted and framed their involvement in this movement. Although our findings offer rich insights into the strategies and perceived outcomes of the movement, they reflect the perspectives of movement participants rather than independent measures of movement effectiveness or policy impact.

The research extends the literature on the intersection of education and social movements (e.g., Chua Reyes, 2023; Kane, 2023; Mariano and Tarlau, 2019; Platzky Miller, 2023) that rarely adopts social movement theories. The contribution of this work is threefold: first, it contributes to social movement scholarship, which traditionally focuses on the role and centrality of faith in activism (Smith, 2014) but often neglects secular drives (Hancock, 2023); second, it adds to the limited scholarship on desecularization in non-religious state education (German Ben-Hayun and Berkovich, 2024); and third, unlike the prior modernist portrayal of the rise of secularization in Israel (Ben-Porat, 2013), it expands the understanding of the current revival of secularist and religious forces in Israeli politics (Ben-Porat, 2022; Ben-Porat et al., 2023) related to education.

Framing plays an important role in determining the success or failure of social movements (Benford and Snow, 2000). The present study shows that the movement against the desecularization of non-religious state education in Israel paid attention to the framing of the issue. The activists took advantage of narrative structures that described the motives of desecularization, problems, and "villains," using these to create the "diagnostic framework" for the secular movement (McAdam et al., 2001). These concepts are known as powerful tools for shaping and communicating activists' perspectives. As Snow and Benford (1988) noted, the effectiveness of the framing of a movement often rests on its resonance with broader audiences. The identification of concrete "villains" responsible for desecularization can channel collective frustration and give supporters a tangible enemy to rally against. Similarly, Polletta and Jasper (2001) noted that crafting compelling narratives, especially those that identify clear "antagonists" or "villains," was instrumental in shaping collective sentiment.

The findings indicate that this framing came together with the grassroots organizations and media outreach. Grassroots organizations offer a platform for activists to assemble, discuss, and strategize, while the media plays an indispensable role in shaping public opinion, disseminating information, and rallying support (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984; Tarrow, 2011). Together, these mechanisms served as the lifeblood of the movement, ensuring that it remained active and effective. These findings are consistent with those of Koopmans (1999) and Bracey (2016) that

political opportunities, mobilization frameworks, and cognitive framing function together to ensure the dynamism and progress of social movements. The composition of our sample of leaders in this secular movement aligns with prior evidence that "social movement leaders tend to come from the educated middle and upper classes" (Morris and Staggenborg, 2007, 174). This is the common profile of activist leaders in Israel as it was identified in previous campaigns against the low quality of education and privatization in Israeli public state education in the 21st century (Berkovich and Avigur-Eshel, 2019). Naturally, such individuals have extensive access to financial resources, free time, social capital, connections with elite actors (e.g., contacts with media and politicians), and knowledge of policies and regulations, all of which enable them to handle complex systems and advocate effectively for their causes. Yet, successful social movements often manage to also mobilize a broad base, including the working class, the poor, and minorities (Roth, 2021). Public polls (Smith Research Institute, 2017) and news reports from various localities (German Ben-Hayun and Berkovich, 2024) indicate that this may be the case here. Future research can examine the class composition of the Israeli secular movement in education.

At the same time, the Israeli anti-desecularization movement serves as a classic example of the complexities inherent in social movement dynamics. The efficiency of the movement at the local level could not be replicated in the national political arena because of the different challenges the movement faces there. The findings suggest that the grassroots activists were not sufficiently well coordinated with political parties who have secular agendas operating on a national scale (e.g., Meretz, Yisrael Beiteynu, and Yesh Atid). Moreover, scholars have indicated that the political system in Israel is currently dysfunctional because of a chronic governance crisis, and consequently, individual choices and endeavors address tensions between secularism and religion instead of national politics (Ben-Porat, 2022). These circumstances limit the political opportunities for social movements to succeed (McAdam et al., 2001). The difficulty of the movement is exacerbated by the fact that despite its size and ability to mobilize, the state does not consider it meaningful enough to justify its suppression by outright force or indirect counter-tactics. In other words, currently, their political power does not undermine the existing political structure. The reliance on local political opportunities to address nationally framed issues could lead to a fragmented approach, where progress is uneven and contingent on local conditions. Although this strategy may achieve local success, its scalability and influence on national-level change remain uncertain. Assuming that the focus of the grassroots movement remains on the dynamics of local politics, the key to success is to capitalize on local victories and propagate their impact, which could result in a cohesive regional movement and possibly influence broader national policies. The social movement literature indicates that the level of repression depends on the perception of the threat: the more threatening the movement, the greater the repression (Sullivan, 2016). This situation suggests that the movement against desecularization processes in Israel needs to focus more heavily on creating and exploiting political opportunities.

The anti-desecularization discourse, as presented in this study, has deeper implications and is a symbol of sociopolitical currents in Israel; it is a representation of the complex fabric of religion, education, and state policy. The emergence of the movement against desecularization does not only represent a struggle between secular and religious

education but is an existential question about the essence of the Israeli state and society. Since its establishment, Israel has had a dual identity as a Jewish and democratic state. The attempt of the state to strengthen the Jewish character of the country by supporting desecularization in non-religious schools can be viewed as a national religionization project (Maniv and Benziman, 2020; Sabbagh, 2019). Bellin (2008) suggested that such initiatives, particularly in the Middle East, often emerge in response to crises of legitimacy, where the state attempts to consolidate its identity by religious means.

The friction between religion and education is not unique to Israel. Norris and Inglehart (2011) have argued that globally, as societies develop and modernize, they witness growing tensions between traditional religious values and secular modern ones. The present study is of global interest, especially for nations with historically secular public education systems like Russia and Turkey, where today the bureaucracy plays an important role in promoting religion (Lisovskaya and Karpov, 2010, 2020; Shlykov, 2019). The study elucidates how public non-religious education becomes a contentious arena where various stakeholders engage in social disputes related to the objectives, narratives, and power dynamics involved in efforts to counter secularization. This is also pertinent to many countries facing conflicts between religious and secular principles in the public non-religious education system, such as France and the US (German Ben-Hayun and Berkovich, 2024).

Note

1. There is a question whether real secularization occurred in Israel. Despite the state showing some responsiveness and modifying unpopular religious public policies (e.g., marriage, public transportation on Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath), and kosher food inspection at public institutions), some argue that these actions were aimed at maintaining and stabilizing the dominance of those religious policies (Golan-Nadir, 2023). From this perspective, the secularization period in the previous century may be interpreted less as a move toward liberalization and more as an effort to accommodate and expand pluralism in Israeli society.

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Author Biographies

Shiran German Ben-Hayun, PhD, is a faculty member at Gordon College of Education. Shiran was a postdoctoral researcher at the Open University while this research was conducted. Her research focuses on positive psychology, emotions in educational and work settings, as well as childhood and learning in the digital age.

Izhak Berkovich, PhD, is a faculty member in the Department of Education and Psychology at the Open University of Israel. His research interests include educational leadership, ethics and social justice in school management, emotions in schools, politics and policymaking in education, and educational reforms.